The Universal Man and the Yellow Dog: 
The Orientalist Legacy and the Problem of Brahmo Identity in the Bengal Renaissance

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The most important fact of the present age is that all the different races of the world have come close together. And again we are confronted with two alternatives. The problem is whether the different groups of peoples shall go on fighting with one another or find out some true basis of reconciliation and mutual help; whether it will be interminable competition or cooperation.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*

When God finished making the world
He had a few stinking scraps of mud left over
and used it to make a yellow dog
(And when they hate any race or nation they
name that race or nation in place
of the yellow dog).

Carl Sandburg, *The People Yes*

I. THE ORIENTALIST CONTRIBUTION TO THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE

This essay is in part an interpretation of the Bengal renaissance and in part an analysis of cultural identity among Bengali intellectuals struggling to maintain their outgoing universalism against the rising tide of militant and aggressive nationalism. The outgoing universalism of Rabindranath Tagore, which is relatively well known among Western scholars, was perhaps the single most significant idea to emerge from the Bengal renaissance. This renaissance—of which Tagore is often held to be both the finest and the final expression—occurred largely in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was characterized by a remarkable creative outburst of literary, artistic, and ideological achievements.
Universalism, so characteristic of the renaissance spirit and thought, was an intellectual outgrowth of East-West contact in Calcutta. At that time the city was a dynamic pivot for acculturating India's most progressive intelligentsia to modernizing impulses from western Europe. The Brahmo Samaj (Society for the Worship of the One True God) was perhaps the most representative institutional expression of the Bengal renaissance. This movement, made up for the most part of a Western-educated professional elite dissatisfied with the shortcomings of their own society and culture vis-à-vis the West, sought to modernize their religious and social traditions.

The birth of a modernizing intelligentsia in Bengal is a subject I have treated in *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*. From my point of view, the renaissance was the child of eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism and pragmatic British policy (derived from Warren Hastings) built around the need for an acculturated civil-service class of Englishmen (trained at the College of Fort William from 1800). Calcutta, chosen as capital of British India in 1772, provided the ideal environment. Spurred on by a class of British officials known as Orientalists sympathetically engaged in a scholarly reconstruction of the Hindu past, a newly formed intelligentsia selectively reinterpreted their heritage and strove to reshape their culture in the new image.

Rationalism, cosmopolitanism, and dynamic classicism were the three key intellectual values transmitted by British Orientalists to the Bengali intelligentsia while functioning as windows to the West. These characteristic components, derived from the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, were universal rather than parochial in tenor. Rationalism pertained to the search for "constant and universal principles" of human nature. Cosmopolitanism was based on the ideal of tolerance and understanding between all peoples and cultures.

Dynamic classicism is more subtle and requires some elaboration. Classicism in general may be defined as looking back through history to what one envisions as a classical age of one's culture, an age when one's distant ancestors seemed to have the right answers to the eternal questions of politics, society, and religion. This age was the real or imagined moment of truth for that culture. The implication to Afro-Asian intellectuals undergoing the same experience is that between the golden age and their own age lies a long, dark period of cultural stagnation. In the mind of such an intellectual awakened to a sense of inferiority as a result of his defensive encounter with the modern West, there arises the question invariably: How does one end the dark age and give one's culture a new lease on life?

The intelligentsia can solve this problem in a number of ways. They can try to disavow their heritage and history completely and succumb to
some Western style of life. This is not an easy solution unless one moves physically from one's point of origin to a utopia across the seas. America was founded this way. The opposite of westernization is "static classicism," the attempt to make one's culture vital and strong again by reviving the purely ancient ideals and traditions without interference from Western influences. This is another impossible solution because the past is dead and buried. There is no way of revitalizing a decadent culture except by borrowing heavily from progressive cultures of the West. This is the root cause of "ambivalent modernization," which is in its more negative aspect a form of militant nationalism often bordering on fascism. Communalism in India and Pakistan, as well as aspects of black nationalism in the United States today, reflect both the dilemma and the dangerous consequences of this position.

The dynamic classicist stands somewhere in the middle—between the westernizer who renounces his culture in order to save it and the nativist who romanticizes it for the same purpose. The dynamic classicist argues that golden age models are to be used not to shape the present in the image of the past but to rediscover guidelines in one's classical heritage appropriate to a society in transition. Unlike the static classicist he uses history to justify accepting modern values from the West. But he makes a sharp distinction between adopting modern values from the West and westernization.

II. THE CHALLENGE OF MACAULAYISM AND THE ORIGINS OF MODERN NATIONALISM IN BENGAL

In the 1830s the antithesis to Orientalist cultural policy appeared in Bengal as Macaulayism, named after Thomas Babington Macaulay, author of the famous Education Minute of 1835. Macaulayism represented both an alternative to Orientalism as a modernizing program for India and an alternative to universalism as an ideology for modern man.

Hans Kohn, an authority on nationalism in the West, places the rise of nationalism "as a general European movement in the nineteenth century" and refers to Macaulay as a chief participant in the movement. "Nationalism," Kohn writes, "made the divisions of mankind more pronounced and spread the antagonistic aspirations to wider multitudes... than ever before." It also produced a "cultural tension which invested the national struggles with the halo of a semi-religious crusade." When Macaulay wrote that the English "have become the greatest and most highly civilized people ever the world saw" he was evidently expressing a chauvinism (however seemingly true to Victorians) that was in sharp contrast to what Kohn calls "the rationalism of the eighteenth century with its emphasis on the common sense of civilization."

Rationalism—the belief in unity over diversity—now gave way to
romanticism, the belief that each culture had a special genius which made it intrinsically different from its neighbor. Cosmopolitanism—the belief in humanity over nation—succumbed to nationalism, the contrary belief in the supremacy of national character and sovereignty. Dynamic classicism—the reinterpretation of tradition in the light of contemporary values from the West—now surrendered to dynamic futurism, the repudiation of all history and tradition. As Macaulay himself aptly put it, "Words, and more words, and nothing but words had been all the fruit of all the most renowned sages of sixty generations."\textsuperscript{11}

Macaulay was, like his counterparts in continental Europe—including Hegel—a well-intentioned liberal optimist of the early nineteenth century, and it is historically unfair to accuse him of deliberately unleashing the yellow dog of national and racial hatred. Nevertheless, in Bengal of the 1830s, Macaulayism did have the immediate psychological effect of doing precisely that by polarizing the loyalties of the intelligentsia into two opposite camps.\textsuperscript{12} The Calcutta cultural mediator who for decades had responded favorably to the culture of the British Orientalist (who was himself favorably impressed with Indian culture) now faced a different view: that all patterns of reform were an integral part of Western civilization and that all Asian civilizations were almost by definition static and decadent. (Macaulay had seriously advised Asians to dress like Englishmen, eat like Englishmen, and act like Englishmen, as their only valid passport to modernity.)\textsuperscript{13}

The intelligentsia in Calcutta therefore confronted a crisis in identity. The westernizers, called Young Bengal, followed Macaulayism and temporarily set themselves adrift in a cultural limbo between their own heritage, which they naturally rejected, and that of England, the utopia across the seas, which they understood only imperfectly and to which they could never really belong.\textsuperscript{14} The older men, those who had worked with British Orientalists and were dynamic classicists for most of their adult lives,\textsuperscript{15} turned defensive and nativist in their sudden zealous appreciation of Hinduism.\textsuperscript{16} They formed an organization called the Dharma Sabha (Society in Defense of the Hindu Socio-Ethical Religious Order), which historically has the importance of being India's first modern nationalist movement.\textsuperscript{17} Macaulayism, unwittingly perhaps, had unleashed the yellow dog of militant Hindu nationalism in Bengal.

III. \textbf{TRINITARIAN ETHNOCENTRISM AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM IN THE BENGALI SETTING: THE CASE OF RAMMOHUN ROY}

The renaissance which owed its genesis to outgoing universalism seemed to be facing its first real crisis as a generation of intellectuals defected from modernism and turned to ingrown nationalism and xenophobia.
Looking back, however, the Dharma Sabha movement was never more than a yellow puppy of hatred for the English rather than a large ferocious dog for the simple reason that the government never implemented Macaulay’s radical program of secular westernization. As it turned out, not secular Macaulayism but the religious variety proved far more formidable a threat to the universalist spirit of the renaissance. Represented by missionaries like the Presbyterian Alexander Duff and converts like Krishna Mohun Bannerji, the gospel of religious Macaulayism denied the validity of all things Indian and based its program on the ethnocentric proposition that Christianity was an integral part of European civilization.\textsuperscript{18}

It was at this point that the Brahmo Samaj began to play its crucial role in the history of the Bengal renaissance. Under the patronage of the powerful Tagore family of Jorasanko, and under Debendranath Tagore’s leadership in the 1840s, the Brahmo Samaj with its subsidiary Tattvabodhini Sabha became the most popular organization for the increasing number of Western-educated intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{19} Within a single decade after 1843, Debendranath had endowed the movement with a structure (the Brahmo mandir or church), had evolved an ideology (the Brahmo Dharma), and had provided an identity (the Brahmo covenant).\textsuperscript{20}

The Protestant missionaries, far more interested than the government in reshaping men’s minds, began a campaign in competition with Brahmos to win over the Western-educated whose training, mentality, and new style of life had alienated them intellectually and psychologically from their countrymen. Whereas the government only anglicized Bengalis sufficiently to make subordinate officials and clerks out of them, the missionaries were anxious to transform total personalities to save souls for Christ. Moreover, since missionaries in those days were ethnocentric and elitist in sympathy, they worked mostly in cities and mostly with the Western-educated through the medium of English.

