

This aspect of the coevality of religion with civilization was part of a powerful Hindu rhetoric of the nineteenth century. It was most strongly articulated in the discourses of some of the famous ideologues of the revivalist lobby. Indeed, Vivekananda's line of appropriation is most discernible in his advocacy of some of the ideas that were put forward by the conservative thinkers like Krishnaprasanna Sen. In a lecture which was later reproduced in *Dharmapracharak*, Sen too argues that Arya Dharma is in fact not a communal religion but an universal religion that was created for the whole of mankind. Without this religion the world would never be able to realize the ideal of the human society. Civilization itself is coeval with religion because the cultural ethos consisting of customs and mores, which are guided by religion, regulates human life and forms the core of civilization.⁶⁵

The greatness of Hinduism, or the representation of what was constructed as authentic Hinduism, could only be demonstrated by reference to history. The Hindu nation in this kind of historical narrative was depicted as a kind of expressive totality, which manifested itself through differences and diversities, which is why it absorbed but never conquered. The familiar topos of India as a unity in diversity obviously has its lineage in nineteenth-century nationalist Hinduism, which has survived to the present day in a version of secularism that is insidiously Hindu in nature. This universalism of Hinduism was sought to be constructed within the internal context of Indian society in the nineteenth century by representing its syncretist potential through a figure like Ramakrishna and democratizing the great Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism by linking it with the little traditions.

⁶⁵'Dharmar Sahit Savayatar Bibaha', in *Dharmapracharak*, no. 1, pt 8, 1887, pp. 3-6.

The Universalization of Hinduism and the Construction of the Nation

In an influential argument about the structure of traditional society in India, it has been suggested that the logic of social organization in traditional society was not conducive to the identification of people as 'enumerated' communities in the modern sense. The earlier communities were 'fuzzy', in the sense that the organization of difference among them was 'more like a colour spectrum, rather than clearly differentiated objects with precise linear frontiers. By implication, although such differences are real, in a world of transitions of this kind, unlike in a world of boundaries, on both sides of the border there would remain a fair degree of neighbourly comprehensibility. Political conflicts are likely to be less intense in any case when the boundary between the self and the other is unclear'.¹ This aspect of traditional society was represented in Indian nationalist history as an inherent quality of harmony and tolerance. The theme of the society-centred unity of the Hindu nation became extremely popular in nationalist discourse in the nineteenth century. The concept of inclusivist Hinduism came to be preached by such diverse thinkers as Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore, who was one of the greatest exponents of Universalism during the Swadeshi movement, powerfully conveyed this idea of Hinduism as the universal religion. In a series of essays written in 1901 on the subject of 'self reliance' or *atma sakti* he offered thought-provoking arguments on the two trajectories of nation making in Europe and India.

In an essay on Indian society called 'Bharatbarshiya Samaj', which was written as a sequel to another tract called 'nation ki' or 'what is a nation', Tagore argued that:

generically the term nation signified a form of unity. Unity in India was conceived very differently from that in Europe. The Hindu concept of unity may not be strictly termed national since the concept of nation was itself an European product. National unity in Europe was a state centred unity. After many battles, the peoples who constituted themselves as nations within the European civilization were of the same race. But after many

¹Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Religion, Politics, Modernity', in *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Occasional Paper no. 11, International Development Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark, 1994, p. 167.

battles and bloodshed those whom the Hindus received within its fold were people of diverse races. Renan had observed that it is not always easy to identify the principles of national unity. Especially in the context of Indian civilization, the unifying factors are too diverse and complex. Although one should not ignore the political efforts at unification like the one that one finds in the making of the Indian National Congress, yet what Indians should never lose sight of is the fact that in our land society is predominant over the state. In ancient times, both the king and the priest were integral parts of society, each striving to contribute to the collective welfare of the community. Welfare of society was conceived as contributing to the spiritual welfare of the individual. This spirit of selfless action to do good to one and all living beings in the universe, to behold the spirit of mankind in the absolute, universal spirit of 'Brahma' is what 'Hindutva' is all about. And it is this idea of unity that has to be resuscitated and renewed through 'dharma yoga' for the creation of nation.²

A nation for Tagore implied a collective consensus, a will to live together. 'Although the kind of social unity that India achieved may or may not be termed national, but creating unity in diversity and the making of a composite culture is what civilization is all about and from this standpoint Indian unity certainly could claim to be recognized as national unity'.³ The discourse on historical sociology that was introduced to support this philosophy of Hindu unity was obviously meant to describe the social conditions under which the people lived. The social conditions were not only described as common but it was a unique society, which homogenized different peoples of diverse race, language, and religion into one community.

The nineteenth century actually saw two strands of anti-colonialism. The first type was one that derided colonialism but accepted it on the grounds of historical inevitability. This form of anti-colonialism found its best expression in the thoughts of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, for whom colonialism was also seen as something that had become possible due to the limitations of the Indian race to confront modernity. Bankim constantly tried to trace the reasons for the colonization of India, and in his thought the critique of colonialism also entails a critique of his own people. This critique however began to shift in the latter half of the nineteenth century when opposing colonialism was thought of as a serious historical possibility, and as its precondition it became important to decide on the moves on the basis of which India could become a nation.⁴

All the major thinkers in Bengal in the late nineteenth century—Bankim,

²'Bharatbarshiya Samaj', in RR, pp. 678–83.

³Ibid., p. 678.

⁴This idea of the two strands of nationalist thinking, the anti-colonial that gradually makes a transition to the nationalist, is found in Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Imaginary Institution of India', in Gyan Pandey and Partha Chatterjee (eds.), *Subaltern Studies*, vol. VII, 1992, pp. 1–39.

Vivekananda and Rabindranath—reflected on the ideologies that went to make such large political entities like nations. Most of their political writings reflected on nation, state, and society. The structure of traditional society where the people's common sense was predominantly constituted by a religious consciousness was well perceived by the nationalist ideologues. However, to represent this tradition as a unitary tradition of Hinduism was a political strategy that nationalism surreptitiously introduced into the neo-Hindu discourse.

Curiously, it was precisely the absence of a clear self-recognition of the various religious sects and denominations in India as Hindu that made such a form of religion available for nationalist description as one single religion or permeated by one single religious common sense which could be described as Hindu. While the factors of race and language were too distinct and visible to be ignored, the abstract category of religious consciousness as common to all the racial and linguistic groups was extremely suitable for representation as a special tradition of India or as a national culture. In the lecture delivered in Oakland in 1900, the Swami said:

The bond of unity in India as in other countries of Asia is not language or race but religion. In Europe the race makes the nation, but in Asia peoples of diverse origin and different tongues become one nation if they have the same religion. The people of Northern India are divided into four great classes, while in Southern India the languages are so entirely different from those of Northern India that there is no kinship whatever. The people of Northern India belong to the great Aryan race, to which all of the people of Europe, except the Basques in the Pyrennees, and the Finns, are supposed to belong. The southern India people belong to the same race as the ancient Egyptians and the Semites.⁵

This theme of the commonality of the Indian community as residing in a common religion was an important aspect of the Swami's religious nationalism. In several key addresses in Calcutta and in South India he iterated this view. Discursively, nationalism predominantly came to survive in its religious form, in striking contrast to such ideas of linguistic nationalism found in Keshab Sen's reflections on the idea of a linguistic unity. Sen had observed that unity in India is only possible through the medium of a common language. In an article entitled 'Bharatbashidiger Madhye Ekata Laver Upay Ki' or What is the Mode of Achieving Unity Among the Indians, published in Sen's well-known literary magazine *Sulabh Samachar*, he opines that 'when the Aryans first conquered India there was no disunity among them so there must be some reasons for the disunity among the

⁵Report of a lecture entitled 'The People of India' delivered in Oakland on Monday 19 March 1900, with the editorial comments of the *Oakland Enquirer*, in SVCW, vol. 8, 1989, p. 241.

