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# THE ROOTS OF BENGALI CULTURE

*and other Essays*

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EUREKA PUBLISHERS

45, Amherst Street

Calcutta-9



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First Published : March 1966

CENTRAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
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Price :

Rs. 4.00 ; \$ 1.00 or 6sh

Printed in India by A. Bhattacharya at Publicity Printers,  
45 Amherst Street, Calcutta-9 and Published by Subhash  
Mukhopadhyaya on behalf of Eureka Publishers,  
45 Amherst Street, Calcutta-9

To my friend  
Sushil Mukherjea \*

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## INTRODUCTION

When Hindu culture and civilization was resuscitated by the efforts of a few Europeans during the latter part of the 18th century, no effort was made to explore the history and culture of the regional people of India. It was perhaps not realized at the time that the regional people had any history and culture different from the main trend of the Aryan civilization. The discovery of Bengal's history and culture was thus left to a few Bengalis whose researches, beginning in the latter part of the 19th century, have now shed a new light into the history and culture of the people of Bengal. It has now been revealed that the tradition and culture of the native population of Bengal have had peculiarities and distinctiveness of its own different from that of the Aryan Hindus.

This discovery inspired the famous Bengali scholar, late Haraprasad Shastri, one of the pioneers in the field of historical research in Bengal, to make the statement that "Bengalees are a self obliivate people". This very apt description explains why a history of the racio-cultural group of people, residing in the eastern region of India has become necessary. It is necessary not only for the people of Bengal to know their own culture and tradition, but also to let others know the distinctiveness of the history and culture of the Bengalis, whose unorthodoxy has distinguished them from the rest of India.

An anthropological enquiry into the history of culture of Bengal will perhaps reveal significant facts about the distinctive social and religious forms of the region which kept itself outside the domination of the vedic people. The ancient Hindu theologicians too always kept Bengal outside the pale of the Brahmanic hierarchy; and even in the recent past, Brahmins of Bengal were looked down by their north Indian vegetarian counterparts. The tradition which permeated the Bengali society therefore should be studied

properly in order not only to find the ethnical and anthropological roots of Bengali culture but also to construct a meaningful history of the Bengali tradition.

Throughout her history Bengal had faced series of invasions, physical and cultural. Exploitations by constantly changing monarchies had ruined Bengal's social and economic life. But Bengalis always tried to imbibe new ideas; and conquerors and missionaries always found in Bengal a friendly people and they stayed on. Thus, when in late eighteenth century, the Englishmen came here they found a people not wholly unresponsive to new ideas despite wide historical, cultural and ethnological differences. And Bengal became the birthplace of a new social and political resurgence in India. The history of this nineteenth century phenomena, widely recognized as the Bengali Renaissance, is a fascinating study.

When the English came and brought with them new ideas and economic opportunities the Bengali intelligentsia seized upon the new opportunities, which in turn resulted in the rise of the new intellectual and professional classes. The impact of western ideas and the new economic opportunities helped the growth and stabilization of the new professional class in Bengal, for the first time capable of defying the social injunctions of a closed authoritarian society.

The oppressions and exploitations of the later degenerate Moghul rule had ruined Bengali life and society and sapped the vitality of the Bengali people. This was closely followed by the revival of the social injunctions of decadent Hinduism. Bengali society, thenceforward, dominated by feuding caste and religious groups, groped for a new life.

The intellectual life of nineteenth century Bengal saw the birth and development of hitherto unforeseen creative activity. In order to effectively match the new ideas and their protagonists, the Bengali orthodoxy also rose to the occasion and

contributed in large measure toward this new creative activity in social and intellectual fields. This conflict between the protagonists of new liberal thoughts and values and the orthodoxy characterises the nineteenth century intellectual life of Bengal, and it is the dominant factor responsible for Bengal's progress and her elevation to the position of leadership in Indian life and society, which Bengal had maintained through the first half of the present century.

These essays are published in the hope they would at least convey a broad idea about Bengal's cultural history.



## The Roots of Bengali Culture

TOWARDS the end of the eighteenth century a few Europeans started a historical and cultural enquiry into Aryan Hindu civilisation. But no similar efforts were made towards exploring the civilisations of the different regional peoples of pre-Aryan India. Perhaps it was assumed they had no cultural traditions of their own. It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that a few Bengalees started to enquire specifically into the culture and history of Bengal. Consequent research has indicated that the cultural tradition of the native population of Bengal, or more generally of the people of Eastern India, is distinct in many features from that of the dominant Aryan civilisation of Northern India.

The late Haraprasad Sastri, one of the pioneers of research into the early history of Bengal, characterised the Bengalees as 'self-oblivious.' According to him, the beginnings of Bengali history are so uncertain, that for all anybody can tell, it may be quite as old as Egypt, Babylon and China: 'When the Aryans had reached the Punjab, Bengal had already attained a high level of civilisation, and when they had advanced up to Allahabad, they began to abuse Bengalees as speechless and devoid of religious sense—presumably, being jealous of their distinctive culture. Before the birth of Buddha, Bengalees had become so powerful on land and sea that a disinherited son of Bengal conquered Ceylon with seven hundred men, and gave the island its name Simhal.'



An anthropological enquiry into the cultural tradition of Bengal will perhaps reveal significant facts about the distinctive social and religious forms of the region which kept it outside the domination of the Vedic peoples. It is known that the ancient Hindu theologicians always kept Bengal outside the pale of the Brahmanic hierarchy, and even in later modern times, the Brahmins of Bengal were looked down on by their Northern Indian vegetarian counterparts. The distinctive social tradition which permeated the entire Bengalee society needs therefore to be studied properly and intensively, not only in order to find the ethnological and anthropological roots of Bengalee culture, but also to construct a meaningful history of Bengali tradition.

### *Vedic Period*

That the culture and civilisation of Eastern India rose to a high peak even before the Vedic peoples had advanced eastwards has now been established by many historical evidences and archeological findings. It is now held that the ancient aboriginal people, who had established themselves from the Mediterranean to the Bay of Bengal before the spread of what is known as Aryan civilisation, were probably the 'dasyus' mentioned in the Rig Veda and described as 'chirping birds' in the Aiteraya Aranyaka. The word, 'anasa,' which was formerly derivated so as to mean 'noseless,' has now been derivated to mean those people whose speech is bad or impossible to understand. The archeological findings in Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and other cities of the Indus Valley civilisation are now known to be relics of these 'dasyus' of pre-Vedic times. It is now common knowledge that the Dravidian language and the spoken language of the Indus Valley people were unknown to the Rig-Vedic peoples; and also that the Sanskrit language was far more developed than the Dravidian language. The Vedic people were also known to

be very keen on correct pronunciation ; and because they could not understand what they called the 'ill-pronounced speech' of the non-Aryan Dravidians, they called them 'anasa' or foul-mouthed 'chirping birds' and the like. These Dravidian people were the original inhabitants of Bengal and Bihar, and probably of the whole of Northern India too. The modern Bengalee nation is a mixture of the Dravidian, Aryan and Mongolian peoples.

According to modern anthropologists, however, the word 'Dravidian' does not mean an ethnic group ; it only means a language group. What used previously to be known as the Dravidian race, now means two racial groups, viz. (1) Proto-Austroloids and (2) Proto-Negroids, The original inhabitants of Bengal were predominantly proto-Austroloids. This racial group is presumed to have once inhabited the entire region from Central Indian to South India and beyond Ceylon up Australia.

Another pre-Vedic Indian people emerged from the Alpine group, whose chief physical characteristic was that they were longfaced. These people inhabited the Indus Valley region. According to some recent anthropologists, the Bengalee nation is a mixture of these Alpine and proto-Austroloid racial groups mainly.

Modern anthropologists also reject the widely held theory and assumption of 'the Aryan race.' According to them, the word 'Aryan' signifies a language group, the language of Vedic Sanskrit. The people who spoke this language belonged to the Nordic race.

The language of the Eastern Indian people used to be called 'asura'. This was an Austric language. About the sixth century B. C., this language is known to have been

use in Rarh (lower Bengal) and Sumbha. From these two languages, the Austric and the Dravidian, many words are known to have been incorporated into the Sanskrit language. An authority in this field, Mr. T. Burrow, thinks that quite a few Sanskrit words have been traced to the early Austro-Asiatic peoples who inhabit the Eastern frontier of India (vide : *The Sanskrit Language*, pp. 375). One of the evidences that the Vedic people came in contact with these Austric and Dravidian peoples and that there were cultural exchanges and racial mixing between them is this interchange of words in the two languages. One such word is 'langal,' meaning plough. This is an Austric word, which was incorporated into Sanskrit at a very early stage. Many people even conclude from this one evidence that the nomadic Vedic Aryans did not know cultivation and had learnt it from these Austric peoples, and that this is the reason why they did not have any name for the instrument used in cultivation. Besides rice, the Austric peoples also used to produce bananas, brinjals, gourds, lemons, betels, coconuts, oranges, betelnuts and many other things whose names are also Austric in origin. Even cloth made out of cotton wool was originally an Austric industry. All these reveal that the Austric people were predominantly an agricultural people.

The Vedic people, on the other hand, were a cattle-raising nomadic community and had learnt agriculture from these earlier settled peoples of India, known as 'Dasyus.' Linguists further think that the word for the chief agricultural tool 'langal' is derived from 'linga' (sex organ). This brings us to a very important revelation about the two divergent thoughts current in ancient India. One is the Vedic, predominated by male gods; and the other the non-Vedic, based on the central idea of 'sakti,' of primal energy and Mother Goddess. This

latter trend is the Tantric trend that considered the female energy as the primary cause of the universe and creation, which is the central concept of Tantra.

We know that the 'linga' worship, which was known to have been prevalent among the Indus people also, had been much maligned by the Rig Vedic people. It is also known that the cult of 'linga' later gave rise to 'Siva-linga' and 'Sakti Yoni,' which have an intimate relation with 'matrika puja' and serpent worship. All these clearly reveal the Tantric trend.

Much light on the life and thought of ancient Bengal can probably be obtained by a critical examination of the social anthropology of the Atharva Veda, Tantra, and other Eastern Indian religious practices. It has been held by many that Kapila, the propounder of Sankhya philosophy, was pre-Vedic ; Sankaracharya also held that Kapila was non-Vedic. Many also consider that Kapila belonged to Eastern India and most probably to Bengal proper. That the famous place of pilgrimage, Sagar island, at the mouth of the Ganges near the Bay of Bengal, might be the place where Kapila preached his philosophy is not improbable, in fact, many evidences tend to establish this. The island is also mentioned in the Mahabharata as a famous place of pilgrimage. The reputed Sanskrit scholar, Monier Williams wrote : 'in all probability the Tantric doctrine owes its development to the popularising of the Sankhya theory of 'Purusha' and 'Prakriti.'

Monier Williams further held that the magical formularies of Tantra had an intimate connection with the Atharva Veda. This is further corroborated by the Bengali Encyclopaedia, *Viswakosh*. One of the famous Tantric texts, 'Yantra-Yamini' of Damodar, says it is the essence of Atharva Veda. This would shed much light on the early history of the

ancient Indian religious text, the Vedas, which, as we are now aware, were originally three in number ( even up to the time of Kautilya, who mentions only three Vedas ), but were later raised to four, presumably as a result of the compromise between the Vedic people of the North and the non-Vedic people inhabiting the Eastern regions of India at a very early time. This inclusion of the Atharva Veda within the sacred fold gave rise to what is commonly known today as Hinduism with a predominant Tantric influence, although retaining a formal Vedic super-structure.

The History of the Vedas also tells us that Atharva Veda had a different religious tradition distinct from Rig, Sama and Yajur Vedas, the three orthodox Vedic texts. It is now widely held that the content of Atharva Veda reflects a much more ancient and primitive faith, though its form appears to be later. The magical formularies contained in the Atharva Veda used to be transmitted only through a line of the initiated disciples by their 'gurus',—a form still in practice among the Brahmins and probably taken over from the people who practised the Atharva Vedic magical cults. In fact, this practice of 'initiation' by the guru, also gave rise to hereditary priesthood and the practice of chanting secret mantras for the attainment of specific desires—which was absent in the other three Vedic traditions.

O. Schraeder, another great authority on Indian religion, writes in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* ( Aryan Religion, P. 43 ): "In India, even before the Vedic times, the hereditary dignity of the Brahmins had been developed from those families of primitive tribes that were expert in magic. From their midst arose the domestic priest ( *purohit* ) who was indispensable to the king for preparing sacrifices." These magical rites, which formed the basis of

the Tantric cult, presumably belonged to the tradition of Atharva Veda, which was later incorporated into the sacred order of Rig Vedic tradition.

