

# Orientalism and Neo-Hinduism

## Lecture VIII

### *Vivekananda and the Transformation of Ramakrishna*

# Ramakrishna's Message: Summary

- Experience – vision of the divine against cultures of reading (high Brahmanical or English)
- Bhakti over social activism – santan bhava, pagal and the Mother
- New type of guru – relaxed, free, friendly and equal relation to disciples (effeminacy, emotions)
- Catholicity
- Grhastha sannyas
- Kamini, kancan and dasatya of chakri
- Message for the chakri
  - Ramakrishna in effect subverted the distinctions between adult and child, male and female, work and play, which the 'civilizing' mission of the west was making more rigid in colonial Bengal. Such subversion was particularly attractive during the hiatus between the renaissance and national myths, but its appeal extended beyond the 1870s and 1880s and had a specific social dimension. It stood in marked contrast particularly to the imposed world of formal routinized education and time-bound chakri.” (Sarkar, 303)

# Grhastha sanyas in social context

- Ramakrishna - an early phase of transition towards an **urban consumer-oriented Hinduism**.
- No definitive set of rituals or doctrines to the middle-class householders; rather *grhastha-sanyas*:
- **“A brahmo sub-judge once summed up what might well have been a characteristic audience response when he declared that he was 'filled with peace and happiness on hearing that there ... [was] no need to leave the world, that Ishwara can be attained even while living as a householder'.”** (Sumit Sarkar, 331)
- “Here in other words was a kind of '**this-worldly mysticism**' – living in the world, pursuing the normal bhadrakalok way of life, but inwardly distancing oneself from its travails and frustrations as typified, above all, in the chronotype of chakri.” (Sarkar, 331-332) – opposite of Weber's *“this-worldly asceticism - “pursue wealth in moderation, in obviously traditional, non-innovative ways, with no premium placed upon diligence and economic success.”* (Sarkar, 332)

# Students and Women

- **Young boys** - escape from school, escape from marriage - arranged marriage to uneducated woman, marriage and dasatya of chakri
- **Young women:** “Ramakrishna's abhorrence of sex, and his advice to keep of intercourse after one or two children, perhaps struck a chord in married women. Sex may have often seemed a terrible duty for young girls married off to totally unknown men at a tender age, in an era when absence of contraceptives made child-bearing frequent, dangerous and extremely burdensome“ (Sarkar, 340).
- **Middle-aged women:** Middle-aged or elderly housewives or widows may have found a way overcoming loneliness and the tedium of household chores by setting themselves up in a maternal role *vis-à-vis* Ramakrishna. They loved to cook and bring food for him, which the holy man eagerly accepted and often asked for. And while little survives of Ramakrishna's conversation with feminine audiences, one must not exclude the possibility that he added an extremely rare, non-personal and (in limited sense) intellectual content to lives otherwise largely bereft of such mental sustenance.” (Sarkar, 340)
- **Prostitutes** – the blessings of Binodini, the saint patron of Calcutta theatre

# Vivekananda's Transitions

- Experience: from village life metaphors to scientific grounding
- Grhastha sannyasa/karma-yoga: from concession to bhadrakalok householder to active engagement and sacralization of the strength over the world and senses (withdrawal from selfishness to brotherhood)
- Catholicity: from the mark of social transition to hierarchized universalism
- From kamini to kama and women liberation (Sarada Devi as Holy Mother)
- From rustic Bengali to chaste Bengali and English (from parables and similes to lectures)
- From Bhakti to Jnana (and Karma)
- From sakara to nirguna upasana
- From acceptance of social status quo and dwelling on prescription to engagement and criticism (serving to daridra-narayan)
- From chakri to high bhadrakalok
- From diversifies society to united Hinduism and Indian nation
- From home abroad (anti-colonialism and defiance)

# Vivekananda's Message to the West

- Hinduism as a universal world religion based on the Vedas. Vedas, however, did not mean according to him any books but universal spiritual laws revealed by the *rishis* and akin to laws discovered by the natural sciences (CWSV, I: 6).
- Hinduism as a “scientific religion”, based on the direct experience of the Absolute. Experience Vivekananda understood as the common ground of religion and science and hence as the scientific source of all religions (CWSV, I: 16). Other religions than Hinduism, however, departed from this point into a doubtful sphere of faith and dogmatism.
- Hinduism as a search for universal truth. Utmost tolerant religion which is able to accommodate all kinds of human efforts to achieve supreme goal. Religion without any dogma, containing just many means of God realization (CWSV, I: 13.). This all embracing tolerance was based on Vivekananda's awareness of intellectual and emotional differences among people and on his notion of cultural relativity.

# Vivekananda's Message to the West

- Hinduism as philosophy which does not have anything in common with criticized social institutions in Bengal in particular and in India in general. Instead it was the ground on which their criticism and slow continuous reform could be conducted.
- Hinduism as religion which offers the culmination of spiritual effort (*moksha*) to all, irrespective of their socio-religious status (to *sannyasis* as well as to householders engaged in family and social duties).
- Hinduism as religion of man responsible for his own destiny, philosophy of Advaita Vedanta through which one should realize that in his very nature he is pure perfect Self, Absolute itself (CWSV, I: 9-10).
- Hinduism as a religion harmonious with science and rationality, but at the same time as a religion offering in its experiential character testable means of getting beyond the limits of rationality into the deepest dimensions of truth.

# Vivekananda's Ambivalences

- Catholicity – Universalism – Nationalism
- Woman question
- Caste question
- Sruti/smṛti question
- **Self-confident activism vs. inward turning world-weariness**

# Social and Cultural Significance of Vivekananda's Transition

- Rammohan's main points and departures from Śankara:
  - Democratic brahmajnana – nirguna upasana compulsory irrespective of cast, asrama and gender
  - Idol worship as concession to those unable to take the high road.
  - Daily duty in asrama as qualifying for brahmajnana and liberation, householder as ideal asrama
  - Austerities as renunciation of selfish desires, noto of the world
  - Brahmajnana as grace
  - Widow as ideal renunciate (against sati)
- Vivekananda
  - High value and task of householder/ charity as the task of monk as well as householder
  - Advaita Vedanta as highest, and essential teaching of Hinduism
  - Karma as mundane (at best unselfish) action, not the ritual action
  - Brahmajnana as grace and experience
  - Widow as ideal karma-yogi (against widow and woman oppression)

# Conclusion

- Culmination of British-brought modernity – **Universal religion for the new middle-class**
- Conquering modernity – **Universal religion for the world**
- Marriage of social activism (modernism) and traditionalism – **Construction of Hindu nation**