Why
religion
as unity
claimant
from

Keshab
and
language

present day Indians'. According to Sen therefore 'there are two reasons, first is the absence of a common language. As long as Indians are unable to achieve an unitary language there will be no unity among them. As long as the ancient Aryans retained a common language Sanskrit, there was no lack of unity among them. And the English are afraid that unless there is disunity among the Indians it will not be possible for them to rule. As a result the government has prohibited the use of Bengali in Orissa and Assam. But all the princes in the major principalities in India should at least begin this work of linguistic unification'.⁶

Except in thinkers such as Keshab, the idea of linguistic unification received very little attention among the intellectuals of the nineteenth century. It was the idea of a religious unification of India that received pre-eminence in the nationalist discourse and it remained the central concern of thinkers such as Vivekananda. The way of conceiving the world through the medium of religion is what, according to the Swami, determined all other cultural practices. On this issue he pointed out:

In every nation you will have to work through their methods. To every man you will have to speak in his own language. Now, in England or in America, if you want to preach religion to them, you will have to work through political methods—make organizations, societies, with voting, balloting, a president, and so on, because that is the language, the method of the western race. On the other hand if you have to speak of politics in India, you must speak through the language of religion. You will have to tell them something like this: 'The man who cleans his house every morning will acquire such and such an amount of merit, he will go to heaven, or he comes to God'. Unless you put it that way they will not listen to you. It is a question of language. The thing done is the same. But with every race, you will have to speak their language in order to reach their hearts. And that is quite just.⁷

However, this mode of constructing the commonness of the people's nation, as it figures in Vivekananda, is not based on the conception of religion in its institutional form. The organizational principle of Hinduism was linked not in the way in which a Christian church organized its followers, but as a form of 'language', in the way Gramsci uses the term, that is, as a form of articulation that is based on a structure of intelligibility of concepts which makes a common conception of the world possible. For Gramsci the general question of language was tied to the philosophical problem of the way in which the commonness of a culture could become possible. The idea of language was evoked as a concept, a regulative principle on the basis

⁶Keshab Chandra Sen, 'Bharatbanshidiger Madhye Ekata Laver Upay Ki', in *Sulabh Samachar*, 1887. Cited in Jogesh Chandra Gupta (ed.), *Sulabh Samachar o Keshab Chandra Rashtrabani*, Calcutta, 1953, pp. 1-2.

⁷SVCW, vol. 8, p. 77.

of which peoples are transformed into a collectivity by 'attaining a single cultural climate'.⁸ Religion was to be deployed as a form of metalanguage through which the idea of unity of the people within a specific conception of Hinduism was to be conveyed and made intelligible. This is the national context in which the Advaita principles of Universalism was to be employed: to organize the sociologically decentralized people by invoking a single abstract core of Hindu philosophy of non-dualism that is supposed to represent and incorporate all the sectarian beliefs, practices, and institutions of various communities. The universalization of Hinduism was one of the tasks that Vivekananda had set himself to achieve in his nationalist endeavour. In her memoirs Sister Nivedita affirms that the Swami's

whole work from the first, had consisted, according to his own statement, of a search for the common bases of Hinduism... The Swami had declared 'Nor has the Hindu clergy—the greater glory still! ever been known to protest against the right of the individual to perfect freedom of thought and belief. This last fact indeed, giving birth to the doctrine of the Ishta Devata (the Chosen Ideal)—the idea that the path of the soul is to be chosen by itself—he held to be the one universal differentia of Hinduism; making it not only tolerant, but absorbent, of every possible form of faith and culture.'⁹

Vivekananda's own admission is instructive in this context. In an interview with the representative of *Prabuddha Bharat*, Swamiji was asked what he considered to be 'the function of his movement with regard to India', to which he answered unequivocally, 'To find the common bases of Hinduism and awaken the national consciousness to them. At present there are three parties in India included under the term 'Hindu'—the orthodox, the reforming sects of the Mohammedan period and the reforming sects of the present time. Hindus from North to South are agreed on one point, viz., on not eating beef'. When asked if it was not the common love for the Vedas that united the Hindus, the Swami clearly stated, 'Certainly not. That is just what we want to reawaken'. Again, on the question as to with which of the three parties that he had mentioned would he identify his movement, he replied, 'With all of them. We are orthodox Hindus but we refuse entirely to identify ourselves with "Don't-touchism". That is not Hinduism: it is in none of our books; it is an unorthodox superstition which has interfered with national efficiency all along the line'. When he was asked categorically, 'Then what you really desire is national efficiency', his answer was equally emphatic. 'Certainly. Can you adduce any reason why India should lie in the ebb-tide of the Aryan nations? Is she inferior in intellect? Is she inferior in dexterity? Can you look at her art, at her math-

⁸Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, New York, 1971, p. 349.

⁹Sister Nivedita, *My Master As I Saw Him*, Calcutta, 1991, pp. 196-98.

ematics, at her philosophy and answer Yes? All that is needed is that she should dehypnotize herself and wake up from her age long sleep to take her true rank in the hierarchy of nations'.¹⁰

Although this form of unitary Hinduism could well propose to bring about a large coalition among its different sects by referring to a common philosophical core, rhetorically spoken of as the 'great tradition of Hinduism', yet to understand how this discourse became inclusive in the sense of admitting other religious communities within its universal domain, it is necessary to take into account the decisive impact that Ramakrishna's interpretation of Hinduism had on this neo-Hindu nationalist discourse.

The Nationalist Theology of Advaita Vedanta and a Strategic Interpretation of Ramakrishna's Hinduism

Ramakrishna had experimented with various religious practices, including that of Islam and Christianity. He had asked a Mussalman fakir to initiate him, and about this experience Romain Rolland wrote that 'for several days the priest of Kali renounced and forgot his own God completely. He did not worship them, he did not even think of them. He lived outside the temple precincts, he repeated the name of Allah, he wore the robes of a Mussalman and was ready to eat of forbidden food, even of the sacred animal, the cow... The complete surrender to another realm of thought resulted as always in the spiritual voyage of this passionate artist, in a visual materialization of the idea'.¹¹ The experiences, Rolland argues, could later be interpreted by his expositors as symbols of the religious unity and tolerance of India:

following as it did immediately upon his great ecstasy in the Absolute, in a very important sense for India, that Mussalmans and Hindus, her enemy sons, can only be recruited on the basis of Advaita, the formless God... He could say to his disciples 'I have practised all religions, Hinduism, Christianity and I have also followed the paths of different Hindu sects... I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once'.¹²

To some historians like Sumit Sarkar, the transition of neo-Hinduism from the hands of Ramakrishna to Vivekananda represents an inversion of Ramakrishna's thought structure to create the form that it takes in Vivekananda. Sarkar sees in Ramakrishna's version of catholic Hinduism the stamp of a 'precolonial Bhakti tradition with its close link with sufism',

¹⁰Interview with the representative of *Prabuddha Bharata*, Sept. 1898, in SVCW, 1989, vol. 5, pp. 225-7.

¹¹Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, trans. E. F. Malcolm Smith, 12th edn, Mayavati, India, 1986, p. 75.

¹²Ibid., pp. 76-9.

rather than the nationalist version of Hinduism which defined 'the blurring of differences as in traditional cults as internal to the self-conscious and well defined structure of Hindu religion'.¹³ From this standpoint Sarkar sees in the transition from Ramakrishna to Vivekananda a great discursive transformation, a form of the classicization of Hinduism, a kind of change that may be attributed to the impact that nationalism had brought about in the sphere of religion. What is intriguing however and needs to be questioned is the extent to which Ramakrishna had consciously prepared Vivekananda for this new mission of Hinduism. Several biographers have tried to throw light on this factor of agency: the role of Ramakrishna in the making of a nationalist Vivekananda.