An enquiry into the meaning of the 'vratya' and the peoples referred to by the word may also throw much light upon the conflict between the Vedic and non-Vedic peoples in this early period. And from all we know these 'vratyas' belonged to the non-Aryan tradition and seem to have been the original exponents of the Tantric and Atharva Vedic tradition.

The seventeenth chapter of the principal 'Brahmana' of the Sama Veda, which has been referred to by the late Haraprasad Sastri in his essay on 'The Absorption of the Vratyas,' says: 'they utter poisonous words (garagiro) because they covet food prepared for Brahmins in inhabited quarters. They declare cultured speech as difficult to pronounce; they punish with death those who do not deserve punishment, and though uninitiated they utter words that only the initiated are allowed to pronounce.'

The ceremonies through which the 'vratyas' were purified and admitted into the Vedic society, differed at least in one particular from the other great ceremonies of the Vedic times; while the others had only the sacrificer and his wife in the hall of sacrifice, in these ceremonies thousands of sacrifices used to be admitted in the hall during each ceremony. This distinction very probably indicates the mass conversion of non-Aryan into the Aryan fold in those ancient times.

Sastri continued: "after conversion they were not allowed to bring their possessions in 'vratya' life and had to leave them to those who remained 'vratyas' still to the so-called

*Brahmins of the Magadhadesa*, who were looked down upon by the Rishis." Who were these so-called Brahmins? Evidently, they seem to be the Brahmins of non-Vedic tradition, the hereditary fire-worshippers of the Atharva Vedic tradition, who probably lived in the Eastern region of India either from the beginning or after being driven away from the North by the early Vedic Aryans.

The process of purification of the 'vratyas' has been elaborately treated in the 'Panchavinsa Brahman' of Sama Veda, though it must have started much earlier than the time when this Brahman of Sama Veda was composed.

Atharva Veda also contains a chapter on the glorification of the 'vratyas.' That chapter mentions seven of the eight 'murtis' (different forms) of Siva that the Hindus worship to this date. There is a view that Siva is the same as 'Rudra' of Rig Veda; but Shiva's resemblance to Rudra is remote, whereas his resemblance to the eight forms is closer and more intimate.

Haraprasad Sastri further wrote: "Rudra was a Vedic deity invoked in many sacrifices; he had a share of the offerings in Vedic sacrifices. But Siva had none, and his admission produced a great commotion typified in 'Dakshya-yagna'."

With the infusion of new blood into the Vedic fold, new ideas seem to have originated, and all the extra-sacrificial ideas in the later portions of the Brahmanas, known as 'Aranyakas' and 'Upanishads,' can be attributed to this infusion of new blood.

There is another matter in which the distinction between the original Rig Vedic 'Rishis' and the purified vratyas is clearly felt in the Brahmanic society. The Brahmins claim

their descent from the seven Rishis of the Rig Veda and from the sage Agastya. These eight are the roots of the 'gotras,' which is the foundation of the gotra system in the Brahmanic society. Bhrigu and Angirases, through ancient Rishis, have no place in the gotra system of the Rig Veda. They are the original Rishis of the Atharva Veda. The marriage of the Rig Veda Rishis is guided by one set of rules, and that of the Atharva Veda Rishis by another.

It thus appears that Atharva Veda and Tantra had a close relation, even if they had not originated from the same source ; and they probably belonged to a non-Aryan tradition which had dominated Eastern Indian life and thought since primitive times.

It also appears that before the advent of Vedicism, Bengali had retained an original religious tradition of its own, based on Atharva Veda and Tantra, and was but little influenced by the Aryan or Vedic religion. Bengal, in fact, remained a seat of Tantra until Buddhism swept the province by a queer blend of Tantricism and Buddhism, leading to two different forms of religious faiths; ( 1 ) Vaishnavism through Sahajiya, and (2) Saktism, known popularly as the 'sakta' cult. Brahmanism, as we know it today, was the last to enter the religious scene in Bengal ; and even when it did, it generally remained as a sort of super-religion dominating in its outer forms, but beneath its surface the original faiths and practices of the land remained dominant.

### *The Tantric Tradition*

Commenting on 'Manu-Samhita,' the famous Sanskrit scholar, Kulluka Bhatta, said : 'srutisca dwi-vidha vaidiki tantriki ca ;' meaning, 'sruti' ( revelation ) is twofold, Vedic and Tantrik. The import of this significant statement has been largely ignored or misunderstood ; it would otherwise



have revealed important historical knowledge about ancient Indian social polity. It is now an accepted fact that two-thirds of modern Hinduism is Tantrik in content and only one-third is Vedic. There has not been any serious enquiry into the contribution of Tantra to Hindu life and thought; although the key to the history and culture of Bengal at least lies hidden in Tantra.

A significant seal discovered in Harappa has, on one side, a female figure with her legs stretched apart and a tree blossoming out of her womb. This seal, which no doubt reflects a very primitive belief held by the Indus Valley people, may throw much light on the beliefs current among the original peoples of India, although the six-lettered inscription on it has yet to be deciphered. The seal undoubtedly can be interpreted as an expression of the primitive belief that an intimate relation existed between the fertility of woman and vegetation. The ideas of magic, magical rites and formularies, which constitute the essential features of Tantra, seem to have been born out of this primitive belief. Because of this very foundation of Tantric belief, the position of woman in Tantric culture is very high in contrast to the degrading status that women suffer in Vedic Aryan society.

Primitive man must have ascribed secret power to women, believing that as they could produce a child out of nothing they possessed the power to produce crops also, by the same secret power. Primitive Bengali society, in other words the society represented in Tantric and Atharva Vedic cultures, thus provides extensive support to Robert Briffault's researches and theory in this respect.

A large number of myths and rites can still be found among the tribal and native population of Bengal and neighbouring areas, which connect woman with the invention of agriculture. In Bankura district, a social rite is still exten-

sively prevalent and practised almost universally, known as the Bhadu Puja. According to one modern account, Bhadu was the daughter of a former Raja of Panchet, who died a virgin for good of the people. In commemoration of her death, the Bagdis and Bauris, two aboriginal castes, carry in procession an effigy representing her, on the last day of the Bengali month of 'Bhadra'—about the middle of September, during the rainy season. There is no doubt that the modern legend is a later interpolation. But the myth and the celebration clearly represent the symbolic cult of fertility. No priests are required for this puja; the women and children of each family chant songs, day after day, before this idol—which is decorated with flowers—for about a month. And, on the last and most important day, which falls on the last day of Bhadra, 'the worshippers forget all work in their loud and boisterous worship of Bhadu.' R. C. Dutt, the reputed sociologist and historian of 19th century India, commenting on this puja wrote; 'the goddess Bhadu...is imagined to be a princess of excessive goodness and beauty, who took pity on the conditions of the poor Bauris and died at an early age... There can be no doubt that the worship is connected in some way with the early rice harvest which commences in Bhadra.'

An intimate relation was thus conceived between fertility and agriculture, in both of which women were the productive agents. On this belief ideas of magic developed among the primitive people, the central idea of which was to fulfil a desire by means of a medium, or symbol. The first real productive work that man experienced was the production of a child by woman. Hence primitive man must have tried to correlate, in some way, their most important productive activity—agriculture—with sexual reproduction. Viewed in this light, the Harappan seal becomes very meaningful, and throws much light on the social anthropology of ancient India.

We also have the evidence of one of the most sacred 'Puranas' of the Hindus, the Markandeya Purana, where the Devi, Mother Durga, is conceived exactly as the figure on the Harappan seal. In the Devi-Mahatmya portion of the Purana, the Goddess is described as existing eternally, embodied in the world. 'By her the universe was stretched forth...She is the creator of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.' (In the earliest extant religious poetry of Bengal, the *Dharma Mangala Kavyas*, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva are supposed to have been born out of the primal energy, 'adya sakti,' which is conceived as the consort of the 'Dharma Thakur,' a later Bengali Buddhist version of the Sun God.

The most significant part of the text in the Markandeya Purana, however, is the following : 'I shall support ( nourish ) the whole world with life-sustaining vegetables, which shall grow out of my body, during a period of rain. I shall then gain fame as 'Sakambhari' ( herb-bearing or herb-nourishing ).' Devi is also described as killing the 'asuras,' Sumbha, Nisumbha, Durgama, who are all conceived as demons of drought; and Durga, as Sakambhari, is conceived as the goddess of corn. According to Devi-Mahatmya, and also Bengali custom, the great annual festival commemorating Durga Puja, is performed in Autumn, which is the time when crops begin to ripen and harvesting is near. Further, an important aspect of the Durga Puja in Bengal is 'navapatrika,' or the worship of the nine plants, which also reveals that the goddess was conceived as the personification of the vegetation spirit. According to the late R. P. Chanda, another great Bengali scholar, 'the legend...connecting the worship of Durga in autumn with Rama's slaying Ravana is unknown to the Ramayana of Valmiki'. 'According to the Ramayana of Valmiki ( VI, 105 ),' he writes, 'Rama worshipped Surya, the Sun God and not Durga, at the instance of the sage Agastya, before his last encounter with Ravana.' Chanda tells us that

'this legend, therefore, was evidently invented to explain the transformation of Durga as the vegetation spirit to the war-goddess and brings her worship in line with epic Brahmanism.' This was presumably made when the final rapprochement between the two major religious faiths of the Hindus in ancient India, the Tantrik and the Vedic, took place, giving final form to what has come to be known as Hinduism today. The comparative broadness and elasticity of the Hindu religion is also partly due to the fact that it has incorporated within itself numerous local cults and the two major faiths of ancient India.

The significant characteristics of Tantra may be summarised as follows : Firstly, the predominance of female goddess ; secondly, the high respect accorded to women who are supposed to be the embodiment of the female energy ; thirdly, the employment of magical practices with the aid of symbols. A study of Bengal's social life will reveal its predominantly Tantrik character, though later Brahmanic domination changed the religious super-structure to a great degree, albeit superficially. In most of the social and religious practices of Bengal, a special place is still found for exclusively feminine rites, which can be traced either to the original supremacy of woman in the social and religious life of Bengal, or to the respect female energy commanded here since primitive times. Some of the religious cults which are prevalent even to this day, like Chandi, Shitala, Manasa, Bhadu and Tusu pujas, carry the original Tantrik traits in them. These goddesses further reveal their non-Aryan character, which goes to show the close connection between Tantrik beliefs and the non-Aryan ethnic group of peoples. It may be mentioned in this connection that when 'suttee' was introduced in Bengal by the Vedic Brahmins, 'Mahanirvan Tantra,' one of the principal schools of Tantra, opposed it on the ground that it denigrated womanhood, which embodies the female energy.

The goddess Chandi, as is evident from all references in old Bengali literature, is a non-Aryan deity. Chandi is the daughter of a 'Hadi' ( a very low caste in Brahmanic hierarchy belonging to the untouchable group). 'Hadir jhi Chandi Ma' ( meaning, Mother Chandi is the daughter of a Hadi ) is a very familiar expression. It is now known that the Hadis, in olden times, used also to perform priestly functions in many Kali temples, and are said to be still doing so in remoter areas of Bengal. They are the custodians of many temples of Shitala, the goddess of small-pox. In 'Harisidhya,' one of the famous 'mainamati' ballads of Eastern Bengal, there is mention of a 'Hadi' raised to the status of a great sage.

The reputed Bengali anthropologist, the late Sarat Kumar Roy, held that the worship of Chandi has come down to Hindu society from the Oraons, a tribal people. It is also mentioned in many early Bengali works of literature that the Oraon youth worshipped Chandi naked at midnight. These original faiths, the worship of Chandi, Shitala, and other goddesses, reveal clearly influence of the magical cults of Tantra on later Hindu life, and its deep influence on Bengali culture. The Hadis seem to have been the original exponents and priests of this cult and must have occupied a decent position in society, which is probably why they were much maligned and relegated to the status of untouchables by the later Brahmanic society. They might have also courted this by their vigorous resistance to Brahmanic aggression on their cultures.