The missionaries did begin to make inroads with the intelligentsia, converting members of some of the best families.\textsuperscript{21} The Brahmo Samaj met the challenge and provided what they hoped would prove an indigenous alternative to Europeanized Christianity. They offered the Western-educated a reformed Indian religion—Vedantism—which they argued was free of superstition and priestly tyranny. At the same time, Brahmos claimed to offer an ethical system based on Hindu scriptures but reflecting the identical sentiments of the Sermon on the Mount. Finally, Brahmos suggested a way of life within the framework of a classical Hindu social order which they said was as accommodating to this-worldly asceticism as was Protestantism.

The origins of Brahmo reformation ideology, upon which Debendranath and his associates constructed a system, date back to the do-
mestication of modern Unitarianism in Bengal by a remarkable intellect named Rammohun Roy (1772–1833). The Bengali version of Unitarianism was from its infancy a far more complex phenomenon than the Western variety in that the problems faced by a Rammohun were always magnified by the perspective of cross-cultural contact. Unlike William Channing in America or Lant Carpenter in England, who sought simply to convince their own countrymen to liberalize their religion and care for the underprivileged among them, Rammohun was continually challenged by the questions Europeans invariably raised: Do you improve the lot of Hindus from within the system or must you undermine it by assimilating to a foreign system? As for the specific content of religious Unitarianism, Rammohun was confronted by such central questions as whether India should follow Christ (however denuded of later excrescences) or whether India should follow some Christlike figure in her own tradition who seemingly represented the same principles.

Rammohun’s sympathies, as those of a leading pioneer of the reformation, are quite apparent in the way he adapted Christian Unitarianism to Indian circumstances. To be sure, Rammohun’s Precepts of Jesus, which constituted his side of a theological debate with a Baptist missionary named Joshua Marshman, was so thoroughly Unitarian in a European sense and so sophisticated in theological erudition and subtlety that one could easily be misled about the author’s identity. Indeed, one has only to compare the Precepts by Rammohun (1820) with a tract by Lant Carpenter (also 1820) entitled An Examination of the Charges Made against Unitarians and Unitarianism to understand the remarkable ideological kinship between the Bengali intellectual and Western Unitarians.

One could certainly hypothesize that the Precepts was largely an extension of the debate in the West between Unitarianism and orthodox Christianity. Rammohun’s primary concern was to maintain the unity of God against all the false ideas and techniques devised by man to adulterate the purity of monotheistic faith. Thus he repudiated all myths, mysteries, miracles, and images which made a mockery of the unity of the Godhead. Rammohun here resembles the familiar liberal and rationalist Unitarian upholding the historic ethical Christ and rejecting vicarious atonement, the Trinity, and other “fabricated fables.” Rammohun’s view that justice and mercy were more acceptable to God than sacrifice was equally Unitarian in spirit, as was his scriptural reliance on the “Synoptic Gospels with the emphasis on Jesus’s teachings rather than the Gospel of St. John with its meditation of Jesus.”

Shortly after the debate, Rammohun and a former Baptist named William Adam formed the Calcutta Unitarian Committee. By 1823, Adam, Rammohun and Dwarkanath Tagore (father of Debendranath)
seem also to have established a Unitarian Press in north Calcutta. In that same year, Rammohun under the pseudonym of Ram Doss found himself in another debate, this time with an orthodox Christian named Tytler, conducted for the most part in the local press. Remarks by Tytler make it evident that Rammohun was considered by Europeans to have been a Unitarian—a term of disrepute to the orthodox. But the debate was mere theological conflict as in the case of Marshman. Faced with narrow, bigoted attacks on Hinduism in particular and Asians in general by a member of the ruling foreign elite, Rammohun was forced into a defensively nationalist position. But because Rammohun was a modernizer and not a revivalist, he faced his opponent as an Orientalist would a westernizer.

This stance is elucidated well in Rammohun’s “Reply to Certain Queries Directed against the Vedanta,” printed in the Brahmmanical Magazine on 15 November 1823. Tytler had accused Rammohun of reading into the Vedanta the sublime message of Christ. Since only the Christian Scriptures were revealed, he claimed, Rammohun’s interpretation was a fraud. In reply, Rammohun with his customary analytical approach proceeded to prove that the message of the Vedanta not only contained the unity of God but did so in a way superior to the Judeo-Christian Bible. Unlike the Bible, the Vedanta did not attempt to categorize the attributes of the Almighty—a gesture which Rammohun found both anthropomorphic and futile. That Rammohun was now using Unitarianism in an Indian way was evidenced by his attack on the Trinity. He argued that whereas Christianity required a blood sacrifice to expiate the sins of man, the Vedanta taught that the “only means of attaining victory over sin is sincere repentance and solemn meditation.” In the following quotation it appears as if the Bengali reformer had made a kind of cultural transference from the synoptic Gospels to Sankaracharya: “The sin which mankind contracts against God by the practice of wickedness is believed by us to be expiated by these penances, and not as supposed by the Querist, by the blood of a son of man or son of God, who never participated in our transgressions.”

Equally interesting was Rammohun’s use of the comparative religious approach, which constituted another marked difference between himself and his Western Unitarian counterparts. Whereas a Channing or a Tuckerman maneuvered primarily in one religious tradition and aimed to reform it, Rammohun was challenged by the need to reconcile at least two major faiths. In the process he was compelled to think comparatively; and as a result his vision sharpened, leaving a narrow sectarian view of the universe behind. He could, for example, in the same reply to Tytler, rebuff his opponent for attacking popular Hinduism by pointing to comparable
malpractices in popular Christianity: "A Hindoo would also be justified in taking as a standard of Christianity the system of religion which almost universally prevailed in Europe previous to the 15th century . . . and which is still followed by the majority of Christians with all its idols, crucifixes, saints, miracles, pecuniary absolutions from sin, trinity, transubstantiation, relics, holy water, and other idolatrous machinery."33

Rammohun could argue that in the same way the authentic Christian tradition was submerged and corrupted, so the authentic Hindu tradition was likewise submerged and corrupted. He willingly admitted that "our holy Vedanta and our ancient religion [have] been disregarded by the generality of moderns."34 This comparativist approach, coupled with a modernist outlook, placed the Hindu reformation movement on an Orientalist foundation from which indigenous traditions could be defended at the same time they were modified according to progressive values in contemporary Western societies. Though the foundation was a precarious one it saved the Hindu reformation repeatedly from the snare of militant nationalism.

IV. RELIGIOUS MACAULYISM AND BRAHMO RESPONSE: RAJNARIAN BASU AS GRANDFATHER OF INDIAN NATIONALISM

In the 1840s these writings by Rammohun were collected and reprinted as ammunition in the ideological struggle for the minds of Calcutta's Western-educated. Several of the missionary adversaries—men like Duff, Dyson, and Long—were keen intellects who were familiar with Rammohun's position and were inventive enough to find ways of countering it. In two areas particularly were the missionaries able to hit the Brahmos where they were weakest: on their historical presentation based on a virtually nonexistent historiographic tradition among the Hindus;35 and on the lack of a systematic Brahmo theology.36 On the other hand, following the lead of Rammohun, Brahmo intellectuals such as Rajnarian Basu and Akshoy Kumar Dutt were equally gifted and could turn every missionary argument into a boomerang aimed at similar inconsistencies and irrationalities—plus the presence of historically unverifiable events within Christianity.37 These debates, because they were carried on at the highest level and because there was a good deal of soul-searching involved, are valuable today as a pioneering attempt at comparative religion.

One argument raised frequently by missionaries like Duff and by converts like K. M. Bannerji was that in the whole of the so-called Vedic tradition there was no notion of a personal god analogous to Jehovah.38 Missionaries contended that even in the Upanishads the concept of God was so abstract as to be without analogy.39 This was the monotheistic-monistic issue in the debate. Duff's concept of the ancient god of the Hin-
dus was of a being who, "unencumbered by the cares of empire or the functions of a superintending providence, effectuates no good, inflicts no evil, suffers no pain, experiences no emotion; his beatitude is represented as consisting in a languid, monotonous and uninterrupted sleep—a sleep so very deep as never to be disturbed by the visitation of a dream."  

The Brahmo reply in *Vedantic Doctrines Vindicated* suggests the fiery and skilled debater Rajnarian Basu (1826–1899), who had acquired the skill at Hare's School, developed it in subsequent encounters with Christians, and brought it to perfection as a nationalist critic of Keshub Sen's universalism. In this tract of 1845, which was his first recorded encounter with the missionaries, he took a phrase like "cares of empire" and asked Duff whether God was a king or an emperor. Rajnarian made capital of this ill-chosen expression, charging that the Christian god was more an oriental despot than a merciful Father.