In his study of Ramakrishna, Sumit Sarkar has observed:

With Vivekananda, sophisticated son of a prominent Calcutta attorney, who quickly acquired international and national fame after his Chicago address, the Ramakrishna cult moved from the clerical margins into the centre of high bhadrakok life. Rustic and homely parables, along with the dasatya of 'chakri' theme, dropped out of Vivekananda's discourse which took the form of lectures (Ramakrishna incidentally had detested oratory) and essays in English or chaste Sanskritized Bengali. The distancing produced by English education and urban middle-class life was often associated, however, with deep awareness of the West as simultaneously stimulus and threat.¹⁴

Sarkar however is also quick to point out that this inversion did not imply a contradiction. In other words, inward-turning piety and activism, do not necessarily remain binaries in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition.¹⁵

Also, this inversion does not yield to a paradox because the ideas are genetically interlinked and differ only in the structure of representation. Ramakrishna is concerned with the idea of making Hinduism more supple, pliable. His interest is to make Hinduism overcome some of its orthodoxies and rigidities. His emphasis on devotion and the evocation of the deity Kali from an icon symbolizing power to the image of a loveable and indulgent mother, in order to make Hinduism accessible to the popular consciousness, takes place entirely within the idiomatic domain of folk culture.

Although in Vivekananda one finds a certain kind of affirmation of this folk tradition, yet his concern is to relate Hinduism to the high doctrinaire content of the non-dualist principles of Advaita with emphasis on anti-ritualism, anti-obscurantism, and abolition of all forms of social inequality. The transformation of the form of Hinduism that occurs from Ramakrishna to Vivekananda is not paradoxical in the logical sense. Logically the idea of

¹³Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., 1992, p. 1553.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 1558-59.

¹⁵Ibid.

paradox implies that the underlying assumptions of the two sets of ideas cannot both hold true at once. The ideas of Ramakrishna went into the preparation of a figure like Vivekananda, and the latter actually carried out the mission that Ramakrishna had planned for him and of which both were acutely conscious. In Vivekananda's words:

He used to love me intensely, which made many jealous of me. He knew one's character by sight and never changed his opinion. He could perceive, as it were, supersensual things, while we try to know one's character by reason with the result that our judgements are often fallacious. He called some persons his Antarangas or 'belonging to the inner circle', and he used to teach them the secrets of his own nature and those of Yoga. To the outsiders or Bahirangas he taught those parables now known as 'Sayings'. He used to prepare those young men (the former class) for his work, and though many complained to him about them, he paid no heed... I loved the Brahmin priest intensely, and therefore, loved whatever he used to love, whatever he used to regard! He was afraid about me that I might create a sect, if left to myself... He as a scientist used to see that different people required different treatment... Devotion as taught by Narada, he used to preach the masses, those who were incapable of any higher training. He used generally to teach dualism. As a rule, he never taught Advaitism. But he taught it to me. I had been a dualist before.¹⁶

J. M. Masson had traced the origin of Ramakrishna's practices to his knowledge of Advaita Vedanta. According to Masson, who analysed the recurrent theme of the ocean in the everyday speech of Ramakrishna, the priest was influenced by the imageries of the ocean because of his acquaintance with an ancient Sanskrit text called *Astavakrasambhita* where this description of the ocean occurs in one of the passages. 'This text', observes Masson, 'written in very simple Sanskrit, is an uncompromising example of Advaita Vedanta, non-dualistic Vedanta which denies the reality of all phenomenon of the outer and the inner world in favour of the one reality that is Brahman and which is same as our innermost self, the Atman'.¹⁷ By citing Satkari Mukherjee, Masson argues at length about the authenticity of the *Astavakrasambhita* as a text in Advaita philosophy of which Ramakrishna had definite knowledge. According to Mukherjee, the ancient Advaitists did not merely advocate a system of thought seeking to replicate Buddhist idealist philosophy; this thought had its moorings in the Upanishads and received definite articulation in older works, including the *Astavakrasambhita*.¹⁸ As to the evidence of Ramakrishna's actually having direct knowledge of it and introducing it to Vivekananda, Masson refers to

¹⁶SVCW, vol. 8, pp. 413-14.

¹⁷J. M. Masson, *The Oceanic Feeling: The Origin of Religious Sentiment in Ancient India*, Dodrecht, 1941, p. 37.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 39.

Saradananda's biography of Ramakrishna, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master* (1952) from where he quotes Vivekananda as saying:

As soon as I went to Dakshineswar, the Master gave me those books which he forbade others to read. Among other books a copy of the *Astavakra Samhita* was in his room. When the Master found anyone reading that book, he would forbid him and would give him instead such books as *Mukti* and how to attain it, the *Bhagavadgita* or some *Purana*. But scarcely had I gone to him when he took the book and asked me to read it... I said: 'What is the use of reading this book? It is a sin even to think 'I am God'. The book teaches the same blasphemy.'¹⁹

The educated middle class, anxious to find an answer to the problem of national unity, clearly sensed in the ideology of Advaita, which was best enunciated through the figure and the logia of Ramakrishna, the symbolic representation of the idea of a Hindu unity. That the intelligentsia was clearly able to discern this is signified in Vivekananda's observation:

It was then that Shri Bhagwan Ramakrishna incarnated himself in India to demonstrate what the true religion of the Aryan race is; to show where amidst all its many divisions and offshoots, scattered over the land in the course of its immemorial history, lies the true unity of the Hindu religion, which by its overwhelming number of sects discordant to superficial view, quarrelling constantly with each other and abounding in customs divergent in every way, has constituted itself a misleading enigma for our countrymen and the butt of the contempt for foreigners; and above all, to hold up men, for their lasting welfare, as a living embodiment of Sanatana Dharma, his own wonderful life into which he infused the universal spirit and character of this Dharma, so long cast into oblivion by the process of time.²⁰

The universalization of Hinduism was made possible through the Advaita doctrine, in the sense that it not only paved the path for a practical unification of diverse social groups but at the same time provided for an excellent indigenous answer to the secular philosophy of Universalism at par with the mainstream European Enlightenment tradition. In his analysis of the form in which the philosophy of Advaita figures in Ramakrishna's Hinduism, Walter Neeval makes a significant assessment about the root of the neo-Vedanta movement in the nineteenth century. His assessment is that the tradition of Advaita that arrives with Ramakrishna cannot be traced back to Sankara but has to be located in the indigenous tantric tradition. His argument is that:

This study would necessitate a reassessment of the sources of the dynamic and life-affirming aspects of the Neo Vedanta thought of the Ramakrishna Mission and those

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 38-9.

²⁰ From the essay on 'Hinduism and Shri Ramakrishna', in SVCW, vol. 6, pp. 183-84.

who are indebted to it. These thinkers self-consciously place themselves in the line of Sankara's thought, seeing his system as the most beautifully consistent ever conceived by man. Yet we find a definite lessening of emphasis upon the cosmic aspects of Sankara's thought and an assertion of views that in varying degrees divinize man and the world and set forth a monistic basis for ethical action. The passive uninvolved Brahman of Sankara's system is replaced by a more truly monistic metaphysics in which Brahman is an active and evolutionary spirit or force of which all things and beings are manifestations.²¹

Neeval also offers another crucial argument about the indigenous origin of the neo-Hindu reformation that cuts across a whole range of analysis grounded on the assumption that the Christian and Western philosophical influence was the sole determining factor that affected the transformation in the doctrinaire content of neo-Hinduism in the nineteenth century. In this context Neeval observes:

Critics of the Neo Vedanta have noticed these departures from Sankara's basic positions, have seen the changes as the outcome of the operation of unacknowledged influences, and have supposed Neo Vedanta to be the outcome of the massive importation of aspects of Western and Christian realism and ethical concern. The Western and Christian presence in India may of course have exerted a powerful impetus towards the reshaping of traditional Vedanta, but it is no longer necessary to see the West as its material source. Our attention to the tantric factors in Ramakrishna's outlook has shown us, in this determinative person, the extra-Sankarite but traditionally Hindu source of a monist understanding that was dynamic and life-affirming. The Hindu roots of the new elements in Vedanta were obscured by late Victorian India, unwilling to acknowledge the extent of its debt to the popular and pervasive but, at the same time disreputable tantric traditions.²²

This analysis becomes significant also in trying to understand the transition of neo-Hinduism from Ramakrishna to Vivekananda. It has been the general argument that classicizing Hinduism and making the metaphysical doctrine of Advaita compatible with the ideal of social service that takes place with Vivekananda is not seen as a form of transition but as a radical break. Neeval, in trying to question this view, finds that the life-affirming aspect of Advaita that is translated in the principle of social activism in Vivekananda has its definite origin in Ramakrishna's philosophy. Citing from Rolland's account, Neeval defends his position by saying that:

Ramakrishna was concerned that if his disciples experienced 'Nirvikalpa Samadhi' they might not return to the world to help others so he discouraged them from seeking this realization. Rolland says that once when Swami Vivekananda sought nirvikalpasamadhi

²¹ Walter Neeval, 'The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna', in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.), *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, Leiden, 1976, p. 95.