The evidence of Tantra can also be found in the folk tales, the 'rupakathas' of Bengal. In these tales we find mention of sages, who ; by uttering incantations over a body cut to pieces, used to rejoin the pieces and make the body whole and alive again. These magical practices are absent in the Rig Vedic tradition. In the legend of Harisidhya of Mymensingh ballads, the sage Harisidhya displays similar feats, and gods

come down to offer him their services. The attribution of magical powers to man, even greater than those of the gods, is a special feature of the folk tales of Bengal and indicates Tantrik heritage. In the 'brata kathas'—tales connected with the religious observances of women—which seem to have come down from antiquity and are ingrained in the social life and beliefs of Bengali women, the deities addressed are mostly unknown to the Aryan, Vedic tradition. Some of their names are also non-Sanskritic and appear a little strange to the modern Sanskritised Bengali language. Their modes of worship too are quite distinct from the Vedic tradition. The hymns addressed to these deities are couched in the oldest form of Bengali, the 'prakrit' dialect, and cannot be clearly understood. Similarly, the origin of the worship of the Bengali women's god, Laul, is also lost in obscurity. This deity, like another called Thua, is represented by a conical piece of clay. This object is covered with floral decorations, and two arms are attached to it. The religious observances connected with Thua and Laul must have been of non-Aryan origin. In the tales connected with their worship it is claimed that young wives introduced it in the family against great resistances by their in-laws. According to the late Dinesh Chandra Sen, to whom falls credit of resuscitating early Bengali literature and folk songs, the Arayans seem to have been opposed to these practices; but the new brides were initiated into the rites probably by the non-Aryans with whom they came in contact and amongst whom the Aryan homes were built. It is also possible that these practices were introduced into the Aryan fold through inter-marriage with non-Aryans. Likewise, the worship of Chandi and Manasa was also not originally favoured by the Aryans, and was said to have been similarly introduced by young brides, who bore oppression and great suffering for doing so.

The archaic forms and words in the hymns and worship

of these dieties and many others suggest their very early origin; they seem to have originated when the Bengalis were at the height of their maritime activities, subsequently prohibited by Brahmanic religion. The chart of worship of the goddess Bhaduli is full of symbolical things denoting sea voyages. There are seven seas, thirteen rivers, the sandy beach, rafts, sea fowls, etc. mentioned in them. Bhaduli used to be worshipped in the month of August when the rivers were full and the monsoon high, and people were anxious for the welfare of their dear ones. Who the goddess Bhaduli was, is not known. In one of the hymns she is called the mother-in-law of Indra, as in one passage Laul is called the elder brother of Siva. These seem later attempts to connect them in some crude way with the deities of the Vedic pantheon. According to Dr. D. C. Sen, the clay figurines made in connection with this celebration had a strange similarity to the clay figures discovered by Avans in Crete belonging to 3,000 B. C.

The essence of the Tantrik cult is to hold a symbol to fulfil a desire by uttering certain secret mystic words. In later Bengali belief, particularly evident among womenfolk, we find barren women, who desire children, hanging bricks or stones on the grills of doors in the temples of local goddesses or Siva, in order to conceive. The peculiar practice of women is evidently essentially Tantrik, where the brick serves as the symbol.

A serious anthropological study into the history and culture of Bengal will perhaps reveal significant facts about the distinctive social and religious practices of Eastern India, which kept its tradition so much apart from the Aryan Vedic tradition of Northern India. This distinctive social tradition, which permeated even the later Brahmin-dominated society of Bengal, should be studied properly in order to discover the roots and history of Bengali culture, which still distinguished her people from those of other parts of India.

## Life and Literature of Medieval Bengal

The folk tales and ballads of Bengal, prior to Brahmanic domination of the province, not only gives an insight into the socio-cultural life of Bengal at an early era, they further reveal to us the simple yet lively and realistic literature that existed in Bengal about which little was known until lately. It is generally held, though erroneously, that Bengali literature is an off-shoot of Sanskrit literature and a part of it. In fact, however, Bengali literature has a distinct tradition of its own and developed parallel with and independently of Sanskrit literature. Whatever evidences are found in the form of folk tales and ballads show distinctiveness in language, style and protrature.

The Bengali ballads can be traced to the early 'Pal' dynasty (6th cent. A. D.) and even to times prior to its rise; and it can reasonably be assumed that a long line of previous story-tellers and bards made and remade many of the old and often still unknown ballads and tales. Eastern Mymensingh ( now in Eastern Pakistan ), which formed a part of the ancient kingdom of *Pragjyotishpur* has been the storehouse of medieval Bengali ballads and it is from here that the gems of medieval Bengali ballads were first recovered. With the decadence of the power of 'Pal' kings, Eastern Mymensingh gradually separated itself from the empire and asserted independence, forming several small principalities ruled mostly by the Rajvansis, Hajangs and the Koches. The last Rajvansi chiefs, Lakshan Hazra and Ram Hazra, were ousted from their seat in Jangalbari of Kishoregunge by Isha Khan about 1590 A. D. The principalities in Eastern Mymensingh,



later known as Muzzamabad, extended as far as Laur in Sylhet and were finally conquered by Hussain Shah in 1523. From the Garo escarpment to the Northern frontiers of Dacca District, a vast tract of country had for long been ruled by the Rajas of Kamrup ("Kamrup" was an early name for Assam) : the faith was Tantricism intermixed with Buddhist and Jain ideas. Brahmanic religion and life began to invade this part of India after the overthrow of the tribal chief, Vaisya Garo, by Someswar Pathak, a Brahmin chief of Kanauj, in 1280 A. D., the founder of the present family of the Maharajas of Susang. The river, Someswari, bears the name of the tutelary goddess of this Vrahmin conqueror. Eastern Mymensingh, for a long time, refused to accept Brahmanic religion, based on orthodoxy and 'kulinism' ; and the enemies of Ballal Sen, the powerful Brahmin ruler of mdieval Bengal who gave vedic Brahmanism state patronage, often took refuge in the regions of Eastern Mymensingh.

The whole of Eastern Mymensingh, however, remained under the influence of non-Aryan peoples, who were powerful, yet peace-loving; and were fond of art and literature. Some scholars, including the late Nagendra Nath Basu, the well known editor of the Bengali Encyclopaedia, *Viswakosh*, had attempted to prove that these people were the same as the 'Panis' referred to in the Rig Veda. The culture of the people of Eastern Mymensingh, who carried with them the original tradition of the Bengali peoples, is manifest in the ballads and folk-lore recovered from there. We find from them that in contrast to later Brahmanic society the girls married after attaining puberty and according to their own choice. There were regular schools (the Tols) for imparting education in the primary, secondary and higher stages and neither caste nor sex was any bar to education. Girls received the same education as boys. In the old 'Chandikavya' story, we find that Srimanta, though a bania by caste, received the same kind of education as

that received by the Brahmin boys. We find 'Phullara', the flower-girl, quoting Sastras; and 'Khullana', the 'bania' lady, recognising her husband's hand-writing. The story of *Vidyasundar* incidentally in which Princess Vidya challenged all the princes to a literary contest is based in part on historical fact.

The ballads of Bengal are the gems of medieval Bengali literature and represent the life and love of the people as was then prevalent. The style and richness of these ballads, regarding whose history and origin little is known at present, can be compared to the great lyrics of any age. We often hear of sea voyages which reveal that they belonged to a people who disregarded later Brahmanic restrictions on sea voyages, and we know from history that Bengal had extensive sea trade with countries of the Far East both before and during the reign of the 'Pal' dynasty. These ballads also completely reject neo-Brahmanic ideals and have no resemblance to Sanskrit literary conventions. One breathes in them complete freedom. The female characters vary greatly, rarely belong to any particular pattern or stereotype, and, surprisingly, never allow social inhibitions to regulate their love-life.

In one such ballad, 'Andha-bandhu' (blind friend), a princess leaves her husband confessing to him that she loved a blind beggar with whom she elopes without shame or remorse. On reading the ballad one finds that the author, far from being dismayed by her supposedly wayward conduct is filled with admiration for a woman truly in love. Love and mutual attraction between man and woman as depicted in this and other ballads, gives a joyful picture of freedom, in which there is no trace of shame or remorse. In a later period after Brahmanism had installed itself in Bengal, a Vaishnava sect. The 'Sahajiyas' were on the other hand much ridiculed and maligned by the Brahmanic hierarchy for advocating and practising such freedom in life and love.

Another immortal ballad, 'Mahua', is also a story of love told in an epic manner. The scene describing Mahua carrying the body of her dead fiance reminds one of the Dyonisian dance of Siva carrying Sati. When at first her foster father asked Mahua not to entertain the illusion of marrying her affluent lover, she obeyed him and left the city. She also thought that probably her lover might not agree to marry her in the end while she would have staked everything for him. But when she later found out that her lover did really love her truly and sincerely she immediately left with him on horseback. Her fiance was killed during the return ride by tradesmen who were captivated by her beauty and charm and tried to tempt her by offering money and valuable things. She was forcibly taken on board a ship. But she remained steadfast in her love. With an axe she broke open the bottom of the ship and sank it. The story ends with the following touching words of Mahua to her father standing before the deadbody of her fiance whom she carried back, "You should not try to marry me with Sujan, father. Can't you see the difference between Sujan and my husband? Pray, look at him *with my eyes*". Saying these words, she ran a knife into her chest and fell dead upon her lover's body. The Bengali verse, which only the privileged can understand, is remarkable in language and style and is totally devoid of Sanskritic influence. Mahua is but one of a large number of such ballads.

'Bhelua', another song of love, seems to belong to an age when Brahmanism had not yet installed itself in Bengal. The ideas expressed no doubt belong to an age preceding the foundation of modern social life in Bengal. Bhelua, the heroine, and Menoka, another female character selected their husbands at the age of 17. Bhelua fell in love with the trader's son, Madan, and no restrictions seemed to

have existed in this love making as their conduct was not questioned even when they made love to strangers before their marriages. The present day Bengali society, which is only a few centuries old, could not possibly have conceived such situations as those described in the ballad. Perhaps that is the reason why Bhelua is now mostly sung by the Mohammedans, the Hindus having given it up since they accepted the puritanic codes of neo-Brahmanic ethics. In the ballad we also find that even when the merchant is distributing money at a religious function, the poet refers to the poor only; the Brahmins are not mentioned at all. Yet they, in Brahmanic society are the ones who generally are the principal and the foremost recipient of such gifts. The ballad also gives a graphic description of the richness of Bengal in those days, its architecture and also its trade.

The ideal of love predominates throughout this ballad too. The heroine, Bhelua, even when surrounded by many suitors and in adverse circumstances, remain devoted to the merchant hero, Madan, and never breaks her vow of love. And although she did not care for the man-made laws of marriage, she remained true to her love.

The early Bengali poets, like the people themselves, did not suffer from moral inhibitions. The completely ignored all social taboos that are evident in Sanskrit literature, and easily and beautifully depicted the lives and loves of the people. These lives and loves they depicted in such a bold manner that they would at times even incur the censure of modern enlightened societies; yet they never faltered, and always remained true to their sense of art and values. The late Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen, the pioneer in the field of research in early Bengali literature, commenting on the ballads, wrote : "( Even ) Rabindra Babu ( Tagore ) ultimately

made his heroine come back from her natural love and desire ; and did not dare to defy the puritanic Brahmanic concepts of chastity and morality. But the village poets never faltered." They depicted whatever they saw and felt, and depicted them beautifully and without hesitation. The female characters in these ballads, "Andha-bandhu", "Shyam Roy", "Dhopar Maath", are unchaste according to modern Hindu ideals ; but they are made perfect incarnations of love, which even orthodox Hindus will not dare deny.

A comparison between these poets and the classical Sanskrit literature is worth studying. The Bengali poets depicted the life and love of the common people ; their language and style were simple and sweet ; the classicists dealt with kings and vedic heroes and had naturally been engrossed in the rich atmosphere of the princely and ruling families. Their language therefore was also rich and represented little of the common people's lives. The poets of Bengal dealt with simple, real and natural surroundings, with life as it was lived by common people, yet they created a form of beauty not in any way inferior to the classical Sanskrit poets.

In Sanskrit, Brahmanist-dominated literature, there is glorification of Brahmanic ideals. At every stage, the reader notices social restraint, whereas the indigenous literature of Bengal is absolutely free from such restrictions. The heroes and heroines succeed in, or succumb for, love in the most natural manner.

The beginning of Sanskrit era in Bengali literature, which began after the establishment of Brahmanic domination, marks also the introduction of strict control in life and rigid social laws. In order to counteract the laxity in society during the later Buddhist times which seems to have taken an extreme form in Bengal where monks and nuns from within

as well as from outside made the 'Sanghas' (monasteries) veritable seats of sexual debauchery, the Brahmins introduced such rigidity and strict control that the free flow of social life in Bengal was disrupted. This was a primary reason why a great number of Hindus converted themselves into Muslims.

But wherever Brahmanism, introduced under the State patronage of the Sen kings, could not dominate, there the original free atmosphere in social life remained, and social taboos were absent. Chittagong, Sylhet, Eastern Mymensingh are some of these places, and it is from these places that the present knowledge of early Bengali life and literature is obtained. In these places people could maintain their political isolation because of natural geographical advantages during the centuries immediately preceeding the Mohammedan conquest and thus maintain their cultural freedom from Brahmanic aggression. And thus the original ballads were saved.