Rajnarian's second point was directed at Duff's depiction of the Upanishadic Brahma as a god who "effectuates no good and inflicts no evil." What kind of God is this, he replied, "who is author of evil?" How can we possibly ascribe "the indiscriminate murder of millions" through "religious fanaticism or political hostility" to "our immaculate Creator?"

The third point seems reminiscent of Rammohun Roy's debate with Tytler in 1823—which was reprinted in 1845, the same year that Rajnarian published his tract. Rajnarian took Duff to task for characterizing God as a being which "suffers pain and experiences emotion." He accused Duff of "rushing headlong into the hideous errors of a reckless anthropomorphism." "Can there be a worse doctrine than that which denudes and degrades God by bringing the Almighty Creator to the level of a man?"

The Brahmos' ideological defense of Vedantism was certainly an important factor in stopping the advance of Christianity among the intelligentsia but, remarkably, such was accomplished without resorting to yellow-dog fanaticism. Besides ideology, the Brahmos, if they were convincing enough, held a certain advantage among their fellow alienated intellectuals: their reinterpretation of Hinduism, if accepted ultimately in place of popular Hinduism, would bridge the gap between themselves and the mass of their countrymen. The Macaulay-like missionaries, on the other hand, rigidly persisted in Europeanizing their converts with the inevitable result that each and every Indian Christian underwent excommunication and denationalization.

More significant still, perhaps, is the fact that the Brahmos retained, with modifications, the outgoing universalism of their founder Rammohun Roy and therefore saved the Bengal renaissance. Throughout long years of ideological struggle with the missionaries they retained a firm distinction between orthodox Christian Trinitarians, who were their adversaries,
and liberal Christian Unitarians, who were among their closest friends. Instead of hating Westerners indiscriminately (the yellow dog attitude), they maintained a steady intellectual and personal contact—through exchange of books and correspondence—with American and British Unitarians. Emerson, Channing, Theodore Parker, Martineau, and others were as well known among Bengali Brahmos as they were among their own Unitarian followers. The universalist doctrine of Unitarianism was itself a strong link in the chain which kept the yellow dog in check.

But it was very difficult, if not impossible, to retain the unqualified cosmopolitanism of Rammohun Roy while at the same time battling foreign missionaries who ridiculed and repudiated the foundation of Hindu tradition. To continually remind one that he was a descendant of an inferior heritage without any relevance in the contemporary world was tantamount to waving a red flag before the bull. Tormented minds, or mercenary ones, willingly submitted; but Brahmos of the mid-century with greater idealism and integrity resisted, challenged, and refuted the foreign missionaries. Thus despite their universalism the Brahmos were also nationalist by virtue of their defense of Hinduism.

But there was already present an even stronger, almost defiant nationalism in Rajnarian’s Vedantic Doctrines Vindicated. It lies in the point-by-point defense of a Hindu tradition against the pretensions of religious revelation and superiority by an alien faith. If in Rammohun’s writings cultural nationalism never went beyond the point of proving that Hinduism was equal to Christianity, in Rajnarian’s earliest polemical tracts there is already the germ of a more aggressive attitude: that Hinduism is superior to Christianity. Of course, by Hinduism Rajnarian the Brahmo did not mean the accepted popular form but the reformed Hindu variety based on the classical Vedantic tradition:

The Vedanta, while it utterly rejects and condemns such degrading notions of the deity, conveys to our minds a far loftier, a more adequate, consistent, and ennobling idea of His attributes, by prescribing His worship as the Supreme Regulator of this boundless universe and as the glorious and beneficent originator of all earthly good.

If, however, in this kind of religious encounter, superiority depended on the validity of one’s defense of Vedanta or Bible as being a revealed source, then Brahmo nationalism of this early period was never dogmatic but tempered by a cosmopolitan outlook. After years of soul-searching on the part of Debendranath Tagore and other Brahmos, the issue was dropped and in 1850 a momentous decision was reached: revelation for any scriptural source, Hindu or otherwise, was denied. Rajnarian, who in the meantime was sharpening his wit in defense of classical Hindu superiority,
accepted this decision against the Vedanta as the word of God with great reluctance.

V. ANTI-NATIONALIST REACTION: THE BRAHMO UNIVERSALISM OF KESHUB CHANDRA SEN

The positive side of this combination of outgoing universalism and defense of culture was, as implied, that it kept the mind free of yellow dog hatred. This was precisely what distinguished the Brahmoo freedom fighter from his militant Hindu counterpart in the twentieth century. Termed "creative nationalism" by one such Brahmoo, the attitude was simply one of trying to keep the freedom struggle separate from a hatred of Englishmen or a hatred of Europeans generally. But on the negative side, the introduction of nationalism per se, creative or not, seemed to have a divisive effect on the Brahmoo intellectuals. In the first place, many Brahmoss, imbued with the Rammohan legacy of the universal man and universal religion, saw nationalism as a dangerous departure from true Brahmoo doctrine. For them, Brahmooism was neither Hindu nor Christian but the quest to end sectarianism by establishing a true universal church and religion. In the second place, nationalism, so Brahmoo intellectuals argued, had the tendency of glorifying a culture and thus concealing its defects and weaknesses. The result, they warned, would be to dampen the enthusiasm of Brahmoss for social reform and cripple the Samaj as a modernizing movement.

In the 1860s it was becoming obvious that nationalism had cracked Brahmoo unity. The Brahmoss under Debendranath suddenly found themselves an old guard defending the charge of social inaction which the younger people associated with the movement's gradual drift back into the Hindu fold. Like an old guard, Debendranath's group rested on their laurels. Had they not arrested Christianity? Had they not refined Brahmoo ideology? Had they not carried rationalism in religion to its ultimate in 1850 when they rejected all scripture as revealed and left each individual free to interpret truth according to the light of reason and intuition?

By 1865, the issue of social reform had reached crisis proportion within Brahmoo ranks. The younger generation under the leadership of Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884) insisted that the ministry be open to qualified members of all castes; that Brahmos who were Brahmans by caste renounce their sacred thread (symbol of caste inequality); that all the Brahmos openly and unequivocally declare themselves against the caste system; and that the Samaj publicly launch a vigorous campaign against kulins polygamy and child marriage while promoting widow remarriage, intercaste marriage, and female improvement through education. The underlying issue was national identity. Debendranath argued that such
radical proposals at this time would alienate Hindus and tear down all the progress Brahmos had made in convincing Hindus to accept Brahmoism as reformed Hinduism.\textsuperscript{54} This was the natural position of a man who had for twenty years defended the Hindu traditions against missionaries.

On 5 May 1866 Keshub Sen gave what was probably his most important, most popular, and most misquoted lecture, at Medical College Hall, Calcutta. This controversial talk greatly perturbed Debendranath and his friends because they believed Keshub had sold out to the missionaries and had publicly adopted the alien faith. Even the title created misunderstanding between older and younger Brahmos: “Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia.”\textsuperscript{55} On the surface, as many missionaries and Debendranath himself interpreted it, the lecture constituted a defense of Christ’s teachings and early Christian dogma. Ignored for the most part was Keshub’s careful distinction between “Christ’s message of universal harmony”\textsuperscript{56} and the institutional Christianity of the nineteenth century with its Europeanized, sectarian, and “muscular” view of Christ.\textsuperscript{57} Also missed was his sophisticated challenge to British cultural imperialism not as a militant but as a creative nationalist who attacked foreign imposition without hating all persons and things foreign. The lecture was also an essay on comparative religion which, when saturated with Keshub’s own spirit of universal Unitarianism, expressed an objective and scientific attitude remarkable for the times he lived in.