²² Ibid., pp. 95-6.

Ramakrishna rebuked him, 'Shame on you! I thought that you were like the great banyan tree giving shelter to the thousands of tired souls. Instead you are selfishly seeking your own well being. Let these little things alone, my child. How can you be satisfied with so one-sided an ideal?'²³

Neeval argues that although Ramakrishna is commonly interpreted as 'bhakta', a lover and devotee of a personal Deity, yet his interpretation of Ramakrishna as a *sakta* does not in any way clash with the popular interpretation because Bhakti as love and devotion is the quality or 'the essence of all spiritual discipline' and therefore pervades all religious practices. Hence this in no way could discourage Ramakrishna to instil the principles of sakta philosophy and its life-affirming principles in the mind of his disciple. Neeval further observes:

As history records, the chastened Narendra went on to become the dynamic Swami Vivekananda, the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission which has continued to heed its Master's command: You should do the same 'as Sukhadeva and work for the benefit of others'. It seems clear that the development of this Mission with its great social awareness and involvement owes no little debt to Sri Ramakrishna's dynamic and life-affirming sakta tantric world-view.²⁴

Sumit Sarkar has argued that the catholicity of Ramakrishna and his representation of the syncretic potential of other creeds and faiths and their prophets was given the synthetic construction that it represents traditional Hinduism. What one finds in Ramakrishna is an appraisal and elevation of the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism, 'the term "Hindu" is not particularly common, and the Hindu/Muslim/Christian demarcation often does not seem qualitatively too different from the distinctions between Shakta, Vaishanava and Brahma. The post Kathamrita canonical literature, however tended to read back such firm hierarchization and dividing lines into Ramakrishna emphasizing his affinities with Vedanta'.²⁵ It was perceived by Vivekananda that the doctrine of Advaita could be successfully translated into the ideal of national unity for two reasons. He was convinced that any political ideology in order to hold sway over the popular mind must be expressed in the language of religion. His argument was that culture in India was overlain and determined by religion. Secondly, a specific interpretation of Advaitism was required which would stress the obliteration of boundaries as the true and wonderful essence of Hinduism. The idea of national unity which was to be actively pursued was to be conceived as the highest form of religious practice. India in the nineteenth century had just embarked on the nationalist project of constructing modernity on

²³Ibid., p. 93.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., 1992, p. 1554.

indigenous cultural foundations. As Koselleck has argued, in modernity the 'difference between experience and expectation is increasingly enlarged' and this is reflected in the 'movement of social and political concepts' where the innovation and enlargement of the semantic fields through the proliferation of new concepts and interpretations reflects an engagement with the future and eager expectations of what is to come which supersedes the conditions of historical time.²⁶

The humanization or secularization of the religious world-view that Vivekananda brings in introduces this future dimension which is removed from the space of experience under the conditions of colonization of a traditional society. He so constructs Advaita philosophy that it can be transferred and expressed through all forms of diverse secular ideologies, be it nationalism, humanism, or rational philosophy. Advaita, for Vivekananda, was purely a religious concept of expectations, a concept of the future. It was in this form, the Swami argued, that religion could survive in modern times. He does not deploy rationalism and religion as 'asymmetric counter-concepts' but shifts the discourse to the spiritualization of the rational world, the hidden religiosity of all scientific and rational world-views, thereby creating a structure of argument within which this asymmetry could be absorbed.

This possibility of deriving a philosophy of humanism in which the divine is conceived in the human is something that comes about with Ramakrishna's specific structuration of Advaita philosophy. Heinrich Zimmer has observed that there occurs in Ramakrishna's tantric Advaita 'a process of reaffirmation of the world similar to that which occurred in Mahayana and tantric Buddhism. From rejecting all as void (Sunya), a full reversal took place and all that we actually see and experience came to be revered, accepted and enjoyed as the void. Ramakrishna has made a similar switch in the advaitic affirmation that "All is Brahman". Rather than a negative emphasis upon the Brahman as exclusive Reality, we see a positive emphasis upon the all'.²⁷

Nationalists in nineteenth-century India were in search of an appropriate concept for describing a society which was like a mosaic, being composed of diverse races and religions; the challenge for the intellectuals of that time was to find a justification for this unique social structure without denying its presence. The Advaita theology provided the answers to both these problems; it enabled its acknowledgement while at the same time it provided a philosophical defence. In his lecture entitled 'Common Bases of Hinduism' delivered in Lahore, Vivekananda offers this Advaitic conception of Hindu Unity:

²⁶Reinhart Koselleck, op. cit., 1979, p. 284.

²⁷Bardwell L. Smith, op. cit., 1976, p. 92.

Here am I, not to find difference that exist among us, but to find where we agree. Here I am trying to understand on what ground we may always remain brothers upon what foundations the voice that has spoken from eternity may become stronger and stronger as it grows... National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune. There have been sects in this country. There are sects enough in the future, because this has been the peculiarity of our religion that in abstract principles so much latitude has been given that, although afterwards so much detail has been worked out, all these details are the working out of principles, broad as the skies above our heads, eternal as nature herself. Sects must exist here, but what need not exist is sectarian quarrel. Sects must be sectarianism need not. The world would not be the better for sectarianism, but the world cannot move on without having sects. One set of men cannot do everything... here at once we see the necessity that forced this division of labour on us, the division into sects; but is there any need that we should quarrel when our most ancient books declare that this differentiation is only apparent, that in spite of all these differences there is a thread of harmony, that beautiful harmony running through them all? Our most ancient books have declared—'That which exists is One', sages call him by different names... There are certain great principles in which I think we — whether Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shakta, or Ganapatyas, whether belonging to the ancient Vedantins or the modern reformed ones—are all one, and whoever calls himself a Hindu, believes in these principles. Of course there is a difference in the interpretation, in the explanation of these principles, and that difference should be there...²⁸

According to the Swami, one of the common principles with which all Hindus concur is the belief that the Vedas are the eternal teachings. It is interesting that although elsewhere he categorically denies the presence of a holy text in the Hindu tradition, here he firmly affirms that there is a common acceptance of the Vedas as the principal scripture of the Hindus. 'We believe that this holy literature is without beginning and without end, co-eval with nature, which is without beginning and without end; and that all our religious differences, all our religious struggles must end when we stand in the presence of that holy book'.²⁹ The other two principles which he thinks are common to all sects of Hinduism are 'the belief in God and the belief in the immortality of the Atma or soul'. Although his views here are clear on the question of the mode of organization of the Hindu religion, elsewhere the text is fairly ambiguous on the question of Hindu identity. Indeed, Vivekananda tries various principles, religious, social, and spiritual, for the construction of the Hindu identity. What is implicit in the argument is that differences will continue to exist but hierarchies must be abolished, a theme that found its most lyrical expression in Tagore. In an essay called 'Swadeshi Samaj', Tagore wrote that 'it is the national character of India that differences are not regarded as antagonistic; others are never rec-

²⁸SVCW, vol. 3, pp. 371-72.

²⁹Ibid., p. 373.

ognized as adversaries. All those who live in this abode called India, no matter to which faith, race or creed they may belong, will live together in harmony, discover the spirit of fraternity, a wonderful spirit of unity that is called Hinduism'.³⁰ This theme is clearly set out in Vivekananda's discussion on the abolition of privileges that was proclaimed as the fundamental principle of Advaita. Hinduism in Vivekananda's thought actually moves from an inclusivist to a corporatist character.