In Sanskritic literature, dominated by Brahmanic ideas, the most approved age for marriage of a girl is eight years ; and in the event the girl should reach the age of eleven or twelve and attain puberty, this development becomes a calamity for the family and for the girl's father. Later, under Brahmanic domination, in Bengal too freedom of women was suppressed, and in the Bengali poems of 17th and 18th century this reached a climax. Joynarayan, a Bengali poet of 18th century, puts the following piece of advice in the mouth of Chandra Bhan, the hero, while addressing his consort Sunetra on the eve of his departure : "During my absence, Oh Sunetra, shun the shadows of all male persons as one would shun black snakes. If the voice of any male person reaches your ears, consider it as terrible as the sound of thunder". This is in conformity with the ideal of Sita, when she, suspected by Rama, says in defence : "Even when I was a mere child I never came too close to a male play-fellow".

Compared to these moral sicklings, what a freedom, self-confidence and joy one finds in women depicted by the earlier ballads of Bengal.

Later, the Vaisnavas revolted against the orthodoxy of Brahmin-dominated society and made an attempt to spiritualise free love through the 'Sahajiya' songs. They resurrected Bengali spirit and culture at a time when it was faced with total extinction under Brahmanic domination. And the best poetry in Bengali literature belong undoubtedly to the Vaishnavas. There is a striking similarity between the early rural ballads and the early Vaishnava lyrics in spirit and outlook; not that the two mutually influenced each other profoundly, but both seem to have had their inspiration from the rich treasure of romantic spirit and love that pervaded Bengal in those early days. This might have partly been due to the spread of the 'sahajiya' cult which drew its inspiration from Buddhism ever since Buddhism had swept the province at a very early period of her history. Thus every poet who saw and studied life got vivid poetical images from the homes and people at first hand. They reveal that the entire soil of Bengal was rich in emotional feelings.

The literature of the Sahajiyas, which exist mainly in the form of songs, also shows that it is a phase of Buddhism in Bengal. Though they are clearly Buddhistic in origin, these songs later became identified with the Vaishnava community. The Sufis, among Mohammedans, who were also converts from Buddhism, similarly retained their original philosophical ideas. The romantic spirit of the Sahajiyas is a part of their religious creed. The Sahajiyas practice free love as a means to attain salvation; it is a form of 'sadhana' for them. They believe that a man's spiritual salvation lies in those means which are available to everyone, and this salvation can only be attained through the medium of love. According to them,

love of the human being is the first step towards the attainment of spiritual love and salvation. And hence they maintain that the highest form of love can only be attained through the natural ( sahaja ) love of man and woman.

The early Vaishnava ballads gave vent to this romantic love that the Sahajiyas had developed. That the 'sahajiya' creed was extremely popular in Bengal during this period is evident from the following comment of the famous Vaishnava poet, Chandidas : "Everyone in our time aspires to be a 'sahajiya'. But how many of us know the true significance of the creed ?" The song of the "Washer-maiden" is one of the oldest and a very typical love-ballad of this type. The later Vaishnava ballads tend to become more propagandist, but, in this ballad, a freshness and the unsophisticated charm of country life can be breathed. According to Dr. D. C. Sen, "it seems to belong to an age, when Chandidas, the gay-bard of Nanoor, sang his immortal songs". Indeed the ballad has many verses which are almost identical with Chandidas's poems.

It is the story of a washer-maiden, Kanchanmala, a handsome girl belonging to a low caste, who is attracted by a handsome young prince. The prince one day passionately seizes her hand which touches off a romantic love affair between them. The poet describes, with great power, the advances of the loving young prince, and, on the other hand, the timid and hesitant approaches of the maiden, nervously conscious of her low status and afraid of scandal against the prince for her sake. After they had made love, she becomes frightened by her passion and by the uncertain future of the love affair, but cannot help loving. When the prince comes to lie by her side on the leaves in the fields, she sighs and reflects that for her sake the prince had come down so low.



But later the prince abandons her ; and thereafter the poet depicts the mind of the girl magnificently. She is stunned by the blow, but cannot speak out her grief to anybody. She tells her sorrows to the river, the boats and the trees. And finally to blot out the memory of the love, lest it might cause pain to the prince, she drowns herself secretly and silently in the river, and asks the waves "to carry her with them...into the boundless unknown."

These ballads are essentially the tales of Bengali Hindu life before the advent of Islam, but today they are mostly sung by the Muslims, as is the case with the other ballads. The songs echo the tender emotions which later became the distinctive characteristics of the Vaishnava school. In these ballads and songs, not infrequently, one comes across the very words and phrases, expressed in a rather crude way, which have lent supreme interest to Vaishnava poetry and further shows that the material of the Vaishnava lyrics were there in life itself in those days.

It is now known, however, that some of the earliest Bengali ballads and songs used to be sung throughout a large part of Northern India and Maharastra in the 10th and 11th centuries. The song of Behula, the bride of Lakhinder, the song of Mainamati, depicting the life of, Raja Gopi Chandra who embraced asceticism in the hey day of his youth, are some of those which found acclamation throughout India. They used to be sung in the typical tune of rural Bengali songs, the 'Bhatiyai rag', popularly known as "Bangal rag".

The elevation of Bengali to a literary status after the Brahmanic domination of the province was brought about by several factors of which the Mohammedan con-

quest was undoubtedly an important one. The anti-Brahmanic Buddhists of Bengal could feel safe only after the Mohammedans came to rule over this province. Dr. D. C. Sen wrote: "If the Hindu kings continued to enjoy independence, Bengali language could scarcely have got an opportunity to find its way to the court of kings". That explains why a large number of non-Brahminised Hindus and Buddhists converted themselves into Islam in Bengal and carried along with them the tradition of ancient Bengali literature and culture, which was imperilled after Bengal came under the domination of Brahmanism. Even the first rendering of the Sanskrit text of Mahabharata into Bengali was undertaken at the order of Nasira Sah, the Pathan ruler of *Gaud* who reigned for 40 years till 1325 A. D. Nasira Sah was a great patron of vernacular literature of this country and the fact that Vidyapati dedicated one of his songs to him speaks highly of him. Vidyapati wrote :

"Nasira Sah knows it well, whom Cupid pierced  
With his dart,—Vidyapati says 'long live the emperor'."

The early Mohammedan Nawabs patronised Bengali literature greatly and gave to the Bengali language the status of a court language. The Bengali Muslims being mostly converts from Buddhists and Hindus, also retained the original Bengali spirit and culture to a great extent. In the "Manasa Mangal Kavya," Hussain Sah is described as "Sanatan—Hussain Sah—Nripatitilak", meaning "the traditional monarch Hussain Sah". It is said that Hussain Sah originally contemplated the cult of "Satya-pir", a new god unifying Buddhistic and Islamic tradition, which is still worshipped by both the Hindus and the Muslims. (Satya-pir means "the old truth" or "the eternal truth"). And to propagate the qualities of this new cult the original version of the famous Bengali poem "Vidaysundar" was written.

Since the sixteenth century however Mohammedan rule seems to have degenerated, as is evident from the ballads of this period. In "Kenaram," the poetess Chandravati describes the country as groaning under the rule of the Kazis ; and in the story of 'Malua' there are vivid illustrations of the oppressions of the Kazis. It seems that since the 16th century, Mohammedan aristocracy had made their names dreadful in the countryside.

From this time Bengal was in a troubled state and the Hindu sub-lords had practically become independent and for all practical purposes defied the powers of the Nawab of Gauda. The rise of orthodox Hinduism under the influence of neo-Brahmanism also began at this time. Subsequent social and cultural conflicts, firstly between the two major Hindu sects the 'Saktas' and the 'Vaishnavas', and secondly between the Hindus and Mohammedans, marred the entire social life of Bengal which reached its climax in the 17th and 18th centuries.

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When Brahmanism was introduced into this land, Bengal was permeated with Trantric rites and Buddhist ideas. Later, Buddha was transformed into 'Dharma', which became the most prominent social deity in every village. Songs and festivities in honour of 'Dharma Thakur' became the craze of the people. It still dominates parts of rural Bengal. The festival, 'Dharmer Gajan' was, in later times, converted into 'Siver Gajan', Siva having replaced 'Dharma' under the influence of neo-Hinduism. The 'Dharma Mangala' poems are full of glimpses of rural Bengali society of the pre-Mohammedan Hindu period, when Buddhist ideas were dominant in Bengal. The entire literature in honour of the deity 'Dharma' was Buddhistic in influence. In the 'Sunya Purana' of Ramai Pundit, a Buddhist treatise, he categorically states that the 'Dharma Raj' does not approve of rituals, in conformity with

original Buddhism. 'Sunya Purana' is derived from the concept of 'Sunya-vada' of the Madhyamika School of Buddhism.

A glimpse into the early history of Bengal will reveal that while Bengal had always been outside the pale of early vedic society, she had also resisted neo-Brahmanic aggression of later times. This neo-Brahmanism developed in India since about the 2nd century B.C. with the accession of the Brahmins to political power under Pusyamitra. During the post-vedic period until the rise of the 'Sudras' to political power about the 6th century B.C. the Kshatriyas were the paramount power in State as well as in social matters, as is evident from the epic version of the Mahabharata. The Brahmins in those days were subordinate to the ruling Kshattriya class. The neo-Brahmins, after having come to political power, created a new class of Kshatriyas from amongst materials which they found most handy and who, like their Brahmin counter-parts, were also second rate. The Brahmins thus were able to maintain their supremacy only by the establishment of a social system which was based upon the negation of the individual rights and freedom.

The Codes of 'Manu', while still including Bengal within the geographical boundaries of Aryavarta, distinctly prohibit, all contacts of the Brahmins with the people of Bengal. Ananda Tirtha, the famous commentator on 'Aitareya Aranyaka' declared Bengal as the land inhabited by 'pisachas' and 'rakshasas'. Brahmanism therefore could not expect to thrive for many centuries amidst a people who were the pioneers of Buddhistic and Jainistic ideas and were opposed to vedic rituals.

The Buddhist priests in the latter part of the 10th century began to write books in a 'prakrita' dialect called 'Gauda prakrita'. This 'prakrita' was also described by the Sanskrit

grammarians, Krishna Pandit ( 12 Cent. A.D. ) as a form of 'paisachi prakrit'. The Bengali 'prakrita' language had, however, attained such a high and respectable position in the Buddhist world that even as late as the 17th and 18th centuries, Japanese Buddhist priests wrote their books in this dialect. The ballads and poems of Bengal have been written in this 'prakrita' language ; but the language and the dialect evolved steadily until, with the advent of the Vishnava Saint, Sri Chaitanya, it attained its perfect form.

The earlier ballads written in this earlier 'prakrit' dialect sound strange even to modern Bengali ears used to Sanskritised Bengali, specially in respect of verbs. They display greater affinity to quaint 'prakrit' forms than to current Bengali usages. Bengali language thus is a direct descendant from this 'prakrita', though the present Bengali has assumed a highly Sanskritised form under the influence of the Brahmin-dominated society. And this is the main distinction by which one can distinguish early indigenous Bengali literature from the later Sanskritised Bengali literature of Bengal.

## The Logic of Bengal

Not infrequently, between the 15th and 19th centuries, one could have come across pundits along the bathing ghats on the Ganges in Bengal, engaged deeply in argumentation or verbiological discourses only to be dragged away later by their wives for being late for meal. Any lay observer would have been puzzled about the unearthly discourses they carried on, but a modern western logician of the Analytical school would have been extremely delighted and surprised to find scholars engaged in such highly logical discourses, which was not only of the finest type of that age but had a standard which could be compared to what had evolved in Europe as late as the 20th century. These logicians belonged to the new school of Indian logic evolved in Mithila and Navadwip since the 13th century, known as Navya Nyaya. The pundits of navya nyaya school were reluctant to accept anything which could not be established by 'pramana' (valid method of proof), which they classified into four types : ( a ) perception ( b ) inference ( c ) identification and ( d ) 'sabda' or verbal testimony.

Stories about the feats of these logicians are widespread and one of them is like this : Once a logician of the Charvaka school, the earliest of the heretical schools of India challenged all the six orthodox schools of India to a debate. All of them felt nervous as they were afraid it would be beyond their power to defeat a charvakist ; and so they sought the help of a pundit of the navya nyaya school in the debate. The latter consented, but, as is natural with those of his school, he got involved in argumentation elsewhere and remembered about the charvakist's challenge very late. Hurry-

ing to the place of debate he found the pundits of all the six orthodox schools hanging their heads in shame having been miserably defeated by the Charvakist. Without going in for formalities the navya nyaya pundit asked the Charvakist as to what he proposed to say. The latter replied that his school accepted perception, that is directly viewing or seeing as the only valid method of proof and did not believe in inference or any other method of proof of the orthodox schools. The navya nyaya pundit then asked the charvakist whether he accepted that he had had a grand father whom he has not seen. The charvakist naturally had to accept that he had a grand father; nevertheless he was not prepared to accept defeat so easily and so he proposed that he was prepared to accept inference as a valid method of proof only in such cases where the incident has taken place in the past and there had been a previous and direct experience. In no case, however, he was prepared to accept the main contention of the orthodox schools the validity of 'sabda pramana', which, in Indian philosophy is testimony of the vedas. The navya nyaya pundit asked him whether he would expect others to accept any statement of fact seen or experienced by him as valid. The charvakist naturally replied 'yes' if the statement is in relation to something which he had previously seen or experienced. The navya nyaya pundit then said that if you would expect others to accept statements made by you, on what grounds can you refuse to accept similarly statements made by the others. Although it refutes charvakist from the argumentative point of view, Navya is Nyaya does not attach any more importance to the testimony of the vedas except that it valid only as a statement as long as it were not invalidated by the other three proofs.