Keshub’s Jesus, whom P. C. Mazumdar later popularized as the “Oriental Christ,” was inspired by God to offer to “humanity, groaning under a deadly malady and on the verge of death, a remedy to save it.”\textsuperscript{58} Christ’s remedy, a gift from the East to the West, was ethical and spiritual as characteristic of Asian religions.\textsuperscript{59} The passage which shocked Debendranath as much as it pleased the missionaries was Keshub’s apparent acceptance of the crucifixion. What Keshub accepted, as should be clear from the following quotation, was the ethical value of the symbol:

He laid down his life that God might be glorified. I have always regarded the cross as a beautiful emblem of self-sacrifice into the glory of God . . . on which is calculated to quicken the hither feelings and aspirations of the heart, and to purify the soul . . . and I believe there is not a heart, how callous and hard, soever it may be, that can look with cool indifference at that grand and significant symbol.\textsuperscript{60}

Most effective was Keshub’s contrast between the noble self-sacrificing Christ of the Orient and the missionaries of Christ sent out from churches in the West to India. It is curious that such anti-imperialistic passages completely escaped the notice of Adi Brahmos and others who were quick to point to Keshub’s surrender to westernized Christianity. After reporting that since the early part of the century only 154,000 converts had
been won over to Christ in South Asia, and that 519 missionaries representing 32 societies with an annual combined budget of £250,000 were combing the subcontinent for potential candidates to the new faith, Keshub asked why they had accomplished so little. The reason, he believed, was that many of the missionaries not only “hate the natives with their whole heart but seem to take pleasure in doing so.” Said Keshub:

They regard the natives as one of the vilest nations on earth hopelessly immersed in all the vices which can degrade humanity. . . . They think it mean to associate with native ideas and tastes, native customs and manners, which seem to them odious and contemptible; while native character is considered to represent the lowest type of lying and wickedness.⁶¹

But Keshub’s response was not that of the militant Hindu nationalist in a blind defense of his own heritage. Like Akshoy Kumar Dutt, Keshub Chandra Sen placed universalism above national character. It is again curious how the following passage, so clear and unmistakable, has been ignored by those who have presented the reformer as an unqualified Christian apologist. Said Keshub:

The fact is, human nature is the same everywhere—in all latitudes and climes, but circumstances modify it, and religion and usages mould it in different forms. Educate the native mind, and you will find it susceptible of as much improvement and elevation as that of the European.⁶²

Indeed Keshub was one of the first Bengalis to refer to cultural stereotypes, which he termed “caricatures.”⁶³ It was not “national character” which kept the Indian nation in darkness but circumstances. The trouble is, he said, “that we are a subject race and have been for centuries.”⁶⁴ In such passionate terms we find the same indignant mood against imperialism in Vivekananda later on. But in contrast to Vivekananda, Keshub in 1866 attacked the excesses of imperialism in the name of the exalted image of the true Christ:

Christ . . . do Europeans follow him? I regard Europeans in India as missionaries of Christ and I have a right to demand they should always remember and act up to his high responsibilities. . . . But I find pseudo Christians with reckless conduct. . . . Yea their muscular Christianity has led many a native to identify the religion of Jesus with the power and privilege of inflicting blows and kicks with impunity. Had it not been for them, the name of Jesus . . . would have been ten times more glorified.⁶⁵

It may be difficult to see how a detached comparative religious attitude could possibly emerge from Keshub’s angry mood, but it did. His underlying belief in unity over diversity made the comparative approach possible. In fact, though a theist and not a deist, Keshub in 1866 reminds one of
Akshoy Kumar Dutt in the way he was groping for the universal principles of religion. Even Keshub’s identification with Christ may be misleading. There are a few revealing passages in the talk which suggest that it was not Christ as such that was crucial but what he represented universally in history: “It is my firm conviction that his teachings find a response in the universal consciousness of humanity, and are no more European than Asiatic, and that in his ethics there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bound or free.”

VI. KESHUB’S SCHISM OF 1866 AND ADI SAMAJ REACTION: THE NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY OF DWIJENDRANATH TAGORE AND THE HINDU MELA

At a general meeting of Brahmos on 15 November 1866 the formal break between generations finally occurred. The birth of the Braho Samaj of India at that meeting was anticlimactic, but the resolutions passed by the Keshubites and subsequent debates sharply define the increasingly vital issue of nationalism and universalism between the two camps. One resolution should be singled out in this regard—the one proposed by the Vaishnava Braho, Bijoy Krishna Goswami, on behalf of the Keshubites. It read: “Men and women of every nation and caste who believe in the fundamental doctrines of Brahmo Dharma shall be eligible as members of the Braho Samaj of India.”

Actually, Bijoy Krishna was not referring to Debendranath’s book Brahmo Dharma, which had served as a bible for the Adi Samaj and which had neatly developed Brahmoism as the reformed Hinduism. Quite the contrary, Bijoy Krishna promptly called for a new “compilation of theistic texts to be taken from all the Scriptures of the world.” It was in reply to Bijoy Krishna that Nabagopal Mitra, personal friend of the Tagores and ardent Adi Braho nationalist, raised his voice. This was the same Nabagopal Mitra whose many subsequent activities of a patriotic nature would earn him the title “National Mitra.” He argued at the meeting that “if there was truth sufficient near home, why should we go abroad? There was all the truth which we require in the Hindu scriptures and we need not therefore borrow anything from other scriptures.”

This mild statement hardly represented either Nabagopal Mitra’s style of belittling universalists or the harsh Adi Braho treatment inflicted upon Keshub Chandra after the schism. The rupture had caused a second major crisis of the Bengal renaissance. The impact on the older generation of Brahmos was disastrous; Keshub became an object of hostility reminiscent of Macaulay’s image in an earlier generation. The Adi Samaj turned into a snarling yellow dog of nationalist arrogance. Rajnarian Basu was perhaps earliest in his response with Prospectus to Start a Society for the
Promotion of National Feeling Among the Educated Natives of Bengal in April 1866.\textsuperscript{70}

Though the association was soon replaced by the more ambitious Tagore-supported Hindu Mela, the prospectus was a powerfully worded document in defiance of Keshub’s universalism. Rajnarian was unimpressed by Keshub’s desire to look abroad for inspiration. More important to Basu was the realization of Bengal’s degradation. How shameful, for example, that “Hindu youth” had not only “severed themselves from Hindu society but had renounced even the Hindu name.”\textsuperscript{71} A program of regenerating Hindu youth was therefore necessary, one which included physical training to “restore the manliness of Bengali youth” and their long-lost “military prowess”; the establishment of a school in Hindu music with the “composition of songs for moral, patriotic and martial enthusiasm”; the founding of a school for Hindu medicine to revive “our own medical sciences”; and the encouragement of “Indian antiquities” to illuminate the “glory of ancient India.”\textsuperscript{72}

Along with the program of general Sanskritic revival, Rajnarian offered proposals for building up contemporary Bengal as a society and culture. He was most adamant about cultivating the Bengali language. “We must learn to communicate in our language,” he wrote. Do the English communicate with one another in French or German? He recommended that Bengali boys learn Bengali before English in school. He urged giving up English food, dress, and even dramatic entertainment for the Bengali variety.\textsuperscript{73}

The \textit{National Paper}, which Debendranath commissioned Nabagopal Mitra to edit in 1865, proved from 1867 onward to be the most effective means of propagating Hindu Brahmo nationalism against Keshubite universalism among the Western-educated in Bengal. The articles which graced the newspaper during its first years of existence, mostly written by Dwijendranath Tagore, were brilliant expositions in defense of both the Adi Samaj and the national culture. Dwijendranath, who was among the most defiant of all Indian patriots from the Bengali middle class, couched his nationalism in the Orientalist ideological heritage. Thus he accepted modernization but argued that the true modernizer had first to identify with his culture and then work within to revitalize it.

As a philosopher by inclination rather than by profession, Dwijendranath was one of Keshub Chandra’s most formidable intellectual opponents. In contrast to his younger brother Rabindranath, who underwent prolonged identity crises and continually shifted between universalism and nationalism, Dwijendranath remained steadfastly nationalist—even much later in life when he debated his brother in support of Gandhi’s noncooperation movement. As early as 1867, Dwijendranath was con-
vinced that the only way the Adi Samaj could survive Keshub’s schism was to identify itself closer than ever with the Hindu Samaj. If Keshub could command the loyalty of the progressive theistic youth on the grounds of universalism, the Adi Brahmos could command the support of the theists in the much greater Hindu society—to which at long last they would emerge as leaders.

The assumption behind Dwijendranath’s nationalist ideology was the familiar notion that the westernizing model was a dead end to nation-building and modernism in India. In an article of 25 September 1867 called “European Model” he blasted those misguided progressives who “have mistaken views of progressive civilization.”74 These people have sold themselves to “an exotic civilization” as if “there were only one civilization in the world, viz. English civilization.”75 The more sensible alternative would be to work within that which was “genuine and national in the manners, customs, and habits of this country.”76 Certainly, he argued, “English civilization deserves our esteem” but only because it is the natural offshoot of the energies of the English nation and of no other people. Thus argued Dwijendranath:

Each nation holds a distinct nationality and for so holding it is the more entitled to the appellation of a civilized nation. . . . But our countrymen rush madly to their own degradation by acting under the supposition that to imitate English civilization . . . is synonymous with making progress . . . and instead of making national institutions the bases of all progress, import a foreign air in all actions and reform.77

Dwijendranath continued his exploration of the problem and later added that a well-intentioned foreign import could, under certain circumstances, “destroy the inner vitality and integrity of our native character.”78 In an earlier article on “Hinduism is not Hostile to Brahmoism” he sought to define progress in terms of national identity. He discovered it to mean “what is harmonious in the fusion of past and present standards of a culture.”79 Progress was assuredly not the substitution of something foreign for something national but the “consolidation of institutions defunct as well as those fast growing up” for the benefit of a given culture.80

It was in the very depths of the psychology of cultural encounter under colonialism that Dwijendranath waxed most eloquent in his defense of nationalism. An article on “Nationality and Universality” was aimed specifically at Keshub. “That the Hindoos and the Europeans should have everything in common is no doubt a desirable end,” he began, but before that, “we must have a footing of equality with the Europeans.”81 “Under present circumstance,” he warned, “an adoption of European habits would be like wearing a badge of slavery.”82 In a later article on much the
same subject, Dwijendranath made a striking comparison between anglicized Bengalis and American Negroes:

With all our present inferiority and infirmities we are little better respected by the world than the Christian negro of North America who speaks English, dresses himself with the jacket and pantaloon, and whose habits of life in fact are mostly borrowed from the European settlers there. And why so? Simply because his civilization is nothing more than an image of European manners and habits, and he is no more like the true European than the monkey in the red-coat riding on the she-goat is like a human being. By means of mere imitation we can be just so much like the Europeans as slaves are like their masters.\textsuperscript{83}

As evidenced in Keshub’s own paper the \textit{Indian Mirror}, which he had managed to acquire after his break with Debendranath, these attacks did not go unnoticed. But far more significant than the exchange of ideas in debate were Keshub’s innovations as charismatic hero of the younger generation of theistic progressives.