In one of his writings on Indian society, A. K. Ramanujan introduces an interesting distinction between cultures as 'context sensitive' versus 'context free'. Dharma in traditional Hindu xenology was clearly culture specific. Dharma, as it was understood, was a predicate of the Hindu way of life that flourished within a specific space; which is why India is described as 'dharmakshetra' or the 'region of dharma'. According to Ramanujan, 'cultures have overall tendencies to idealize and think in terms of either context free or the context sensitive kind of rules... In cultures like India's, context sensitive kind of rules is the preferred formulation'.³¹ Ramanujan's position is that this context sensitivity is what overdetermines the cultural pattern. In India no imaginable aspect of life is context free, which is why, although dharma has a fundamental unity and is essentially a single system, yet the system is itself highly taxonomic, internally differentiated, and not one form or practice is universally ascribable to all:

Even space and time, the universal contexts, the Kantian imperatives, are in India not uniform and neutral, but have properties, varying specific densities, that affect those who dwell in them. The soil in the village, which produces crops for the people, affects their characters... houses (containers par excellence) have mood and character, change the fortune and mood of the dwellers. Time too does not come in uniform units: certain hours of the day, certain days of the week, etc. are auspicious or inauspicious... Certain units of time (yugas) breed certain kind of maladies, politics, religions, eg. kaliyuga.³²

Every aspect of life, as Ramanujan goes on to show, from music and the grammar of language to medical matters, depends on context. There is no one single Hindu dharma but dharmas of different castes, sects, and ethnic groups based on regional diversities. This lack of universalism, as Ramanujan notes, was noticed by Hegel when he said, 'While we say, 'Bravery is a virtue', the Hindus say on the contrary, 'Bravery is a virtue of the Cshatriyas'.³³ Within the Hindu body of knowledge, dharma is the most

³⁰ 'Swadeshi Samaj', in RR, p. 701.

³¹ A. K. Ramanujan, 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), vol. 23, no. 1, 1989, New Delhi, Newbury Park, London, 1990, p. 47.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³³ Hegel, c. 1827, pt 1, sec. 2, *India*. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 46.

symptomatic of all concepts and lies at the heart of Hindu xenology. It is, as P. Hacker says, both empirical but at the same time normative. It became the key concept which not only helped to maintain the 'social and religious status quo, of the distinction between the hereditary groups and levels of qualifications (i.e the varnasramadharmas)' but it also helped to set up the boundary between what constituted the Aryans from the non-Aryans.³⁴

Within traditional Hinduism, dharma was essentially ethnocentric and Indocentric. Modernization, as Ramanujan sees it, consisted in the movement 'from the context sensitive to the context free in all realms'.³⁵ Within neo-Hinduism, it is reinterpreted in a universal sense, eternal, inclusive, and tolerant. Indeed, one of the definite goals towards which the neo-Hindu movement directed itself was to universalize Hindu dharma. This was done through philosophical discourse but also by affecting the semantics of linguistic usages. Differences of all kinds were now redefined as the multitude of forms through which the universal makes itself amenable to common perception. Recent critics writing on neo-Hinduism disagree with the synthetic restructuring of Hinduism. L. S. Joshi, editor of *Dharmamoksha*, rejects the neo-Hindu claims of the universal potential of Hinduism. Joining issue with Radhakrishnan, he argues that the structure of Hinduism was like a 'mosaic' or 'museum' within which various forms of religious life passively coexist, but this picture of Hinduism was not to be mistaken for an all-inclusive, synthetic whole.³⁶

In the national context, the ideology of unity which could bring down the sectarian barriers and also the divide between the high and the popular traditions of Hinduism in order to be both cognitively amenable to people's common sense and acceptable required a strategy whereby the comprehension of the unfamiliar could take place through the 'ritual of recognition', that is, by translating the unfamiliar into familiar images. To make the idea of unity attractive, it had to be accompanied by a force of moral hegemony. Vivekananda was acutely conscious of the fact that in traditional society it was the figure of the renunciate who exercised this power. The figure of Ramakrishna in this sense was appropriated as the national ideal. Vivekananda reasoned that if the highest ideal of syncretism and unity of the diverse and often conflicting strands of thought of different sects and religions was made acceptable by an individual like Ramakrishna through the example of his life and work, then it was equally possible for the society to be constructed likewise. The universalist potential of a religious figure like Ramakrishna must have also been demonstrated by the diverse set of

³⁴ Wilhelm Halbfass, op. cit., p. 332.

³⁵ A. K. Ramanujan, op. cit., 1989, p. 55.

³⁶ L. S. Joshi, *A Critique of Hinduism*, trans. G. D. Parikh, Bombay, 1948.

Ramakrishna as a figure
 of religious unity
 and synthesis

followers that Ramakrishna attracted. Apart from the middle-class urban bhadrak, his 'inner circle' of devotees consisted of housewives, widows, college-going youth, 'actresses of prostitute origin', and the 'lone disciple of non bhadrak status, his Bihari servant Latu'.³⁷

To Vivekananda, the personality of Ramakrishna was the embodiment of the idea of national unity: a practical illustration of how Hinduism could be conceived in the context of heterogeneity and could be successfully used as the organizing factor in creating a collective self.

It appears a plausible line of reasoning that this insight into the cultural geist of the nation is relayed on from nineteenth-century nationalists to succeeding generations and culminates in a figure like Gandhi, who largely succeeded in politically exercising this moral authority over the cultural space of the nation as a renunciate. J. C. Heesterman provides an insight into this aspect of the power of the renunciate in the context of the problem of constructing a unified modern nation within a tradition that is highly differentiated internally, a phenomenon which he describes as the 'inner conflict of the tradition'. According to Heesterman, the unity of the nation is apparently not bounded by ethnic, linguistic, or geographical criteria or even by the extent of existing or potential channels of distribution. The final criterion would seem to be the recognition of a specific formulation of transcendent authority and legitimation. For the Hindu, this was clearly and unequivocally the renunciatory ideal. It was this ideal that was not only referred to but effectively embodied by Gandhi, who thereby could arbitrate conflict and guarantee ultimate unity.³⁸

Reform and Transgression in Vivekananda's Thought

There were several strands within the Hindu reformist movement that was sweeping through the whole of the nineteenth century. Although they all went under the aegis of the great Hindu reformation, yet it is clearly possible to discern three distinct stages within this period. Rammohan's brand of Hindu renaissance was largely preoccupied with a refined and rational conception of the Hindu world-view which thought of reform in instrumental terms, as an agency that would remove the superstitious and obscurantist elements in society. However, with Rammohan, the Brahma Sabha was thought of as a genuine substitute for the Hindu religious system. Reform in this sense clearly implied the birth of something that was completely new and compatible with a universal rationalist order. The problem of national religion does not arise with Rammohan since the universal

³⁷For a detailed discussion on this subject, see Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., 1992, p. 1557.

³⁸J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, Delhi, 1985, p. 24.

was not a contested arena but a receptacle within which all that is rational finds its due place. David Kopf has argued that all eighteenth-century ideologues were agreed 'on the universality of all cultures that was the commonly shared component in the Orientalist value system'.³⁹ Kopf has also shown how this understanding permeated the value system of Orientalist scholarship which later came to be unseated in the Anglicist phase in the nineteenth century by administrators like Macaulay and missionaries like Alexander Duff, who reversed many of the eighteenth-century notions about universality and 'accentuated the polarity between east and west'.⁴⁰

Indeed, the specificity of nineteenth-century religious nationalism lies in the fact that national self-consciousness arises with an awareness that what is proclaimed as the universal is actually the privileged ground of the European Enlightenment. It is this particular awareness that is most pronounced in the second strand of the reformist movement commencing from the second half of the nineteenth century. That the national, the eastern, or still interchangeably Hindu, needs to make its mark on the canvas of the universal is stated in various forms. For example, the *National Paper* of Nabagopal Mitra of 22 January 1868 carries an article entitled 'Religion is Universal as Well as National, in which he stated that 'they are traitors to the cause of Religion who assert that the first and the essential truths of Religion are not indelibly impressed upon the minds of every nation, people, race or tribe living and moving in the world. They are essentially traitors... who think because Religion is universal it cannot be national'.