The main contention of navya nyaya is that any system of thought or idea must satisfy the test of logic or reasoning

which is superior to all other tests, as against the orthodox Hindu assumption that the authority of the vedas is the supreme and ultimate justification for any system of thought or philosophy ; and any argument directed against the supreme validity of the vedas should be rejected. Raghunath Siromoni, the most brilliant exponent of navya nyaya and other free thinkers of this school never hesitated to subject traditional thoughts and beliefs to severe criticism if reason demanded that. In this attitude of non-conformism they were probably influenced by the Jain and Buddhist traditions which, earlier than them, and for the first time in India, had challenged traditional Hindu thinking and the absolute authority of the vedas. Navya Nyaya thus brought about fundamental changes in the structure of Indian logic and epistemology.

The origin of logical thought in India can be traced to the aupanishadic age in the quest for metaphysical truth by the ancient sages. The Upanishads composed between 900 and 600 B.C. dealt with the soul and destiny, and was known as the 'atma-vidya', the science of soul. Atma-vidya was at a later stage called 'anviksiki'—the science of enquiry. Since Manu described anviskiki as equivalent to atma-vidya, his followers called it a branch of the vedas, evidently considering it as synonymous with the upanishads. Anviksiki, however, while comprising the entire function of atma-vidya was different from it, and from the upanishads too. It was a step forward from the purely metaphysical enquiries of the upanishads, towards formulating a logical method of enquiry. The etymological meaning of the word, anviksiki, denotes "what is supplied to us by scripture or the evidence of the senses must be subjected to a critical enquiry."

Vacaspati Misra, a later scholar, defined the purpose of Nyaya as critical examination of objects of knowledge with the aid of logical reasoning. Originally, however, Nyaya



treated of two subjects : the soul and the theory of reasons. The distinction of original Nyaya from 'atma-vidya' lay only in this that while the latter embodied certain dogmatic assertions about the nature of soul, the former advanced arguments supporting those assertions. The origin of the purely logical side of Nyaya began about the middle of the Sixth century B.C. when Gotama expounded his theory of reasons in order to combat the effect of phenomenalism which assumed that all cognitions are merely illusory appearances and there cannot be any real cognition of the objective reality behind these appearances.

Gotama's Nyaya treated different philosophical problems as the problems of epistemology. The introduction of this logical methodology spread its influence immediately on all the existing philosophical systems. Thereafter all the philosophical systems had to be more logical in their formulations and rational in their outlook. A tradition of logical contemplation was thus created by the impact of Buddhism in ancient India which dominated ancient Hindu philosophical life for about thousand years until neo-Brahmanism swept the country and exterminated Buddhism out of its fatherland.

Indian logic, Nyaya Sastra, developed along with the Vaiseshika system and on the theory of matter propounded by its founder, Kanada. In Vaiseshika, Kanada held that every particular experience should be comprehensible in terms of the meaning system of language. Kanada looked into the meaning and definition of words in explaining the world process and argued that it was through language that the essence of human experience, the laws of reasoning and the general systematisation of knowledge are achieved and communicated. The atomic theory of Kanada held that the world is constituted of earth, water, fire and air, and that all things

including life, mind and consciousness are transformations and mechanical products of atoms.

Originally, however, the Nyaya confined itself to the mechanism of knowledge while the Vaisheshika devoted itself mainly to the analysis and constitution of things as the basis of its atomic theory. Even the commentaries of Vatsayana ( about the beginning of Christian era ) kept the two separate. The Vaisheshika categories were used by him only as supplement to the Nyaya. Udyotakara's "Nyaya-varttika" for the first time combined the two into one complete system.

The rational and critical thinking that grew and developed in ancient India completely overshadowed the orthodox vedic ritualistic theological beliefs and vain metaphysical discourses ; and the influence of Nyaya was evidently dominant in all spheres of knowledge. This influence of logic which dominated the entire intellectual life of ancient India for about thousand years is believed to have compelled the Brahmins to issue injunctions against it. In the Santi-parva of the Mahabharata, 'anvikiki' is condemned in the discourse between Indra and Kasyap. Phani Bhushan Tarkabagis, a recent reputed scholar of Nyaya distinguishes the atheistic trend in Nyaya which he holds as 'nastika' from the later theistic Nyaya ( Vide : Introd. to Nyaya Darsana ). In support of his argument, he quotes the condemnation made in Mahabharata ( Santi, 180/47-49 ) of logic that leads one away from the vedas, to disbelief in the next life, to become doubtful and sceptical about everything and also to act contrary to the injunctions of the vedas. Similar views about 'anvikiki' is also expressed in the Anushasan-parva of the Mahabharata in the reply to Yudhisthira by Bhishma. In the Ayodhya-kanda of Ramayana when Rama censures Lokayatik Brahmins in his advice to Bharata, he too condemns Lokayata

because of non-acceptance of the authority of the vedas as well as because of its 'anviksiki'. Thus, henceforward, the authority of the vedas (sruti pramana) came to be regarded as the principal method of proof. This was the beginning of the great setback to Indian life and thought. And since the time of Sankaracharya, whether any proposition is valid or not came to be determined by its conformation or not with the vedas. In his debut against the Sankhyas, Sankara had recourse to this method when everything else failed and declared that Kapila, the propounder of the Sankhya theory, is not the same person as the one mentioned in the vedas and hence he cannot be accepted ; nor his theory, as a valid school of thought.

Thus while the main current of early Indian thought developed on the basis of a critical attitude and on logical analysis, Sankara fell back upon the authority of the vedas in order to establish his system and with the ostensible purpose of combating Buddhism. What has come down to us as the most authoritative and representative Hindu thought is this creation of Sankara, and with it critical outlook and validity of reason were buried deep down.

When Nyaya studies were revived in Mithila and Bengal after centuries of cultural stagnation, we find Nyaya directed against the vedanta of Sankara. The older Nyaya of Gotama and Vatsayana carried on logical discourses with other branches of Hindu philosophy but it mainly attacked Buddhist phenomenalism. The immediate cause of this revival of Nyaya studies in Mithila and Bengal however was the attack made by Sriharsa, a staunch vedantin against Nyaya. Sriharsa's attacks acted upon the Nyaya scholars as a great stimulus resulting in the composition of the famous work of Gangesa Upadhyaya, "Tatva Cintamani"

in 1225 A. D. which led to the foundation of the new school of Hindu logic, Navya Nyaya. The Nyaya and Vaisesika which became closely allied at this time joined hands and defended the cause of realism and logical reasoning which were the targets of the vedantins.

The main contention of Gotama was that every system or idea must satisfy the test of logical validity which he held superior to all other tests. Against this view, Sankara held that any argument directed against the authority of the vedas was untenable and contended that every interpretation of the universe or ultimate reality proved to be full of fallacy beyond a certain limit. Even his own doctrine of 'Brahma' could not be proved logically, he admitted. Reason, according to Sankara, could not lead one anywhere regarding the nature of soul or the phenomenal world. This rejection of reason became the basic plank on which Sankara founded his doctrine of 'maya'. The nature of the universe, Sankara argued, could not be described, hence it was illusory. But this illusory nature of the universe could not be established by Sankara except on the authority of the 'sruti' (vedas). Since the srutis had contended that Brahma alone was the truth, Sankara followed by saying that the universe was pure illusion or maya.

According to Nyaya-Vaisesika, all effects are produced by the assemblage of certain collocations which unconditionally, invariably and immediately preceded these effects. The collocation which produced knowledge involved certain non-intelligent as well as intelligent elements and through their conjoint action uncontradicted, thereby determinate knowledge was produced. This collocation is called 'pramana' or the determining cause of the origin of any knowledge. None of the separate elements composing the cause collocation can be called the primary cause; it is

only their joint collocation that can be said to produce the effect, and sometimes the absence of a single element from those composing the cause collocation is sufficient to stop the production of the required effect. According to older Nyaya, knowledge is an effect like any other effect, and its origin or production occurs in the same way as any other effect, namely by the joint collocation of the causes, intellectual and physical. But Nyaya denies any transcendental element in the production of knowledge.

Navya Nyaya, the new school of Hindu logic, is distinct from the old Nyaya in the originality of its method and preciseness of language and definition. It also accepts like the older Nyaya, four types of valid knowledge; and each of them is testified by a special instrument (pramana): the preceptual instrument,—‘pratakshya karana’, the inferential instrument,—‘anumana’, identifying instrument—‘upamana’ and the verbal instrument—‘sabda’. It is this verbal instrument which is absolutely distinct from the entire Hindu tradition and is a novel introduction in Indian logic. The ‘sabda pramana’ in Navya Nyaya should not be confused with the testimony of the ‘srutis’ as is always the case with older systems. In Navya Nyaya it has assumed the status of a separate science, the science of language and can be compared more correctly with the modern science of semantics. It enables to explain definitions more precisely and introduces a method for the correct understanding of statement by means of which each word and proposition may be rightly understood in its historical and circumstantial connotation.

The subject of pramanas, particularly of ‘anumana’ (inference) received special attention of navya naiyayikas since the time of Gangesa. Inference, according to them, is a process of reasoning by which we can determine

the unperceived character of a thing through the medium of a mark which is found present in the thing and is known to be universally related to its character. As for instance, we infer the existence of fire on a hill when we observe smoke, as we have always observed that whenever there is smoke there is fire ; in other words, that smoke is invariably related to fire. And then the process of limiting the definition more and more to eliminate all possible errors due to wrong observation or otherwise begin. In the Nyaya language, the hill in regard to which we infer fire is called "pakshya", or subject of inference. The fire which we infer is called "sadhya" or object of inference, and the smoke which serves as the mark or sign of the unperceived fire is called "hetu" or reason. This relation of unconditional or invariable concomitance between the 'linga' ( smoke ) and the 'sadhya' ( fire ) is called "avinabhava" or "vyapti" ( pervasion ). Fire is called 'vyapaka' ( pervader ) and smoke is known as 'vyapya'. Inferring consists of a three-stage process, viz. knowledge of pervasion, operative knowledge and the knowledge of inference. Inference, as a valid form of knowledge, is defined as knowledge corresponding to reality or the true state of affairs.

The chief characteristic of Nyaya for which it stands out as one of the most brilliant contributions to thought movement in India is its logical empiricism. Navya Nyaya deals with propositions, and the propositions are continually pushed back for further verification and limitation. Thus, the propositions in Navya Nyaya are continually improved upon till all possible defects, that are raised, are eliminated. Thus, in Navya Nyaya, propositions are never taken as, or confounded with, ultimate and final truth, which has been the chief characteristic of Hindu philosophy. In Navya Nyaya, the propositions are continually verified and

improved upon in the light of new knowledge gained. Navya Nyaya should therefore be taken as a logical methodology dealing with verifiable propositions which can be continually improved upon. This new school further excluded from its attention metaphysics, theology, ethics or religion, and whenever these subjects such as the existence of god cropped up they were only dealt with incidentally.

This remarkable, and the most developed Hindu logic received little attention from Indian scholars themselves during the last few centuries much less a systematic and thorough research by western Indologists and logicians. Its complicated and difficult linguistic and logical structure and its untranslatable Sanskrit may have been the causes for its not being made available to the laity or in English, and for its not getting the rightful place in the history of Indian philosophy. Even the late distinguished Professor S. N. Das Gupta does not deal elaborately with this new school of logic (Navya Nyaya) of Bengal in his monumental work, "History of Indian philosophy" "for the simple reason that most of the contributions of this school consists in the invention of technical expressions and the emphasis put on the necessity of strict exactitude and absolute preciseness of the logical definitions and discussions" which, according to him, "are almost untranslatable in intelligible English". However, Daniell H. H. Ingalls has written a book on the subject in the Harvard Oriental Series, No. 40, giving an insight into this highly developed Hindu logic which flourished in Mithila and Bengal from the 13th century onwards. That this logical system was far ahead of its time can be understood from this small quotation in the introduction to the treatise by Ingalls. He writes : "There are a number of points where Navya Nyaya appears definitely superior to Aristotelian logic. Among these are its understanding of conjunction, alternation

and their negates and of the class corollary of De Morgan's law...In its concept of number it seems to anticipate Mathematical logic by several centuries.....Navya Nyaya never invented the use of symbols. It invented instead a wonderfully complex system of cliches by which it expresses a great deal that we would never think of expressing without symbols".