In the early years Keshub championed reformism and universalism without much apparent inconsistency. Bijoy Krishna’s proposal in the meeting of 15 November 1866 for a compilation of scriptures from all the religious sources led to the publication of the \textit{Sloka Sangraho}, first used in Brahmo services, and then borrowed and adapted by Unitarians for their own services abroad.\textsuperscript{84} The opening of the Keshubite \textit{mandir} on 22 August 1869 boldly proclaimed the universalism and reformist intent of the newly formed Brahmo Samaj of India. Keshub’s declaration of principles was obviously derived from Rammohun Roy’s tenets in the trust deed to the first Brahmo church, established in 1829. “This building,” Keshub declared, “is established with the object of paying reverence to all truths that exist in the world . . . that all quarrel, all misunderstanding, all pride of caste may be destroyed, and all brotherly feeling may be perpetuated.”\textsuperscript{85} No idols were to be worshipped and no scripture was to be considered infallible. Furthermore:

\begin{quote}
No sect shall be vilified, ridiculed, or hated. No prayer, hymn, sermon, or discourse to be delivered or used here shall countenance or encourage any manner of idolatry, sectarianism or sin. Divine service shall be conducted here in such a spirit and manner as may enable men and women, irrespective of distinctions of caste, color, and condition, to unite in one family, eschew all manner of error and sin, and advance in wisdom, faith and righteousness.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

Even the architecture of the \textit{mandir} reflected Keshub’s universalism. It was a blend of a Hindu temple, Christian church, and Muslim mosque.\textsuperscript{87} In 1870, when an expanded edition of the \textit{Sloka Sangraho} was published
for the congregation, the motto beautifully inscribed on the title page was "The Wide Universe was the Temple of God."\(^{88}\)

The Tagore family responded to Keshub's universalism by beautifying and popularizing their yearly national festival which came later to be known as the Hindu Mela. Started in April 1867 by the combined efforts of Rajnarian Basu, Dwijendranath Tagore, and Nabagopal Mitra, it aimed at carrying out the principles articulated in Rajnarian's prospectus. Actually, by supporting local industry, it went even farther than Rajnarian had anticipated and may in this sense be looked upon as the precursor of the Swadeshi movement of the early 1900s.\(^{89}\) Fervent nationalist poems and songs were composed for the occasion, and wrestling matches were arranged between Bengali and Punjabi students with the hope that the former would defeat the latter—if and when they did, as in 1868, the fact was well publicized. There were also exhibitions of every sort testifying to the abilities of Hindus in general but Bengali Hindus in particular.

In 1869, the year of Keshub's new mandir, the Tagores invested more money and talent in the festival, enlarging the program and drawing more people. The management was pleased to report that seven thousand people had attended the Hindu Mela that year.\(^{90}\) Three themes were promoted in songs, poems, and speeches: "progress, unity, and self-reliance."\(^{91}\) Progress to the Adi Brahmo backers of the Hindu Mela meant progress of Hindus, whereas unity meant burying regional and caste differences for the sake of Hindu unity and self-reliance meant the promotion of entrepreneurship among Bengali Hindu youths principally.

The Hindu Mela, although it did help the Adi Samaj stay alive by giving it a share in the leadership of Calcutta Hindu society, did not affect Keshub or his career. On the contrary, in the early 1870s the silver-tongued reformer was riding the crest of his popularity and success. His universalism seemed to endear him to all. An American Unitarian missionary named Charles Dall was made a member of the Keshubite community by signing the Brahmo covenant and was given every opportunity to spread Unitarian literature and ideas among Brahmos in Bengal and elsewhere in South Asia.\(^{92}\) Dall predicted that Keshub's brand of Brahmoism would ultimately triumph in India as an indigenous form of Christian Unitarianism.\(^{93}\) In 1866 Lant Carpenter's daughter Mary had come to India to promote social work, and while in Bengal it was to the younger Brahmos that she appealed directly for assistance. Her close friend was Monomohon Ghose, an active member of the Keshubite organization whom she called the "Bengali Unitarian." Her first visitor upon arriving in Calcutta was Keshub Chandra, whom she viewed at the time as the truest follower of her father's friend, Rammohun Roy.\(^{94}\)
VII. Identity, Community, and the Brahmo Marriage Act of 1872

The problem of national identity was no mere ideological issue between Adi Brahmos and Keshubites but had serious practical implications as well. The difficulty may be traced back to the 1850s when Debendranath stated that "we Brahmos are situated amidst a community which views us with no friendly feelings" since we ourselves attack "their Puranic and tantric systems."\(^{95}\) He went on to point out that Brahmos have little in common with anglicized "secularists" and with other "denationalized" sorts such as members of the Christian community. He characterized the Brahmo attitude to these persons as one of "practical hostility." Thus he concluded that the Brahmo community was in a delicate position between apologists of the Hindu status quo and apologists of a Western way of life. And he predicted that Brahmos would continue to have a hard time of it "so long as our numbers are so small, our resources so limited, and our enemies so powerful as they now are."\(^{96}\)

When the new mandir opened, Keshub initiated twenty-one young men into what he tried to make them believe was not simply a religion or ideology or a social gospel but a full-fledged community. Three things were painfully obvious to Keshub at the time. First, that most of the young converts were excommunicated from their caste and ostracized from their families. Second, the reason why they had been cut off from Hindu society was that they were anusthanic Brahmos—Brahmos who practiced what they preached. These two factors together added up to the third realization: that his Brahmo community was already de facto separated from the Hindu samaj but lacked de jure recognition of their existence. Even the Christian families were protected legally as to inheritance and the validity of their marriages.

In fact a year before the Keshubite mandir was completed and the new community came into being officially, the advocate general of India ruled that Brahmo marriages which conformed neither to Muslim nor to Hindu rites "were invalid and the offspring of them were to be considered illegitimate."\(^{97}\) Since their marriages departed so little from Hindu rites, Adi Brahmos had no problem. But the Keshubites found themselves in the lamentable position of being penalized by a Western government for adopting Western-inspired reform measures. Keshub had no recourse but to pressure the government to give legal recognition to the Brahmo marriage and family—a formidable task when it is considered how tiny a minority the new Brahmo community constituted as against any organized opposition by the vast majority of Hindus.
Between 1869 and 1872 the controversy over the proposed Brahmo Marriage Act was so violently abusive and so interlaced with other issues that it led to a final and irrevocable split between the Adi Brahmos and the Keshubites. Before then there was a kind of verbal truce between Keshub and Debendranath, but after 1870 Debendranath withdrew from Brahmo affairs to Santineketan, leaving the presidency of the organization in the hands of his more militant successor, Rajnarian Basu. Rajnarian, Dwijendranath, and Jyotirindranath (another elder brother of Rabindranath Tagore) lashed out against the Marriage Act proposals from the pulpit of the church, from editorials in the National Paper and Tattvabodhini Patrika, and from the podium at public meetings. They hoped to stir up fear of the act's consequences among the Hindu samaj.

What appears to have disturbed the Adi Brahmos most of all was the familiar nationalist concern about estrangement from Hindu society. Most of their articles, speeches, and editorials led to the conclusion—by no means an unfounded one—that it would arrest the course of "healthy and spontaneous reformation" by legally defining the "Brahmos as a body distinct from the general body of Hindus." Said Rajnarian in an official memorial against the Marriage Act proposal on 12 April 1871: "The Brahmos now in fact form an integral part of Hindu Society. The law will dissociate the former from the latter—a contingency to be highly dreaded as it will injure the course of religious reformation in India."  

In the quest for identity, the Keshubites were now increasingly compelled to admit that Rajnarian was right in his conclusion but wrong in his gloomy prediction of the law's consequences. During the latter stage of the controversy P. C. Mazumdar, on behalf of Keshub, wrote a revealing article on the problem of identity in an effort to arrive at a new perspective. The question he posed was this: Who in fact were the Brahmos? Were they Christians as the Adi Samaj suggested? "How can we be Christians?" he asked. Said Mazumdar, "We do not believe in the divinity of Christ nor in the infallibility of the Bible, nor in miracles, nor in prophecies, nor in sacraments." Nor are Brahmos Muslims. Are Brahmos Hindus? Mazumdar's answer; "Yes, nationally and socially we are. The Brahmos take pride in calling themselves Hindus so far as the name of their country goes, so far as their ancestry and the society of their countrymen among them whom they love are concerned."  