However, this engagement of the Hindu nationalists with the universal is clearly inattentive to the internal nature of Hindu society. The philosophical defence of the Hindu world-view, fed by the resources of Orientalist scholarship, is only partial and to a certain degree rhetorical. A more mature reading of Hinduism needed to be accompanied by a closer scrutiny of the society's structure and the construction of an internal defence of the system in its universalist dimension. This type of discourse that makes a move from patriotism to nationalism, in the sense of contemplating the shared historical destiny of the Indian peoples and of making this idea available to the popular imagination, arrives in its most powerful form with Vivekananda. Much of the reform that was undertaken in the eighteenth-century spirit of universalism cannot be called the result of a nationalist impulse. As Sudipta Kaviraj argues, this earlier structure of thought is best described as anti-colonial since it had not yet chosen its nation:

it's merely an oppositional attitude towards colonialism, a cultural critique, a resentment

³⁹David Kopf, op. cit., 1969, p. 207.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 260.

Handwritten notes in the left margin: 'Rammohan's brand of Hindu renaissance was largely preoccupied with a refined and rational conception of the Hindu world-view which thought of reform in instrumental terms, as an agency that would remove the superstitious and obscurantist elements in society. However, with Rammohan, the Brahma Sabha was thought of as a genuine substitute for the Hindu religious system. Reform in this sense clearly implied the birth of something that was completely new and compatible with a universal rationalist order. The problem of national religion does not arise with Rammohan since the universal'

Handwritten notes in the inner margin: 'The final criterion would seem to be the recognition of a specific formulation of transcendent authority and legitimation. For the Hindu, this was clearly and unequivocally the renunciatory ideal. It was this ideal that was not only referred to but effectively embodied by Gandhi, who thereby could arbitrate conflict and guarantee ultimate unity.'

Handwritten notes in the right margin: 'A sense of social base for the reformist movement'

against ignominy rather than a political economic rejection of its civilizing pretensions... From being a negative reaction to colonial power, it turns positively into consciousness of new identity. It must be seen however that this something which it supports is not present to it in an objective form. It has got to be constructed, imagined into existence. And the pessimism of anti-colonial consciousness arises partly because of its failure to find an adequate social base for its dissatisfaction and its critique.⁴¹

Nationalism not only had to construct the collective subject but also had to devise its hegemonic strategy in order to stitch this collectivity together. One of the problems that the reform movement was to confront, such as the rifts between the high and the popular culture, was already foreshadowed in the Brahma-Hindu controversy. The efficacy of nationalist discourse to construct this collectivity involved therefore the difficult task of overcoming the religious prescriptions of social stratification without appearing to have transgressed the norms of the society. In this context, it is useful to introduce an argument about reform and transgression which is a central problematic in Vivekananda's nationalism. Vivekananda held very complex ideas about the notion of reform. Indeed, the texts suggest that there is hardly ever a mention of the need for a complete reversal or change. In an interview given at Madura when he was asked whether or not he advocated the abolition of rituals in the context of social reform, he categorically stated:

No, my watchword is construction, not destruction. Out of the existing rituals new ones will have to be evolved. There is infinite power of development in everything, that is my belief... All along, in the history of the Hindu race, there never was any attempt at destruction, only construction; one sect wanted to destroy and they were thrown out of India: They were the Buddhists. We have had a host of reformers—Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Chaitanya. These were great reformers, who always were constructive and built according to the circumstances of their time. This is our peculiar method of work. All the modern reformers take to European destructive reformation, which will never do good to anyone and never did.⁴²

In the same interview, his general view of reform is formulated. Reform, the Swami opined, should not be introduced from above:

At times, great men would evolve new ideas of progress, and kings would give them sanction of law. Thus social reform had been in past made in India, and in modern times to effect such progressive reforms, we will first have to build up such an authoritative power. Kings having gone, the power is the people's... The tyranny of the minority is the worst tyranny in the world. Therefore, instead of frittering away our energies in ideal reforms, which will never become practical, we had better go to the roots of the evil and

⁴¹Sudipta Kaviraj, op. cit., 1992, p. 12.

⁴²Interviews, SVCW, vol. 5, p. 217.

make a legislative body, that is to say, educate our people, so that they may be able to solve their own problems.⁴³

In Vivekananda there is clearly a break in the discourse of reformation. There was a great deal of emphasis on universal literacy and education to bring out the rationalizing potential of religion. In an interview with the *Madras Times* in February 1897 the Swami said:

I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics will be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed and well cared for. They pay for our education, they build our temples, but in return they get kicks. They are practically our slaves. If we want to regenerate India, we must work for them. I want to start two central institutions at first—one at Madras and the other at Calcutta—for training young men as preachers.⁴⁴

The dissemination of rationalism could take place only when people were educated and made familiar with the ideas of rationality. In an interview in London in 1896, when the Swami was asked where his work would end, he replied, 'It will certainly end in the working out of India's homogeneity, in her acquiring what we may call democratic ideas. Intelligence must not remain the monopoly of the cultured few; it will be disseminated from higher to lower classes. Education is coming, and compulsory education will follow. The immense power of our people for work must be utilized. India's potentialities are great and will be called forth'.⁴⁵ The hegemony of nationalism could succeed only when knowledge could make such ideas of rationalism intelligible to the common sense of the people; universal education was crucial in this respect.

One of the central questions of nationalism that Vivekananda pondered over was the question of the legitimacy of the nationalist leadership. His nationalism becomes a discourse on religion chiefly in order to solve the problem of transgression which the nationalist elite was to encounter in their road to modernizing the traditional society. That the burgeoning nationalism was being internally split on the question of nationalism versus modernism was something that Vivekananda had set himself out to resolve from the very outset. From the 1860s this conflict had been heightened with the schism that had developed between both the Brahma Samaj and Hindu society, and within the ranks of the Brahma leadership itself. This tension was marked in Keshab Chandra Sen, who attempted unsuccessfully to fuse these two contradictory pulls of nationalism against

⁴³Ibid., p. 215.

⁴⁴SVCW, vol. 5, pp. 222-3.

⁴⁵Ibid.

Reform in transition
and education

nationalism is
- split in Brahmo movement
- transition on Brahmo movement

universalism, but ended up as a much misunderstood man, and one in tragic isolation within the Brahmo camp. It is interesting that he became one of the first disciples of Ramakrishna from among the Calcutta élites who had perhaps sensed the potential to resolve this conflict in the religious discourse of one such as Ramakrishna. Vivekananda's nationalist ideas are only a culmination and fulfilment of the quest for which Keshab Sen had unconsciously set the stage.

David Kopf makes an important point about this conflict. He argues that:

the introduction of nationalism per se... seemed to have a divisive effect on the Brahmo intellectuals. In the first place many Brahmos imbued with the Rammohan legacy of the universal man and universal religion, saw nationalism as a dangerous departure from true Brahmo doctrine. For them, Brahmoism was neither Hindu nor Christian but the quest to end sectarianism by establishing a true universal church and religion. In the second place, nationalism, so Brahmo intellectuals argued, had the tendency of glorifying a culture and thus concealing its defects and weaknesses. The result they warned would be to dampen the enthusiasm of the Brahmos for social reform and cripple the Samaj as the modernizing movement.⁴⁶

The paradoxical proposal to appropriate the universal on nationalist terms was offered in several different and often ambiguous ways. According to Kopf, the older Brahmos like Debendranath now had to defend their rationalism in nationalist terms, arguing that they had contained Christianity, refined Hinduism, and had done a great service to the nation.⁴⁷ Although there is substance to this, yet Debendranath's thinking about the Brahmo movement was largely different from Rammohan's. Whereas for Rammohan, the Brahmo Sabha was clearly outside the pale of Hindu society, Debendranath's position came to be significantly revised under the pressure of neo-Hindu nationalism when he chose to assert that the Brahmo movement was an integral part of Hinduism. As N. S. Bose has put it, 'The Adi Brahmo Samaj cry was "Brahmoism is Hinduism" but the younger Brahmos' cry was "Brahmoism is catholic and universal"'.⁴⁸ In the face of the younger Brahmos' indignation at the Indianizing Brahmoism to the point where it had become another Hindu sect, Debendranath had already answered Keshab Sen by defending the sacred thread and other attachments to Hinduism as symbols which, if rejected, would lead to complete 'denationalization'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶David Kopf, 'The Universal Man and the Yellow Dog: The Orientalist Legacy and the Problem of Brahmo Identity in the Bengal Renaissance', in Rachel Van M. Baumer (ed.), op. cit., 1975, p. 53.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸N. S. Bose, *The Indian Awakening and Bengal*, Calcutta, 1960, p. 95.