A critical study of Hindu philosophy will however reveal that logic which was evolved in India to provide reason to 'atma-vidya' always remained subservient to "Darsana Shastra" which is translated in English as philosophy. Darsana however both etymologically and in reality signifies "means for the realisation of 'Truth' or 'Brahman'". Yet if any critical history of Indian thought should be written it should start with logic, which, in India, had a continuous growth and a most remarkable development. The influence of logic, even in ancient India, can be assessed from this analogy given by Kautilya, the famous author of 'Artha Shastra' of 3rd century B. C. who described Nyaya as 'the basis of all systems ( of thought ), the vehicle of all reasoning and the light of all knowledge. When revived in Mithila and Bengal, Hindu logic, as Navya Nyaya, did not concern itself with Buddhist scepticism but attacked vedantic mysticism because the latter tended to undermine logical thinking and critical judgement. But mysticism and the religious way of life are much too ingrained in the life of the people to be shaken by logic. Thus we find even the greatest Hindu logician, who is considered by Ingalls as one of the few great logicians of the world, Raghunath Siromani, was a vedantin in private life. This could be possible because the Hindu pundits themselves never attached that importance to logic which religion commands. Hence, logic is treated merely as a secular science meant for 'tarka' ( critical discourse ) having nothing to do with the way of life.



## Nineteenth Century Bengal

### Reason and Reaction

Awareness of limitations makes a man endeavour to attain what he lacks, in personal and social life. It is only when he feels that he should have the freedom to do certain things or act in a certain way in order to fulfil his desires or ambitions that he strives to win that freedom. Unless one is aware of the limitations circumscribing him one does not feel the need to break away and strive for a new pattern. If that necessity is not felt by most members of a society the lack of awareness exists in that particular society as a 'socially patterned defect'. In such societies where some or many restrictions exist because of the absence of any protest against them, individuals are not discontented, and even feel genuinely happy fitting themselves into a restrictive society. As a matter of fact, these restrictions are raised to the level of virtue.

The backwardness of Indian society is exactly this lack of awareness of the restrictions under which individuals live and the injustices imposed upon their aspirations. That Indian society has been lagging behind in the march of human progress and had laws and customs repugnant to human sensibility was first felt by a few, soon after the advent of the British in India, in the nineteenth century. The horrifying rites of *suttee*, the utter degradation of womanhood evident in '*kulinism*,' the prevention of widows from remarrying, the inability of the individual to act on his own judgment, all consequences of the absolute rule by the family head in a rigid patriarchal society, were viewed by these few as not only repugnant compared to

contemporary European society but also on their own merits. Centuries of tradition imposing the injunctions of the brahmanic social order reduced an entire people to such a state of morbidity that it not only did not feel the absence of freedom but rather believed that obeying those injunctions was a virtue.

India's contact with the western world in the eighteenth century, when her social and intellectual life was at its lowest ebb, opened up a new chapter in her history and evoked the hope of a resurrection. Europe had undergone a vast revolution in life and thought by the time her people came to India. The Renaissance had resurrected man in Europe from the bondage of god and religion and given a new definition of man who was no longer a creature of fate but had become his own master, and was capable of remaking himself. Once resurrected, man attempted to remake the society he lived in, closer to his desires and aspirations, until the French revolution established by law the rights of man based on equality and liberty, and ushered in industrial civilisation. The latter opened up a new horizon for the development of man's potentialities and new hopes of progress. It was the need of this industrial civilisation which brought the western world in closer contact with India in the process of seeking new worlds in search of raw materials.

The impact of the West was not, however, felt in India until the beginning of the nineteenth century when English education was introduced here. A few men, of whom Raja Rammohun Roy may be regarded as the foremost, saw and felt the limitations and backwardness of Indian society compared to the greater possibilities of individual development and prospects of social progress in western society. He noted the respect it showed to individuals; and hence he first welcomed the advent of the English as well as the impact

of their culture and civilisation on India. Rammohun exposed the ills of Hindu society and tried to reform it after centuries of cultural stagnation. He was like a giant among men of his time and gave rude shocks to Hinduism by exposing its terrible rites and false concepts of human values miscalled spiritualism. He demanded with all his powers that its wrongs should be righted and truths about it frankly told. He, for the first time, condemned the idolatry of the Hindus, demanded the abolition of the *suttee* and of the caste system, the removal of the utter degradation of woman and the establishment of the right of the individual to live and act according to his own judgment. The Brahmo Samaj which he established offered hope for the achievement of his ideals. And it was he who tried to unearth the lost philosophical tradition of ancient India, the meaning of the *vedas*, the *upanishads* and the positive sciences, forgotten even by its own spiritual preceptors, the priesthood. As a consequence, he had to leave his parental home twice for about eight years, and could not be in the forefront when the Hindu College was inaugurated, although its main architect, because that would have invoked the antagonism of the entire Hindu population. In sum, he brought upon himself the wrath of the entire Hindu society.

The establishment of the Hindu College in 1817 made English education available to Indians and thus furthered the movement for reform which he had initiated. New men emerged, having access to wider reaches of knowledge through English education, and thus a growing section of the people felt the limitations and backwardness of Hindu society. They endeavoured to carry on the movement for the liberation of Indians from the bondage of traditionalism and the hidebound restrictions of the existing order.

Freedom of the individual to act according to the dictates of his own reason could never be tolerated in the Indian

patriarchal social order, where the head of the family has always been its undisputed master. Besides, he was guided by the injunctions of rigid social laws and by its spiritual preceptors, the priesthood. ( Even today that is the dominant feature of Hindu society and the cause of its growing revivalist tendencies. ) Orthodox beliefs in the greatness of the spiritualist Hindu culture actually contribute to its stagnation. That explains why when a handful of Englishmen established their rule over this country the common people were absolutely callous about it, being reduced to mere cogs in the wheel of the transcendental life cycle of Hindu social conceptions. They were unconcerned about changes in the government. *The most destructive force in life is man's contempt for himself.* The spiritualism of Hindu culture reduced man to that state of helplessness and morbidity. Only when man is convinced about his utter helplessness does a society slide into a cycle of poverty, ignorance and static despotism.

The concept of freedom once born continued to grow in the face of powerful opposition from Hindu orthodoxy, also because the rebels had access to an alternative mode of living not dependent upon their own social system. That was made possible by the new channels of employment and security offered by the British invaders.

After Rammohun, Derozio, a teacher of the Hindu College ( 1829-31 ) and his student associates followed up his work, and soon set up new standards in life and thought, completely breaking away from any traditional limitations. They advocated a thoroughly critical approach and a rational outlook towards everything. This group later known as 'philosophical rebels' founded the 'Academic Association'. They drew their inspiration from the revolutionary tradition of France and the 'Encyclopaedists' ; they too soon brought upon themselves the

wrath of the Hindu society. Derozio was removed from the teachership of the Hindu College after a campaign mainly conducted by a Brahmin named, Brindaban Ghosal, on charges of spreading atheistic, anti-religious and anti-Hindu ideas. The growth of their movement can be understood by the simple fact that when Paine's *Age of Reason* came out it was sold in Calcutta at a prohibitive price, and a Calcutta book-seller could not cope with the demand for it.

At this time the conflict between the rebels and orthodoxy rose to a point of climax. Raja Radha Kanta Deb, the famous compiler of the Sanskrit dictionary '*Sabda-kalpa-druma*,' and the great philanthropist Mati Lall Seal took up the leadership of Hindu orthodoxy and started *dharma sabhas* (religious meetings) in Calcutta. Vigorous preaching of Hindu spiritualism was started by one Bhabani Charan Banerjee through a journal named *Chandrika*. The Academic Association group took up the challenge and started a journal named *Inquirer*, condemning the aggressiveness of Hindu orthodoxy. Krishna Mohun Banerjee, who later became a Christian, Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyaya and many others had to face terrible persecution and were compelled to leave their homes.

When Rammohun Roy died in England, the only Indian speaker who spoke at his memorial meeting held in the Town Hall, Calcutta, in 1834, was Rasik Kr. Mullick, one of the editors of *Inquirer* and known as the crest-gem of the 'Philosophical rebels'. In 1838, they brought out a Bengali monthly journal called *Jnananvesan* as the organ of a new group sponsored by them, 'Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge.' The life and intellectual activities of these pioneers of modernism in Bengal initiated a new awareness in the Bengali youth and opened a new chapter in Indian life.

The establishment of the Brahmo Samaj by Rammohun in 1828 created a new society working for individual freedom

out of the bondage of caste and religious superstition. In 1829, after a relentless struggle by Rammohun, Bentinck abolished *suttee* by decree. ( In Calcutta alone, where some statistics could be obtained, the number of *suttees* varied between 300 and 1000 per year. ) And finally, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's movement for widow remarriage became law in 1856. Memorandum signed by over 50,000 people were sent to the Governor General against this last enactment. Strangely, when the Sepoy mutiny broke out in 1857, it was described in Calcutta as a calamity caused by this enactment of widow remarriage.

Rammohun's was the first revolt in the entire history of India to liberate man from the authoritarianism of a rigid social order. Brihaspati and the whole host of Charvakists had preached their revolt against Brahmanic ideas in forests, donning ascetic robes. Buddha's revolt had been confined to his monasteries until, after Buddha's death, his teachings came to be regarded as a philosophy of world negation, sacrificing the richness of life for the attainment of *nirvana*, which eventually came to signify a mystical entity, and was later merged in the orthodox belief of life after death. The Charvakists and the Buddhists did not concern themselves with the establishment of the rights of the individual in social life. Rammohun was concerned with life as it existed in society and his revolt was to liberate the social individual, distinct from the recluse, so that ordinary people could live as they wanted to. His values were concerned with the individual in his present life and not in '*bairagya*' or renunciation ; and thus he marked a total departure from the Hindu tradition which has demanded total subordination of the individual to authority and tradition ever since the Indus civilisation. The foundation of the Brahmo Samaj signified a change in which a free and moral life could be lived in the ordinary course of *grihasthya* life.

The price of liberty, however, is eternal vigilance. The orthodox reaction that began in 1830 and culminated in the Sepoy mutiny of 1857 completely changed the situation. Orthodox opinion throughout the country was in a ferment ever since the introduction of English education and subsequent enactments abolishing *suttee* and permitting the remarriage of widows. Railways, the telegraph, the printing press—all the benefits of modern science that reached this country looked entirely foreign and denationalising. The government itself at last yielded to this growing reaction and preferred to rule rather than to liberate. A striking comparison may be made in this regard with another Asian country Japan, which accepted modernism, abolished feudalism and made tremendous progress in scientific achievements, while India chose to deny the impact of modern science and civilisation.

The vigilance that characterised the earlier rebels disappeared, and the subsequent English-educated intelligentsia lacked the vigour, quality and sincerity necessary for the struggle against this orthodox upsurge. The Brahmo Samaj, torn by internal strife, later lost its libertarian significance. Those who took up Christianity as an alternative way of life cut themselves adrift from Hindu society and lost their challenging purpose, and thus the orthodox upsurge gained strength. The publication of Bankim Chandra's *Banga Darsana* in 1872 marks the beginning of the new outlook when the swing towards orthodox Hinduism was complete. His satire against western civilisation and culture gave expression to this revivalist psychology of the times. Bankim Chandra gave up his earlier rationalism which he developed through the medium of English education, especially influenced by J. S. Mill, and began to preach the ideal of duty towards society as advocated by the Gita, against the inculcation of the spirit of revolt and the establishment of rights advocated earlier by him. Duty

towards society based on *dharma*, as expressed in the Gita, became the supremely desirable end of life.

Individual freedom and critical outlook demand that every person think and act for himself. Such a declaration of independence was abhorrent to a mind born and brought up in a tradition of resignation and dependence. The lofty spiritualism of the Gita which has always guided Hindu life and thought was essentially one of denial of the rights and aspirations of individual life, and was based on the belief in a teleologically determined world process by which the present life was reduced to a mere sequence in the chain of transmigrations.

The awareness and realisation of this denial and frustration of life was the essential precondition for any progress towards a rational and free life-in-society. The history of Bengal during the first half of the nineteenth century had raised hopes for a fulfilment of that ideal and ushered in a consciousness of freedom ; but the movement lost its vigour towards the close of that very century and ultimately succumbed to the growing nationalist upsurge. That inhibited social awareness confronts us even today. The so-called educated society of today has come to respect traditionalism with greater zeal as the symbol of the spiritual heritage of India. *But spiritualism has no significance if it stultifies the development of the individual.*

If only the Indian mind could realise that the present life-in-society has a significance and meaning for very individual and that it is an end-in-itself, only then would it want to develop and not to resign itself to fate. The resurrection of Indian manhood still depends on this realisation, and on breaking away from the tradition of world negation and resignation.