But then Mazumdar went on to declare that in ideology, ethics, and social practice "we Brahmos are not Hindus." Brahmos do not accept the Vedas and Puranas as infallible nor do they believe in "the sacred wisdom of the Rishis," nor do they accept the "incarnations of Vishnu." To round off his argument, Mazumdar said that "if again by Hinduism is
meant idolatry, caste... incantations and all the false superstitions, then we are certainly not Hindus.”

The intensity of expression surrounding the controversy only magnified the seemingly insoluble problem of Brahmo identity. Keshub's own reasoning throughout was based on the proposition that so long as Brahmos practiced their tenets no wrongs would result. There was nothing in Brahmoism which would produce denationalizing tendencies. The Marriage Act would have the effect of enabling Brahmos to practice what they preached. Moreover it was the Adi Brahmo Samaj that was treading a dangerous path because it was sacrificing the Brahmo program for the sake of national identity. More and more, however, Keshub found himself arguing the universalist position that Brahmos were neither Hindu nor Christian but the pioneer community for a syncretic religion which represented the best features of the existing universal faiths.

No theory could erase the fact that on 19 March 1872, when the Brahmo Marriage Act was enacted by the government, those Brahmos who adhered to it discovered themselves legally divorced from Hindu society. The fact was momentarily overshadowed by jubilant progressives all over India who hailed Keshub as a miracle worker. They pointed not to the provision on Brahmo identity but to the provisions allowing for such reforms as intercaste and widow marriage or prohibiting such social evils as child marriage and polygamy. Keshub had struggled and won against enormous odds. By means of memorials, letters, visits to bureaucrats in Simla, and by publicized consultations with doctors as to the proper marital age for young adults, Keshub had convinced Lord Lawrence to sign into law an act of social reform.

The only difficulty was in the wording of Sir Henry Maine, who wrote the act. The reforms applied to “those marrying parties who declared that they did not profess the Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian, Parsee, Buddhist, Sikh, or Jainna religion.” Thus at the stroke of a pen, in the eyes of the government, Brahmoism was no longer reformed Hinduism but a distinct religious community with a distinct legal identity.

VIII. BRAHMO UNIVERSALISM BETWEEN CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND MILITANT NATIONALISM: THE FAILURE OF KESHUB SEN’S NEW DISPENSATION

Thus Keshub was certainly not the Christ-lover or simplistic anglophile his critics have made him out to be. These same critics, rather inconsistently, also accuse him of Vaishnava emotionalism which prompted him to introduce the kirtan and processions as a regular Brahmo practice. Keshub was an ardent universalist or cosmopolitan who in the 1870s drove his immediate disciples into an intensive study of all major religions
from primary sources in their original languages.\textsuperscript{106} Not only Christianity was studied as an alien religion but Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Islam as well. The first Bengali translation of the Koran was a product of this research.\textsuperscript{107} Then Keshub held seminars on comparative religion; from available accounts no single religion was held as revealed or superior to the others.\textsuperscript{108} The purpose of all this: to ascertain the underlying unity of all religions.

So long as Keshub combined universalism with social activism as a modernizer, he maintained the loyalty of the progressive wing of the intelligentsia. This he managed to do until the middle of the decade. In 1878 he lost the progressives and younger people with the formation of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj just as Debendranath had done twelve years earlier. In part, Keshub was victim of historical circumstances which dashed his program to pieces; and in part, he was victim of his uncontrolable obsession with the development of a true universal religion.\textsuperscript{109}

The alarming increase of British yellow dog racism and cultural imperialism ultimately made a mockery of Brahmo universalism.\textsuperscript{110} In the first place, there was a sharp rise of the educated unemployed who could not find suitable jobs.\textsuperscript{111} The British were rightly blamed for their misfortune. Secondly, gifted Bengalis were discriminated against openly by Britishers who resented “niggers” in high positions.\textsuperscript{112} Thirdly, the nonofficial British community blocked every effort to give Indian magistrates the power to judge cases involving whites as well as nonwhites. In short, the historical atmosphere suddenly made Keshub’s universalism ludicrously inappropriate if not downright unpatriotic.

At a time when Indian cultural nationalism was rapidly becoming politicized, Keshub publicized his continuing loyalty to Queen Victoria, a gesture which must have seemed offensive to the younger radicals.\textsuperscript{113} In this regard, it should be pointed out that the leaders of the Sadharan Brahmos who broke with Keshub in 1878 were the very same people who led the Indian Association, precursor of the Indian National Congress.\textsuperscript{114} Ananda Mohun Bose in particular—who was among the twenty-one young men to proclaim publicly his adherence to anusthanic Brahmism under Keshub’s leadership at the mandir in 1869, and who rebelled against Keshub to found the Sadharan Samaj less than ten years later—proved to be the prime mover, organizer, and financier of the Indian Association.\textsuperscript{115} Indeed it was Bose who employed Surendranath Bannerji after the latter’s dismissal from the civil service and Bose who provided the inspiration and support for Bannerji’s rise as early nationalist critic of the excesses of British imperialism.\textsuperscript{116} Behind Bose and Bannerji were such articulate politicized Brahmos as Bipin Chandra Pal, Sivanath Sastri, Krishna Kamul Mitra, and Dwarkanath Ganguli.
Keshub was also victim of his preoccupation with the composition of a universal religion which demanded more and more of his time and energy. His American Unitarian friend, Reverend Dall, warned him repeatedly against deserting social reform for the task of constructing a highly intellectualized, highly abstract religious system. But Keshub persisted in his dream of a New Dispensation which would integrate the best elements of all religions. Intellectually, without doubt, the New Dispensation represents one of the major achievements of the Bengal renaissance. The rites, myths, and symbols of all the major faiths underwent a subtle and ingenious transformation to become parts of a new system that it was hoped would replace the limited sectarian system. It was, unfortunately for Keshub, a futile gesture. Many thinking people the world over had by 1884 (the year of Keshub’s death) rejected the validity of religious solutions to social problems. Moreover, in the so-called progressive West, virtually every country was becoming an armed yellow dog as Europe before 1914 increasingly resembled a community of hounds on the eve of a fox hunt.

IX. THE CHALLENGE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE TRIUMPH OF UNIVERSALISM AS A CULTURAL IDEAL: THE BRAHMO HERITAGE AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE

To complete this study of the Orientalist legacy and the problem of Brahmo identity in the Bengal renaissance, one must look carefully at Rabindranath Tagore’s reinterpretation of the Adi Brahmo idea of Hindu modernism, which may well constitute his most important ideological contribution to Bengal and to India. Though it is enormously difficult to follow Tagore’s intellectual meanderings—indicating a certain cultural rootlessness—I would recommend that we pay heed to the relationship between Hindu modernism and his self-acknowledged adherence to a Hindu Brahmo identity.

Hindu Brahmoism, which I have traced back to 1866 as one consequence of Keshub Sen’s schism from the Adi Samaj, was born out of an encounter of modernizing alternatives framed in the context of nationalism and universalism. It was surely no accident that the earliest use of the term *Hindu Brahmo* was in reference to Adi Samajists such as Rajnarian Basu, Debendranath Tagore, and Dwijendranath Tagore. To my knowledge the term was first applied to a Sadharan Samajist in 1890, when Ramananda Chatterji cast off his sacred thread and declared himself a Hindu Brahmo because “Brahmoism was the truest exposition of Hinduism.” With the escalation of British imperialism and the consequent rise of militant nationalism, the problem of modernity became even more acute. Here is the setting for Rabindranath’s role and contribution as a key
member of the Bengali intelligentsia within the Brahmo context.

Though the basic biographical data of Rabindranath’s life are well known to the general reader of Indian history, the Brahmo side of his life is relatively unknown in print. Stephen Hay, in a recent monograph on an aspect of Tagore’s ideology, claims that the earliest formative influence on Rabindranath was Keshub Chandra Sen.121 The fact that Rabindranath was born in 1861, during the honeymoon period of relationship between Keshub and Debendranath, is significant to Hay. The fact that Rabindranath was born at the very time Keshub fled his house to live in the Tagore bari is also highly significant. Indeed as Rabindranath himself later wrote: “I was fortunate enough to receive his [Keshub’s] affectionate caresses at the moment when he was cherishing his dream of a great future spiritual illumination.”122

No doubt Rabindranath was influenced by Keshub—especially in his ideological development in mature life—since few Brahmós from Deben-
dranath’s time onward were not at first favorably attracted to the reformer. But we should also keep in mind that Rabindranath was five years old when the bitter schism radically transformed the affection of the Tagore family and made them deadly foes of Keshub. For all practical purposes, Satyendranath passed out of the Calcutta scene in 1862 when he went to England and upon his return became a covenanted civil servant in west India. The family leadership passed into the hands of Dwijendranath and Jyotirindranath, two of Keshub’s deadliest enemies both ideologically and personally.