⁴⁹David Kopf, op. cit., 1969, p. 203.

This posing of the conflict between Brahmo universalism against nationalism marks a watershed in the history of the Brahmo movement. It was around this time that the movement began to fasten itself to Hindu society. The schism between the Adi Brahmos and the followers of Keshab, who genuinely believed Brahmoism to be the modern religion of the nation, spilled into open conflict with the controversy over the Brahmo Marriage Act between 1869 and 1872. Rajnarain Bose, who became the most militant Hindu spokesman from the Brahmo platform, in his opposition to the Marriage Act proposal on 12 April 1871 stated, 'The Brahmos now in fact form an integral part of Hindu Society. The law will dissociate the former from the latter—a contingency to be highly dreaded as it will injure the course of religious reformation in India'.⁵⁰ Even the missionaries who were sympathetic to Brahmo reform, like Reverend James Harwood, noted that one of the principal reasons for the breakup of the Brahmo movement was that nationalism had found its ground in Hindu religion. The kind of theism that the Brahmos sought to advocate as part of their package of rationalism in the end only proved, it appeared, the truth of the Vedas; consequently it invalidated the Brahmo proposal as something superior and separate from Hinduism. Harwood also notes that one of the principal reasons for Vivekananda's popularity was that he ably framed the national question in religious terms.⁵¹

It is not entirely correct that Brahmo ideas of theism coincided with those in the Vedas. The question that Brahmos like Debendranath asked was about the nature of the relationship between man and God which did not relate to the problems of non-dualism that the Upanishads advocated. Indeed, Debendranath's dissatisfaction with Upanishadic non-dualism is reiterated in several sections of his autobiography.⁵² Vivekananda's Upanishadic non-dualism however went a step further in upholding rationalism by posing questions to the theist in the humanist vein of equating man with God. In fact the non-dualist philosophy arrived as an Indian version of humanism. Mohitlal Majumdar was to write later that, 'India had always worshipped man, the Avatar cult is a witness to that. Being and Brahma (God) is inseparable. Various ideas and practices had appeared to realise this philosophy of nonduality in every sphere of life, in the path of knowledge, love and work... "Hu-

⁵⁰Cited in David Kopf, 1975, op. cit., p. 62.

⁵¹Reverend James Harwood wrote this in an article that was quoted in *Theosophical Thinker*, 5 June 1897. A Bengali translation of this article is cited in VSV, vol. 1, p. 223. My quotation here is both a translation from Bengali and is also paraphrased.

⁵²For a detailed discussion, see S. C. Chakrabarty (ed.), D. Thakur, *Atma jibani*, 4th edn, 1962.

Nationalism vs Universalism -
op. cit. in 'Brahmo movement'

manism" was only the reflection anew of what was already available in our tradition'.⁵³

One of the first attempts from within the Brahma movement to raise the question of the relationship of the universal ideals with the national values was that of Keshab Chandra Sen. Kopf argues that Keshab was not just a cosmopolitan universalist who was unmoved by nationalist concerns but rather one whose aspiration was more to reconcile universalism with Hindu identity. This aspiration however remained largely unfulfilled.⁵⁴ Keshab's universalism figures in his denouncement of parochial Christianity which he thought was distinctive of the genuine universal message of Christ. However, the fervent appeal against 'muscular' Christianity ultimately failed to see the important problematic of universalism in the way it was implicated in colonial discourses which had projected the Enlightenment as a privileged domain of knowledge in the custody of Europe. Keshab did however take an important step in distinguishing the Enlightenment from the chauvinist Christian appendages of colonialism. In this sense, much of Vivekananda's universal humanist concerns are prefigured in Keshab's thoughts. Sen however largely failed because his strategy of the appropriation of the universal in the name of nationalism remained misunderstood in the absence of a complete and explicit redefinition of Hinduism that arrived only with the discovery of Ramakrishna by the Calcutta élites. Without this redefinition or invention of Hinduism, the new modernized Brahma reformation could not become acceptable as part of the nation's tradition, its history, and culture.

Hindu religious discourse became important for nationalism as it was able to speak for the nation's history and its cultural past. By contrast, Brahmoism, to the extent that it was seen as something distinct from Hindu society, was completely robbed of its nationalist potential, to speak for the nation's past, as Brahmoism was proclaimed as a radically new invention. Consequently Keshab Sen antagonized and frustrated nationalists like Rajnarain even within the Brahma camp. Keshab thought and spoke for a national religion completely in the modernist vein, as one can see in his appeal to the Brahma Samaj in 1865 where he called on the Brahma ministers 'to enable members of all castes to enter the Samaj, that all Brahmans who are Brahmans by caste renounce their sacred thread and that all members of the Samaj categorically declare themselves against the caste system

⁵³Mohitlal Majumdar in *Banglar Navayug*, 1959. Cited in Bhabatosh Datta, *Bangali Manashe Vedanta* (Vedanta and the Bengali World-View), Calcutta, 1986, p. 22.

⁵⁴David Kopf bases this argument on A. C. Banerji's study of Keshab Sen, op. cit., 1969, p. 203.

and that it launches an all out campaign against kulin polygamy, child marriage and promote widow remarriage'.⁵⁵ If one compares the theme of his controversial lecture entitled 'Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia'⁵⁶ with that of Vivekananda's later claim that Christianity was actually a fulfilment of Hinduism, one can draw important conclusions about the morphology of the Hindu reformation, and the internal changes it underwent which radically altered the very structure of nationalism.

In his lecture, Keshab sought to drive a wedge into the Christian discourse that represented itself as the only religion of Enlightenment universalism. He argued that Christ as the symbol of universal harmony was inconsistent with the sectarian and muscular Christianity that was advocated by missionaries in India. What was subtly hinted at was that true universalism did not draw the distinction between East and West, the way Christian missionaries did. He observed:

They regard the natives as one of the vilest nations on earth hopelessly immersed in all the vices which can degrade humanity... They think it mean to associate with native ideas and tastes, native customs and manners, which seem to them odious and contemptible; while native character is considered to represent the lowest type of lying and wickedness.⁵⁷

This strategy of appropriating Christ's universalism in the form of an 'Oriental Christ' was completely missed by the nationalists in India. The syncretic potential of Hinduism, necessary for such a tactic to succeed, had not yet been discovered through Ramakrishna, a type of redefinition of Advaitic syncretism that became strategic in enabling Vivekananda to appropriate the universal in Hindu nationalist terms. In several lectures Vivekananda openly proclaimed Christ as the symbol of universal brotherhood and compassion by carefully separating that symbol from institutionalized Christianity but without losing his credibility as a nationalist like Keshab Sen before him. It is important to notice again how Vivekananda's strategy of appropriating Christ as a universal figure or godhead could take place in Hindu nationalist terms. In her memoirs, Nivedita recounts that one of the last and determining visions occurred to Swami Vivekananda on his way to India in January 1897; this was his vision of the Oriental Christ. She wrote:

One gathers that during his travels in Catholic Europe, he had been startled, like others before him, to find the identity of Christianity with Hinduism in a thousand points of

⁵⁵David Kopf, op. cit., 1975, p. 53.

⁵⁶Keshab Sen delivered this lecture on 5 May 1866 in the Calcutta Medical College hall.