## Eighteen Fifty Seven

When the Sepoy mutiny broke out in 1857, there was neither any disturbance in Bengal nor any public participation by the Bengalis in the now described first national revolution of India. The Bengali intelligentsia ignored the whole thing, and the Bengali orthodoxy called it a calamity which had befallen because of the enactment of Widow Remarriage Bill a year earlier at the instance of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar against strong opposition of the Bengali orthodoxy. During the entire history of the freedom movement in Bengal, this so-called national revolution remained almost in the background and the reason is not far to seek. One of the earlier leaders of the freedom movement in Bengal and of the Indian National Congress, Bipin Chandra Pal, whose views have been quoted later in this article, considered it a reactionary movement. Hence, when the centenary of this event has been decided to be observed, this year, 1957, with all the pomp, it would be worthwhile to make an objective study of the movement and discover the factors and causes that led to it which no doubt was a very significant event of 19th century Indian history. The controversial rebellion also needs a serious study in order to construct a rational account of the history of modern India.

A first glance into the factors that caused the mutiny would reveal two basic facts: (1) That the rebellion was inspired and led by the upper class Hindus, and by dethroned princes, both Hindus and Muslims, and (2) that the Indian personnel of the British Indian army that revolted were composed of those people who had the traditional repute for chivalry, and who were very much jealous of their traditional moral concepts.

### *An Indian Subedar's View*

An Indian subedar, Hedayut Ali, admirably summed up, native feelings that led to the mutiny in his paper : *A few words relative to the mutiny of the Bengal Army and the Rebellion in the Bengal Presidency.* Late Hurrish Chandra Mookherjee, the renowned political commentator and editor of the journal *Hindu Patriot* commenting on the paper wrote "It contains the thoughts of a shrewd man, and that man a military officer familiar with the views and character of the army which has been the chief agent in the event around us.... The opinions given are marked by intelligence ; and though a sense of what is due to his masters has given the writer's language a tendency to soften and palliate their faults, there is considerable frankness in the statement" (*Hindu Patriot*, June 1857 ).

This Indian subedar traces the origin of the cause of dissatisfaction in the Indian Army to the Afghan expedition which took the sepoy's against their wishes to a 'mlechha' land, a land where every act of daily life had to be performed under circumstances adverse to the observance of Hindu rites. The Hindu sepoy's considered their religion in danger and grumbled. The hardships of the campaign added to the discontent. On their return they had to face social persecution for their unorthodox travels, as travelling beyond India was against Hindu social laws at that time. Further, "they were taunted with having become Mohammedans". "The Mohammedan sepoy's had also their peculiar causes of dissatisfaction. They had no heart in a war with their fellow-religionists and some of them even boasted that they had evaded the orders of their English masters by never correctly aiming when they fired against the Afghans."

This feeling, according to the subedar, spread until the Bengal Army believed itself to have been very ill-used, and a

general aversion had been generated. This aversion could have been counteracted by the grant of increased pay, which the English promised ; but this last inducement was also taken off later on the occasions of a relief in Scinde and subsequently in the Punjab. To the feeling of being ill-used was thus added suspicions of a breach of faith. Some native regiments even mutinied on these occasions, but the matters were eventually hushed up by the anxiety of the officers to save their reputations.

The subedar next comes to the most significant event that is supposed to have caused the mutiny—the annexation of Oudh. He writes that “the effects which that measure had upon the minds of the native soldiery was most deplorable”. The province of Oudh was the chief recruiting centre of the Bengal Army. A large number of native soldiers were subjects of the king. When the annexation was first talked about, the Sepoys received the report with incredulity. When the matter assumed a more serious form they made overtures to the king’s government, promising to stand by his side. The English, however, preferred to decline the preferred aid and orders were given to the Oudh officials to make over their charge to the British. Though everything passed off quietly, “the annexation of Oudh gave a mortal blow to the native confidence in the British faith. Those who could treat an ally like the king of Oudh in the manner that Lord Dalhousie treated Wajid Ali Shah were deemed capable of any act of perfidy. Those who could break a treaty were considered capable of breaking the terms of a proclamation or a law made by themselves. ...Thus reasoned the Sepoys ; and the chiefs and the people reasoned likewise. The annexation of Oudh prepared the country for revolt.”

“The greased cartridges came next. The unfortunate blunder ignited the mass of combustibles which the more

serious crime had collected." He continued that things might have passed off at any other season without doing much harm, had the suspicions of the sepoys not been provoked by previous acts. "That reliance upon British faith and honour which alone could make up protestations of the Government unacceptable had been shaken. The Government was positively disbelieved." The sepoys revolted as a matter of necessary consequence, he added.

### *Another View*

I had to devote this much space to the one very valid testimony coming from one who was involved in it for analysis and estimation of this revolution. He, however, seemed to have overlooked one important factor which caused the extension of the mutiny of the sepoys to almost a rebellion. That was the repeated annexation of territories in northern India which treated a general discontent among upper class Hindus, mainly affecting the dethroned rulers though. The repeated annexation of territories by a foreign power, the spread of Western mode of education and new ideas of life—all combined revealed to the Hindu mind a consistent effort to substitute a Western for a Hindu civilisation. Nearly all men of high caste and most of them from Oudh dreaded tendencies which they thought to be denationalising. The dethroned princes, their heirs and widows, were the first to learn and take advantage of this general dissatisfaction which ultimately broke out in the form of mutiny.

Commenting editorially in *Hindu Patriot* of June 4, 1857, Hurrish Chandra Mookherjee wrote ; "The cause of order received a fatal blow in the vaunted settlement of the North Western Provinces. In Oudh, this course was followed by more than usually violent symptoms. The most warlike portion of the population, the most influential leaders, were

injured in their sensitive parts. The Sepoys began to fear not only their caste and their pay, but likewise for their lands. They struck the first blow. The feudal aristocrats urged them on. When a certain measure of progress was made, the aristocracy put itself at the head of the movement, and the Sepoy mutiny became "the Indian rebellion." But despite Hurrish Chandra Mookherjee's assertion it is a fact of history that the Sepoy mutiny did not transform into an Indian rebellion; more significantly it failed to carry with it the toiling peasants of India or the intelligentsia of Calcutta, the causes of which must be discovered in order to understand the history of India that presented itself in the 19th century.

#### *Historical Background*

The corruptions and inefficiency of the decaying Muslim period with its manifold intrigue caused ruin of their empire giving rise to serious discontent in the country. There was a general unrest added by increasing poverty, looting and social insecurity. Aurangjeb's long rule from 1658 to 1707 may be regarded as both the culminating point of the Mughal empire and the beginning of its decay. The message of social equality and brotherhood which the Muslims brought with them and drew many adherents from the socially oppressed in the caste-ridden Hindu society gradually lost all its meaning and significance. None of Aurangjeb's successors was anything better than a puppet, and were devoid of integrity and character. The social and economic hardships of the people continued to grow; the experience of later Mohammedan rule was still worse. That was one of the main reasons which led the people of Bengal look upon the Britishers as saviours and they therefore did not resist them establish their rule. It is futile to blame Mir Jaffar alone.

Compelled by their own necessity to exploit the enormously rich natural resources of this country, the Britishers tried to

establish an administration based on law and order. The subsequent spread of English education and abolition of many cruel rites that existed in the then Hindu society created a new social force in Bengal, but it simultaneously antagonised the orthodox Hindu upper class. After the second Sikh war and the annexation of the Punjab, the Britishers also began to introduce new civil and criminal codes of law, constructed new roads and canals, introduced railway and the postal system. Thus it happened that when the sepoy mutiny broke out, the Punjab and Bengal remained not only quiet but loyal primarily because of the new benefits that had flown and also because of the spread of a new outlook of life which enabled them to look beyond the decaying feudal system. And Oudh struck the first blow because it happened to be the centre of Hindu orthodoxy and militancy. Let us look into the annexation of some important territories and the case of their rulers.

By far the largest annexation of territory made by Dalhousie was the great central tract, Nagpore, in 1854, which constituted nearly 4/5th of the Central Provinces. This was the seat of powerful dynasties of the aboriginal races who were crushed by the Mahrattas in 1781 which made the aborigines to flee. There the refugees formed themselves into plundering banditti who became the terror of western India and helped to swell the Pindari hordes. The Mahratta princes came into conflict with the British in 1803, and were defeated by the Duke of Wellington. In 1817, the fourth Raja attacked the British resident and was defeated. After being pardoned, he attacked again and was badly defeated which compelled him to flee into a life-long exile. In 1818 the state of Nagpore was thus without a ruler after about 40 years of Mahratta terror. Hastings reconstituted a portion of it as a subordinate native state under the nominal rule of an infant descendant of the second Raja, but under the actual administration of an English resident. The boy prince majored in 1830 and is said to have dissipated the entire accumulated royal treasure,

mainly on women. He died in 1853 leaving no son or legitimate child and is said to have persistently refrained from adopting one despite urgings by the resident. Commenting on the annexation of this territory, Hurrish Chandra Mookherjee wrote : "The annexation of Nagpore is a recent event. No sweeping settlement has destroyed all the landmarks of society. The Berar population still entertains the idea of a possible return to power of the dynasty that formerly ruled them." And then he pleads "*the present representatives of that dynasty would submit to any condition of imperial vassalage to regain the seat from which they have been ejected. The Bhonslas, as vassals, had never proved indocile.*" Continuing, he pleads further : "If the Bhonsla and the council were invested with powers now exercised by the commissioner, the ostensible domination of the British Government upon the province of Nagpore would not be in the slightest measure diminished while its real hold will be actually strengthened." He adds : "It would be superfluous to say that such an administration would be far more popular than any commissioner, *however wise and just can make his.*"

Let us take the case of the Nana Saheb, one of the greatest heroes of the rebellion and the idol of modern nationalism. Under a treaty made in 1818 after the Peshwa of the Mahrattas was completely beaten by the British, Baji Rao was to get £80,000 annually as pension. Baji Rao died in 1851 leaving to his adopted son Nana Sahib, an immense fortune known to be amounting to about £280,000 and believed by some to be even more. The British Government in India admitted his title to this heritage and also added to it the 'jaghir'—grant of land—on which his father had resided in the North Western Provinces, but refused the pension which, the British argued, had lapsed on the death of Baji Rao. This refusal of pension was the cause of Nana Sahib's entire grievance against the British Government, which was of course

later associated with the national aspirations of the people. If the Nana Sahib had received the pension then the cause of the people and his indignation against the British would have probably been different.

A contemporary historian has summed up the causes that led to the rebellion of 1857 in the following sentences : "There is no doubt that the Mughal family at Delhi bitterly resented their lowly position under the Company's rule. Nana Sahib of Bithur likewise resented the stoppage of his pension. The protagonists of Oudh monarchy were mostly disaffected on account of the unceremonious annexation of the country. The Rani of Jhansi nursed a grievance because her adopted son was deprived of his royal status. The talukdars of Oudh were hostile because their rights in the land had been attacked and curtailed. Other feudal chiefs had some grievance or the other."

### *Bengali Intellectual's View*

Before I proceed to make my observations, I would like to quote from another noted personality of Bengal, Bipin Chandra Pal, one of earlier leaders of our National Congress and of the nation as a whole, whose integrity thus, to my mind, is beyond question. In his introduction to the second volume of the book, 'My Life and Times', he writes : "The Sepoy Mutiny, particularly in Bengal, left the general population of the country absolutely cold. They belonged to a generation that had seen and suffered from the anarchy and disorder of immediate pre-British rule. During the quarter of a century that preceded the outbreak of the mutiny, the life and properties of the people were being increasingly secured against the oppressions of their stronger neighbours. Along with material advantages secured by the East India Company, new intellectual and moral forces came into operation through the introduction of English education." Commenting on the



administration of the East India Company, he further writes : "With all its faults and failures, the administration of East India Company had initiated a line of progress which helped to replace the personal rule, whether of Hindu or Moslem princes and chiefs, by a new reign of law. The anarchy and disorder that had followed the decline and disruption of the Moghul power, was gradually replaced by a more or less centralised and settled government. The East India Company, whatever its failings in other directions, helped very materially to give the country peace and protection not only against outside invasion but what was more important, to a very large extent, equally against internal disorder and the tyranny of the strong over the weak. The useful work that the East India Company had done was to secure peace and order in a land that had been distracted by almost universal anarchy and disorder. It was under the administration of the East India Company, that almost all the progressive movements of modern India were initiated." Continuing, he writes : "The British rulers up to the time of the mutiny were, many of them, steeped in the idealism of the French illumination. And Bengal, owing to her original spirit of personal liberty and social freedom, more readily accepted the new gospel of Equality, Fraternity and Liberty of modern European culture. This is the real explanation of the fact that while English education was simultaneously introduced into the three presidencies of Madras, Bengal and Bombay, Bengal was far more profoundly affected by the spirit of rationalism and individualism of 19th century European culture. This was why Bengal practically led the great freedom movement in modern India."