Indeed, it is Jyotirindranath who became Rabindranath’s favorite broth-
er in the years that followed.123 If Rabindranath experienced anything during the years of Nabagopal Mitra’s nationalist enterprises, the National Paper with the inflammatory articles by Dwijendranath, the Tagore-supported Hindu Mela, and Rajnarian’s presidency of the Adi Samaj, it was assuredly a strong family commitment to Hindu Brahmoism and cultural nationalism. As viewed by Keshub and his followers, the Tagores were drifting back into the Hindu fold. If in his youthful years Rabindranath was still attracted to Keshub’s universalism (which is likely, but difficult to prove one way or the other), then we may have isolated the origins of that “traditionalist-westernizer” split in Tagore’s personal and ideological makeup which S. C. Sarkar, in an illuminating essay on Tagore and the renaissance, has interpreted as the two most significant currents of thought in the poet’s lifetime.124

Although Sarkar is in my opinion as close as anyone in identifying this crucial “dialectic” in Tagore’s intellectual development, he has unnecessarily imposed his own value judgment on both extreme positions. In terms of the identity problem faced by Brahmós throughout the Bengal
renaissance, Sarkar's analysis is from my point of view partial and inadequate. Sarkar evidently approaches Tagore with the idea of the slavophile-westerner split among the Russian intelligentsia in mind. In the context of the identity problem vis-à-vis the West, this is certainly a valid approach. He splits the sentiments of Bengali intellectuals like Tagore into an Orientalist or traditionalist camp and a westernizer or modernist camp. The difficulty emerges when Sarkar reduces traditionalism to "worship of past glories," "a consciousness of Hindu superiority," and a "tendency to spiritual mysticism and emotionalism." On the other hand, westernism equals rationalism and liberalism.

Considering some of the salient aspects of Adi Brahmo Samaj history reviewed in this essay, where in fact does such a definition lead us? Does a defense of one's own tradition always mean traditionalism in the reactionary antimodern connotation employed by Sarkar? The Adi Brahmos in the Tagore family camp were not advocating a defense of status quo traditionalism but were instead aiming to modernize the Hindu tradition through Brahmaism. Nor were any of the Adi Brahmos given to spiritual emotionalism. On the contrary, we find such religious excesses, if you will, among the Keshubites, who were in fact more liberal reformers than the Adi Samajists. The Sadharan Samajists, admittedly the most progressive group of the lot, were no less dominated by religious enthusiasts. Often, those most westernized were also the most passionate theists, whereas Sanskrit College-trained pundits like the famous Vidyasagar—thoroughly exposed to the spirit of the classical tradition—were indifferent to religion. Moreover, belief in the superiority of Hinduism, which was a natural component in the rise of nationalism in India, does not necessarily exclude a belief in constructive change and modernism.

Actually, in terms of cultural identity, nationalism would probably describe the Adi Samaj attitude more accurately than traditionalism. The challenge by the Keshubites, who were professed universalists, only reinforced Adi Samaj loyalty to their own cultural tradition or national heritage. Thus when Sarkar quite rightly points out that between 1882 and 1885 Rabindranath was under Rajnarian Basu's influence, this does not imply that the poet was at the time antimodernist so much as it implies that he identified strongly with Hindu India against the West. Take, for example, the Tagore preoccupation with nationalist projects such as the Hindu Mela or with the national secret society organized in Jorosanko in 1874. Rabindranath, then thirteen years old, was invited to the meetings by Jyotirindranath. Two other conspicuous members were Dwijendranath and Rajnarian. To be sure, the secret society identified itself in no uncertain terms with the Hindu tradition. But in the order of the Swadeshi-like program of the Hindu Mela, the organization promoted, among other
things, the industrial development of India, starting with textiles and jute.\textsuperscript{135} Was this support of industrialism, in Sarkar’s terms, “traditional,” “Orientalist,” and “reactionary”?\textsuperscript{136}

Also, in 1884 when Rabindranath was supposedly in one of his dark and reactionary periods as a prisoner of “Orientalism,” he became secretary of the Adi Brahmo Samaj. According to Ramananda Chatterji, who first met Tagore at this time, Tagore was shocked at Bankim Chandra Chatterji’s “defense of Hinduism” in the issues of \textit{Prachar Nabajuban}.\textsuperscript{136} Ramananda was much taken with Tagore’s attitudes at the time. When one considers that Ramananda was in his radical student phase in Calcutta it is difficult to believe that he and his peers would have been attracted by the lectures of a traditionalist reactionary.\textsuperscript{137}

In fact, sociologically speaking, the young Rabindranath in the early 1880s was hardly the persevering puritanical type of Brahmo applying himself diligently for some professional career. In comparison with the trio of Satyendranath, Dwijendranath, and Jyotirindranath, Rabindranath was the least educated formally and, in retrospection, the least likely to succeed—judged from the high standards of Brahmo society. Satyendranath was preparing himself for the covenanted service, Dwijendranath was a self-trained technical philosopher, Jyotirindranath was an accomplished musician and erudite musicologist.\textsuperscript{138} But as Stephen Hay relates, “Rabindranath in 1882 at 21 years of age had no worldly responsibilities to concern him” as he “lived off income from tenants of the family’s large estates.”\textsuperscript{139} Moreover, having stopped school at thirteen, his education was most irregular.

The 1880s were unsettling years for Rabindranath. He evidently suffered a great loss when his sister-in-law, Kadambani Debi, Jyotirindranath’s wife, committed suicide.\textsuperscript{140} Five months before that his father had married Rabindranath off to an eleven-year-old girl with little education, the daughter of an employee in the zemindari.\textsuperscript{141} This was the period when he moved about in a coarse sheet as a garment and rarely wore shoes.\textsuperscript{142} Hay puts great stress on Rabindranath’s feeling the rootless outsider during this decade. Then in 1890 he went off to England with his brother Satyendranath for a holiday.

From Sarkar’s point of view, Rabindranath was in a pro-Western phase in the period 1886–1898. Using numerous examples from the poet’s writings, Sarkar has made a convincing case for Rabindranath’s antipathy to Hindu revivalism. This was the era of the newspaper \textit{Bangabasi} under violently anti-Brahmo and generally antiprogressive Jogendra C. Basu.\textsuperscript{143} In this period the Hari Sabha branches began to proliferate.\textsuperscript{144} This was the age of vicious satires against Brahmos in novels and plays by sharp-witted defenders of the status quo such as Indranath Banerji.\textsuperscript{145} This was
the time when Puranic Hinduism and the whole medieval tradition was being defended by such notorious antiwesterners as S. T. Chadamani and K. P. Sen. The ethos of the era was well captured in 1889 when a Sadhan ran Brahma missionary named Bipin Chandra Pal lashed out at what he called "the present social reaction":

When education, instead of enlarging our minds and making us ready to welcome and fitted to receive the light of other ages and the truth of other countries, simply helps to envelop us in a mist of narrow and selfish patriotism that refuses to acknowledge the existence of any virtue beyond the limits of the narrow hold which we call our country, we may shudder to realize how strong this reaction has already become. In fact, the whole atmosphere seems to be literally surcharged with this virulent poison.

Rabindranath also spoke out against the virulent poison of traditionalism which was mechanical and deadening, but not quite in the westernizing manner suggested by Sarkar. Tagore was, after all, the son of Deben dranath and there is no evidence I have seen that indicates a reaction against the Hindu Brahma style of the Adi Samaj. Most assuredly, Rabindranath was against revivalism, nativism, and xenophobic nationalism. On the one hand, he attacked Bankim Chandra and Nobin Chandra Sen for the dangerous way they wedded some of the worst features of traditionalism with an aggressive nationalism. And he repudiated a static view of the Hindu heritage in the following way:

A lifeless people, stagnant and immobile
Its course obstructed by the morass of tradition
A nation that does not move for its feet are tied
By scriptural commands and endless incantations.

But on the other hand, Rabindranath seemed to stay clear of that alli ance between a westernized Brahmaism and political constitutionalism. His attitude to the Indian Association and the National Congress of Ananda Mohun Bose and Surendra Nath Bannerji is illustrated in an anecdote by Rabindranath's son Ratindranath. One night the poet was invited to a dinner by "anglicized" congressites for the purpose of enlisting his support in the movement. "Father came dressed in a dhoti and chandur in the midst of the anglicized diners," wrote Ratindranath. He then went on to say that "my father had little faith in their politics" because he "realized the futility of holding meetings and passing pious resolutions."

The fact is the Rabindranath between 1890 and 1900 spent much of his time in rural East Bengal supervising the zemindari. In sharp contrast to the Brahma professional intelligentsia of Calcutta, who were deeply and directly involved in such issues as modernism, revivalism, and nationalism, Rabindranath was the privileged and poetically gifted son of a
prominent Brahmo zemindar who could drift along the rivers of up-country Bengal in a houseboat cursing “the organized selfishness of Calcutta city life.”\textsuperscript{152} Perhaps no other Bengali poet so captured the natural beauty and simplicity of East Bengal as did Rabindranath.