⁵⁷Cited in *ibid.*, p. 55.

familiar detail. The Blessed Sacrament appeared to him to be only an elaboration of the Vedic prasadam. The priestly tonsure reminded him of the shaven head of the Indian monk; and when he came across a picture of Justinian receiving the law from the shaven monks, he felt that he had found the origin of the tonsure. He could not but be reminded that even before Buddhism, India had monks and nuns, and that Europe had taken her orders from them. Hindu ritual had its lights, its incense and its music. Even the sign of the cross, as he saw it practised reminded him of the touching of the different parts of the body, in certain kinds of meditation... Henceforth he could not believe that Christianity was foreign.⁵⁸

Vivekananda, unlike Keshab and Brahmandhab Upadhyay before him, completely reversed the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity. Within his discourse, it was Christianity that became a derivative of Hinduism. The symbol of the Oriental Christ is utilized to underline the eclectic potential of Hinduism celebrated in the Advaita thesis.

This can be seen more clearly by looking at the relationship between Keshab Sen and Ramakrishna. It was the latter who introduced and popularized this eclectic version of Hinduism. Keshab's earlier attempts to reconcile Hinduism with universalism found a firmer symbolic representation in his New Dispensation movement. There was a major controversy within the Brahma camp regarding Ramakrishna's influence on Keshab, particularly after the publication of Max Mueller's *Real Mahatma* in 1896. While the Brahma associates of Keshab sought to vociferously deny Ramakrishna's influence on him lest it tarnish their overzealous defence of rationalism, Narendranath Sen, the editor of *Indian Mirror*, on the other hand, assiduously advocated the view that it was in Ramakrishna's ability to reconcile Hinduism with universalism that lay the secret of Keshab's attraction for him. On 21 March 1894, the editorial in the *Indian Mirror* proclaimed:

Ramakrishna was a unique man. He was not a great Pundit but simply as the result of long continual spiritual culture, the truth dawned upon him that all religions were true... He was a Hindu of Hindus, and yet a teacher and a follower of universal religion... It is an acknowledged fact that the late Brahma leader, Keshab Chunder Sen, derived special eclectic ideas which he subsequently developed into a system of religion, under the name of The New Dispensation.

Subsequently the *Indian Mirror* carried long articles of scholarly assessment about the stages of the religious ideas of Keshab Sen. Particularly noteworthy is a letter published in its issue of 25 October 1896. It was said:

But the real question is are the distinctive ideas of the New Dispensation... with which Mr Sen's was specially identified... belong to the period before... Mr Sen's friendship with Paramhansa... The reforming ardour of the great Brahma leader, the once formidable enemy of Hindu idolatry and Christian polytheism had died out. He had become an

⁵⁸Sister Nivedita, op. cit., 1991, pp. 229-30.

advocate of peace and harmony... Not content with reiterating... that not only was there truth in all religions but that all religions were true, he went so far as to adopt and incorporate in his New Dispensation... the homa, the arati, the baptism and the Eucharist... He gave an explanation of the popular Hindu mythology... Above all the name Ma, as addressed to the Deity by the Saktas, was ever on his lips. Did these... exist before Mr Sen became familiar with Paramhansa?... It was a strange and fascinating eclecticism—a singular forgetfulness of the diversities that divide religion from religion, that could go into ecstasies at a theistic service, and again dance in rapturous joy before an image of clay or stone, and Keshab's ardent and keenly susceptible soul caught the fascination!... We who closely watched his movements, and had ample opportunities of doing so, see no other influence that can account for this great change than that of the great Hindu eclectic whose broad heart and comprehensive philosophy had room in them for the most widely differing creeds and cults.

Keshab's New Dispensation was one of the modes of acknowledging the Advaita philosophy in the way Ramakrishna had come to practice it and made it intelligible to the people's common sense. The idea that Hinduism was eventually the fulfilment of all other religions could become convincing only by showing its eclectic potential which constituted strategically the sharpest nationalist challenge to the Christian discourse of fulfilment which spoke for the subordination of Hinduism to historic Christianity. Its most important proponents were Monier-Williams, T. E. Slater, and J. N. Farquhar. As Farquhar had proposed:

This is the attitude of Jesus to all other religions also. Each contains a partial revelation to God's will but each is incomplete; and he comes to fulfil them all. In each case Christianity seeks not to destroy but to take all that is right and raise to perfection.⁵⁹

On the concept of the fulfilment thesis, W. S. Urquart wrote that the Vedanta is not Christianity and never will be simply as Vedanta; but it is a very definite preparation for it. It is the belief of Christianity that the living Christ will sanctify and make complete the religious thought of India. For centuries her saints have been longing for him, and her thinkers, not least the thinkers of the Vedanta, have been thinking his thought.⁶⁰ Wilhelm Halbfass however observes that, 'It is no surprise that the idea of fulfilment was also taken up from the side of Hinduism, where it was placed in the service of Hindu self assertion and turned against Christianity... it was claimed that the Vedanta provided the encompassing context within which Christianity, like all other religions, was contained and a priori superseded. We may even suspect that the development of the idea of fulfilment among the Christian missionaries is, in part at least, a response to the neo-Hindu

⁵⁹Eric Sharpe, op. cit., 1965, p. 52.

⁶⁰W. S. Urquart, *The Vedanta and Modern Man*, 1928, p. 250, cited in ibid. F.N. no. 247.

Renunciation
Success of universalism
was the subordination of
Christianity, Christianity
at the end.

inclusivism, as we find it exemplified by Ramakrishna, Keshab Chandra Sen and Vivekananda'.⁶¹ Keshab's earlier critique of Christianity, where he made fervent appeals to missionaries to realize its universalist potential, had only reminded his followers of the poverty of Hinduism which now had to depend on Christianity's resources to realize itself. The neo-Hindu movement succeeded in becoming nationalist in Vivekananda's hands only when he was able to bring out its inclusivist content and was able, unlike Keshab, to subordinate the Christian discourse to the religion of Vedanta.

In Vivekananda's case, Ramakrishna showed him the path of reconciling universalism with nationalism as the conflict brought to the forefront the question of making rationalism more pliable without transgressing Hindu values. This debate that arose in the wake of the radical reformism of Brahmos like Keshab Sen also sensitized Vivekananda to the whole range of questions that the nationalist élites were going to face in their endeavour to modernize and unify the national community. Consequently, renunciation was thought of as one of the strategies of advocating reform without destroying the legitimacy of the reformer as a nationalist. Vivekananda had called on the people to devise their attitude towards the traditional social institutions and practices from the point of view of a renunciate who, in the traditional Hindu world-view, could also be the initiator of counter-cultural movements. The renunciate was above the rank of both the king and the Brahmin because of his special status as a sannyasin. Being outside the mundane sphere of society, he did not have to conform to social laws and institutions. A renunciate's role was 'neither to negate society nor to radically alter it but to establish a parallel society'.⁶² Romila Thapar also makes a crucial point that historically the religious impetus for the appearance of a renunciate group came 'from the need to institutionalise a way of life that is new... or as a means of crystallising a popular religious ethos and providing it with a status'.⁶³ She argues that the charisma of the renouncer was derived 'from the practice and pursuit of non orthodox knowledge, which provided one aspect of the ultimate moral authority of the renouncer... The renouncers were above and beyond the conventional laws, for they conformed to their own laws and these were often in contradiction to the accepted social laws. This gave them added prestige as it gave them the freedom to protest against the laws of the normal society. The form that this protest took was the flouting of social convention. The accommodation of this protest, and investing it with charisma and moral authority, has

⁶¹Wilhelm Halbfass, op. cit., 1988, p. 52.

⁶²Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?', in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1990, p. 63.

⁶³Ibid., p. 77.

been in a sense characteristic of Indian society'.⁶⁴ Ideas of modern reform in a colonial society could now be made intelligible and acceptable through a traditional discourse on the ethics of austerity. This special relationship which the renunciator enjoyed with society as an outsider who is also simultaneously regarded as the guardian of the society is a symbol that Vivekananda constantly utilized to speak for reform, rationalism, and modernization without losing his credibility as a nationalist.

Reasons for universalism

1. unifying India
2. Subordinate Christian discourse
3. In spite of early presence of Hinduism

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 98.