I gave the above quotations in order to remind the present generation what the earlier generation thought about the event which has suddenly come to be called by almost all sections of the people as the first national revolution of India.

Does it mean that the word 'revolution' has undergone changes in its meaning ? Or, does it indicate a national upsurge in which everything anti-foreign has come to be idealized ?

### Conclusions

If an objective assessment of the British policy that led to the mutiny in 1857 be made to-day, it would be clear that Dalhousie, who finalised the annexations and paved the foundations of an industrial India, was no better or worse than our leaders of free India. His works, which may be summed up as conquest, consolidation and development, made the first real foundation of a united India that we boast of to-day. By his schemes of railways, roads, canals and postal system, he laid the foundation for the transformation of an agricultural country into a modern, industrial one. It is therefore time to think whether that nationalism which is entirely negative in its outlook and stands against progress, and moreover wants to revert to the old feudal aristocracy, as it aimed for all practical purposes in 1857, is desirable. Whether a nationalism that is totally callous about the lot of the people and just wants to safeguard the vested interests of a few is what we want or should idealize. To speak about our own times whether the demands of princely states to preserve their rights could be called revolutionary ; if not, we have to think twice before describing the mutiny of 1857 a national revolution.

This great Indian revolution however had one definite effect on the British rulers. The rebellion could not drive them out, because it, in fact, lacked the support of the people it professedly championed. But it helped the Britishers to recognize their most active opponents, albeit their potential ally, the feudal princes, and they made a compromise with

them. That compromise halted the industrial progress of India but helped the British rule to continue and enabled them to exploit the vast natural and human resources of India for their own economic betterment. The Indian feudal rulers were reinstated in time but the fate of the toiling millions was ever sunk into oblivion after having a faint glimpse of brighter days. They were extolled for their spiritualism and simplicity—the sole consolation of a people who could not get two meals a day ; and we have witnessed in our own time the luxurious life of their spiritual leaders, the protagonists of this first national revolution.

Taking over the administration from the East India Company thereafter, a joint rule of Indo-British reaction was set up by the British Crown, enabling both the partners to exploit fully the enormous human and material resources of this vast subcontinent. A less talked about revolt in Bengal, the Indigo revolt, which was an expression against oppressive economic exploitation of the peasants of Bengal, may be cited as the fore-runner of political agitations and movements in Bengal. In Bengal thus because its intellectuals had seen the light which came through English education and accepted the good of western civilisation they were not enthusiastic about such movements like the Sepoy Mutiny that tended to take the country away from civilisation but actively participated and sponsored movements like the Indigo Revolt that were in tune with progress and freedom. And that explains why the Indian freedom movement began in Bengal towards the end of the very century, when the rest of India lagged behind.

## The Religious Background

Bengal had remained outside the pale of Vedic influence in the ancient days. There were even injunctions against visiting the Bengal region by the so-called vedic Aryans. Thus Bengal had remained heretic in the eyes of the vedic Brahmins and were known as "vratyas".

Ancient Indian history mentions the place, 'Gangaridae', a name originally given by the Greeks to the people living in the valley of the estuarine Ganges. The first contact of the vedic peoples with the Bengalis probably occurred around the fourth century B. C. But it failed to bring the Bengalis under the vedic influence. According to many pundits, Buddhism had influenced northern Bengal, then known as "Pundravardhan", before the reign of Asoka.

An early form of Tantricism was the dominant religion of this region. About the second century B. C. this was partly displaced and largely influenced by the Buddhist and Jain religions. Hiuen Tsang found Jainism flourishing when he visited Bengal in the seventh century, and apparently it was popular here for a long time ( vide : An Advanced History of India by R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Roy Choudhury and K. K. Datta; pp. 201-2 ). However Buddhism seems to have the dominant religious practice in the area and remained so at least until the 12th Century A. D., and perhaps as late as the sixteenth century.

During the last centuries of the Buddhist period, the Mahayana doctrine came under the influence of Tantricism and evolved a system of thought or metaphysics which seems to be neither Buddhist nor Hindu in origin. The original

transformation from Hinayana to Mahayana represented a popularization of Buddhism. Mahayana, with its more liberal ideal of the final goal, could capture the mind of the people much more than Hinayana because of the latter's strict monasticism and ethical rigorism, ( vide : *Obscure Religious Cults* by Sashi Bhusan Das Gupta, p. 9 ). This was further developed in the transition of Mahayana into Vajrayana. It is the Vajrayana doctrine which can be called Tantric Buddhism.

Out of the original teachings of the Buddha emerged the notion that reality consists of two main principles known as 'sunyata' ( vacuity ) and 'karuna' ( compassion ). These were transformed under tantric influence into 'prajna' ( consciousness ) and 'upaya' ( activity ), which in turn were identified with the male and female principles of nature. In the new interpretation, reality is construed as a drama in which these two principles interact.

From the original notion of 'nirvana', whether construed as the cessation of the continuous cycle of rebirth or as a state of tranquility, grew the concept of 'mahasukha' ( supreme bliss ). It was understood to be the perfect experience which occurs when there is complete union of 'prajna' and 'upaya', the male and female principles of the universe. The attainment of an absolute state of supreme bliss was accepted to be the *summum bonum* of life by all the tantric Buddhists. And for the realization of such a state of supreme bliss they adopted a course of sexo-yogic practice. This conception of 'mahasukha' is the central point round which all the esoteric practices of tantric Buddhists grew and developed in Bengal ( vide : Sashi Bhusan Das Gupta—*Obscure Religious Cults*, p. 37 ).

A religion of sexo-yogic practices fused with animistic beliefs was prevalent in Bengal when Buddhism was over-

thrown and replaced by Hinduism. One of the early Hindu rulers, Ballal Sen, made vigorous efforts to demolish Buddhism and establish Brahmanism. He invited vedic Brahmins from other parts of India to come to Bengal and bestowed great favours on them. During the reign of Ballal Sen, and especially during that of his son, Lakshan Sen, Brahmanism and Sanskrit literature flourished under court patronage. But Brahmanical influence was limited and gradually succumbed to tantricism to a large extent.

The male and female principles later became identified as Shiva and Shakti ; and around the partisans of each developed the popular cults of Shaivism and Shaktatism in Bengal. The Shakta cult eventually became more popular. From the notion of activity as the female principle eventually came the identification of Kali as the goddess of destruction.

The worship of deities hardly above the animistic stage was strongly entrenched in every Bengal village, over which the Brahmanic priests threw the mantle and sanction of Hinduism. Gods and goddesses of aboriginal origin, e.g. that of Manasa Devi ( the serpent goddess ), Dakshin Rai ( the tiger god ), Chandi, Dharma Thakur and many others came to be regarded as Hindu gods and goddesses and were accepted by the Brahmanic priesthood.

Besides the Shaiva and Shakta cults, another movement of Hindu origin was profoundly shaped by the Tantric concept of male and female principles. The male principle was identified as Krishna, the eternal lover, and the female principle as Radha, the eternal beloved. The drama of their eternal love-making symbolizes the relation which every devotee should have with the Supreme God, Vishnu, one of whose incarnations is Krishna. From Vishnu comes the name of the cult, Vaishnavism, and the name of the followers, the Vaishnavas. The earliest

literary record of Vaishnavism in Bengal is Joydeva's Gita-Govinda, and its most popular poet-exponent was Chandidas.

The important revival of Vaishnavism in Bengal took place in the sixteenth century under the influence of Sri Chaitanya. Evidently it derived much of its impetus as a popular movement as a protest against rigid Brahmanic control of social and religious life. It cut across caste lines, and derived most of its strength from its teaching about the fundamental oneness of man in spirit. According to Vaishnavism, the highest value in existence is attained at that moment when the devotee-beloved achieves mystical union with the deity-lover. And hence all Vaishnava devotees, man or woman place themselves in the position of Radha striving for union with Krishna. To those who seek this goal all earthly distinctions are inconsequential. The Shakta and Vaishnava cults came to dominate the life of the Bengalis from the fifteenth century and evolved within the cults various sexo-religious practices. An intense religious feud developed between these popular cults and became the most significant feature of Bengali religious life in the subsequent period.

Early Tantrism taught that participation in ultimate reality can be attained through sharing in the drama of interaction between the male and female principles. Subsequent refinement of this notion led to the emphasis on love as the basic unifying force, and love is valued as more than just the unifying principle in Vaishnavism. The Vaishnava poetry and literature of Bengal repeatedly reflects the view that love is what makes life worthwhile, and this appeared to have gained greater strength later when people faced constant suffering, hardship and deprivation. Love and its association of spiritualism and mysticism helped sublimate the sorrows and afflictions of life to a higher plane of mysticism. This had profound impact on the Bengali mind and influenced their

present emotional temperament. Romantic love thus became a dominant force in Bengali life largely because of this influence.

Vaishnavism had also had impact on the Muslims. The Muslims were largely converts from the down-trodden lower castes. The chief reasons for this large-scale conversion were : social persecution by the upper castes Hindus, the lure of social equality in Islamic brotherhood and the hope of a better and secure life as Muslims under the Muslim conquerors. In its latter days however ; Muslim rule degenerated and became tyrannical. Vaishnavism then became popular and checked conversion into Islam by offering social equality within the Hindu religion.

The administrative degeneration during later Muslim rule and consequent helplessness of the people brought about a feeling of social resignation. Vaishnavism and Sufism, which became very close at this period, reflected the people's feeling of helplessness and provided the religious basis to sublimate earthly suffering into a mystical plane of love.

The socio-religious situation in India had reached its lowest ebb during this latter part of the 18th century. The period, the country was then passing through a period of exhaustion, consequent upon the disruption of the Moghul empire while religious sectarian feuds dominated the life of the people.

About this time, the Code of Raghunandan came to dominate the life of the Hindus. It is this code which introduced the injunction against travel abroad by Hindus ; even though maritime activities had been one of the major commercial enterprises of the Bengalis in earlier periods. At the end of the 18th century, the intense caste feud and the conflict



between Hindus and Muslims had given in to an acute sense of frustration and demoralisation which pervaded Bengali life. What remained and dominated the life of the people was a set of rituals and norms of social behaviour which came to be regarded as tradition ; and violation of tradition became the most heretical act.

Towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, primarily because of the new conquerors from the West and consequent impact of new ideas and new economic prospects, a new class of people came into social prominence and assumed community leadership. A tremendous upsurge of social, intellectual and economic activity developed in Bengal ; and thus the nineteenth century came to be widely recognised as the Bengali Renaissance. Rammohun Roy, regarded as the high priest of this renaissance, studied Sanskrit, Persian and later English, and launched a vigorous movement for the study of India's ancient philosophies and the need to reorientate the life of the people on the basis of the teachings of these philosophies and the Upanishads. However Rammohun's journey across the seas to England and his agitation for the abolition of the 'Suttee' brought upon him the wrath of the orthodox Hindus. They resented these two heretical acts of Rammohun even though many of them had collaborated with him in the past for the resuscitation of ancient Indian philosophies and the introduction of English education. These two acts of Rammohun were considered defiance of tradition and unpardonable heresy. Even Rammohun's own 'disciple' and lieutenant, Bhabani Charan Banerjee, left him and launched a campaign against Rammohun's heresies and in defence of orthodox Hinduism. He was joined by Raja Radhakanta Dev and others who started organizing 'dharma sabhas' (religious meetings) to combat Rammohun's reformist religious movement, the Brahmo Samaj.

The most significant feature of Nineteenth Century Bengal was the revitalization of Bengali life and society resulting from this vigorous intellectual activity and intensified by the conflict between the reformists and the traditionalists. The following quotation from the fourth volume of Sir Jadunath Sarkar's "Fall of the Mughal Empire" aptly summarizes the situation.

"On our hopelessly decadent society the rational progressive spirit of Europe struck with resistless force. First of all, an honest and efficient administration was imposed on the country and directed by a British agency to ensure peace and economic growth. Then, within one generation, the land began to recover from the plight of medieval theocratic rule. Education, literature, society, religion, man's handi-work and political life...all felt the reviving touch of the new impetus from the West. The dry bones of a stationary, oriental society began to stir under the wand of a heaven-sent magician. It was truly a Renaissance, wider, deeper and more revolutionary than that of Europe after the fall of Constantinople."



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