Between 1898 and 1906, Sarkar has placed Tagore in another extreme antiwesterner phase. There was deep unrest in the poet, while his work reflected the “shadows of an anguished mind.”\textsuperscript{153} This was the brief period of Rabindranath’s politicized behavior on behalf of the Swadeshi movement. In 1904, at his father’s birthday celebration, Rabindranath proudly recalled the Adi Samaj contribution to Indian nationalism. He is quoted as having said that the greatness of his father lay in refusing “to dilute our supreme national religion into a vague universalism.”\textsuperscript{154} This was also the period in Rabindranath’s life when in defiance of Brahmo social reformism he married off his daughters aged eleven and fourteen in the traditional Hindu manner.\textsuperscript{155}

One should view this phase of Rabindranath’s antiuniversalism against the backdrop of Brahmo defections and the rise of militant nationalism in Bengal. It was probably a kinship of nationalist feelings that prompted Rabindranath to invite Brahmobandhab Upadhyay to be headmaster of the new school at Santineketan in 1901. Rabindranath’s own recorded sentiments during these years resemble those of Brahmobandhab.\textsuperscript{156} Even Rabindranath’s notion that “Brahminism and not kingship was our country’s wealth” in ancient times, uttered in 1904, closely followed Brahmobandhab’s own interpretation.\textsuperscript{157} Burning with indignation against the excesses of European imperialism, which he expressed in poems on British intervention in the Boer War or in suppressing the Boxer Rebellion in China, Tagore underwent a Brahmobandhab period, aggressively defying Western racism, militarism, and economic exploitation.\textsuperscript{158}

The question may then be asked whether Rabindranath at this point defected from Brahmoism. Certainly as a militant nationalist, Tagore was never so suspicious of modernist impulses from the West as during this period of his life. From a Keshubite or Sadharan perspective, Rabindranath’s extreme nationalism would make him appear a defector. But in the Adi Brahmo tradition, nationalism was more characteristic than universalism. The question poses a serious dilemma which Tagore himself quite possibly sought to resolve in his most powerful novel, \textit{Gora}, first serialized in Ramananda Chatterji’s \textit{Probabasi} in 1907.\textsuperscript{159} In 1907 the poet was clearly beginning to retreat from nationalism back to universalism.

His \textit{Gora}, the massively built, fair complexioned, and strong-faced hero who is chairman of the Hindu Patriot’s Society\textsuperscript{160} and detests anglicized
Brahmos, is according to one contemporary source a caricature of Brahmobandhab Upadhyay. Just as likely is the possibility that Gora was Tagore himself during his Brahmobandhab period between 1898 and 1906. Written at the end of this period, the novel can hardly be interpreted as a propaganda piece on behalf of Hindu nationalism against Brahmo universalism. Instead, it may be seen as a brilliant soul-searching exploration of the dilemma of Hindu modern identity caught between the polarity of nation and world.

On the surface the story is about romantic and other entanglements between Gora’s Hindu family and a prominent Brahmo family. On another level it is both a defense and repudiation of Hindu nationalism and a defense and repudiation of sectarian Brahmoism. Only an Adi Brahmo like Tagore, through the character of Gora, could defend Hindu nationalism with such fervor as essential for identity. Take, for example, Gora’s reply to the charge of Hindu social abuses and cultural decadence: “It matters not whether we are good or bad, civilized or barbarous, so long as we are but ourselves.”

Then there is the dialogue between Gora and his closest friend Binoy in which Gora is forced into the position of defending caste, declaring that “since I owe allegiance to society, I must respect caste also.” “Are we then bound to obey society in all matters?” Binoy asks. Gora replies that “not to obey society is to destroy it.” “What if it is destroyed?” Binoy retorts. Gora’s reply: “You might as well ask what harm there is in cutting off the branch in which one is seated.”

This same theme is pursued later on in the book when Binoy is sitting with a Brahmo girl discussing “the defects of our society and the abuses of our caste system.” He explains to her that Gora feels otherwise because he refuses “to regard the broken branches and withered leaves as the ultimate nature of a tree.” Gora regards well-intentioned Brahmo reform as being too often “simply the result of intellectual impatience.” Gora maintains that he is not a reactionary because “he does not ask for any praise of the decaying boughs, but asks us to look at the whole tree and then try to understand its purpose.”

The alert Brahmo young lady replies that, withered boughs aside, it is the fruits of caste which should be considered and “what kind of fruits has caste produced in our country.” Binoy, still representing Gora by proxy, gives a significant answer which again accentuates the need to place the nationalist values of cultural loyalty and self-respect above the Brahmo propensity to expose Hindu social defects:

What you call the fruit of caste is not merely that, but the result of the totality of conditions of our country. If you try to bite with a loose tooth you suffer pain—for that you don’t blame the tooth, but only the looseness of that particular tooth. Because owing to various causes, disease and
weakness have attacked us, we have only been able to distort the idea which India stands for, and not lead it to success. That is why Gora continually exhorts us to become healthy, become strong.\textsuperscript{168}

But if Rabindranath sympathetically defended the basic tenets of militant nationalist ideology, he was equally sympathetic to Brahmo modernism and universalism. The book is as much a repudiation of the Brahmobandhab thesis that modernism had to be sacrificed for nationalist goals as it is a defense of the proposition that universalism is not incompatible with the quest for a cultural identity in the modern world. When Gora out of compassion for the poor travels throughout rural India to arouse the masses to their own enormous potential for change, he is greatly disillusioned with his experience:

This was the first time Gora had seen what the condition of his country was like, outside the well-to-do and cultured society of Calcutta. How divided, how narrow, how weak was the vast expanse of rural India—how supremely unconscious as to its own welfare. . . . What a host of self-imposed imaginary obstacles prevented them from taking their place in the grand commerce of the world. . . . Without such an opportunity to see it for himself, Gora would never have been able to observe how inert were their minds, how petty their lives, how feeble their efforts.\textsuperscript{169}

That Rabindranath remained faithful to the Adi Brahmo doctrine of modernism proceeding along national lines is quite obvious even when articulated through the defiant nationalist posture of Gora. In one passage after Binoy challenges Gora on the vitality of Brahmo persistence to reform society, the reply is the familiar argument Adi Samajists had been using since the Keshub Sen schism of 1866. Gora says that he too is for change but that “it won’t do for those changes to be absolutely crazy ones.”\textsuperscript{170} In a manner reminiscent of Dwijendranath Tagore, Gora declares that:

A child gradually grows up to be a man but man does not suddenly become a cat or dog. I want the changes in India to be along the path of India’s development for if you suddenly begin to follow the path of England’s history—then everything from first to last will be a useless failure. I am sacrificing my life to show you that the power and greatness of our country have been preserved in our country itself.\textsuperscript{171}

The crushing blow to Gora in the very end of the novel is Rabindranath’s vindication of Brahmo universalism against this extremely narrow nation-centered view of change. Throughout the book Brahmos continually argue with Gora that effective change in India is impossible if her cultural frontiers remain shut to the progressive forces in the West.\textsuperscript{172} The persuasiveness of the position gradually wins over Gora’s friend Binoy,
who becomes a Brahmo sympathizer. Then in the final pages Gora, after burying himself deeper and deeper in the pit of his Hindu militancy, learns from the man he viewed as his father that he is not a Hindu after all but the son of an Irishman killed in the Indian Mutiny.\textsuperscript{173} Both of Gora’s parents had been white Europeans. “In a single moment Gora’s whole life seemed to him like some extraordinary dream,” writes Tagore. In the following narration, Tagore explodes the myth of a narrow, confining national loyalty and places Gora in the limbo of an uncertain identity:

The foundations upon which, from childhood, all his life had been raised had suddenly crumbled into dust, and he was unable to understand who he was and where he stood. . . . He felt as though he were like the dew drop on the lotus leaf which comes into existence for a moment only. He had no mother, no father, no country, no nationality, no lineage, no God even. Only one thing was left to him and that was a vast negation.\textsuperscript{174}

But the book ends on a triumphant note when Gora begins to accept the wider identity of universal humanism—which Tagore himself was acquiring at this time. Symbolically, it is to Paresh Babu, the most sympathetic to Brahmo in the book, that Gora discloses: “Today I am free . . . today I am really an Indian. In me there is not longer any opposition between Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. Today every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food.”\textsuperscript{175}

Evidently Tagore, after years of brooding despair among the ranks of the nationalists, now returned to the larger tradition of Brahmo universalism. And Gora may well have represented his last major reconciliation of opposites leading to a higher synthesis of the nobler features of the Brahmo heritage with the exigencies of contemporary life in Bengal. It is unlikely that he ever deviated much from the vision achieved through the writing of Gora but only enriched it with new challenges and experiences moderated by the infirmities of old age.

By 1921, in his beloved ashram at Santinekatan, the ever youthful Rabindranath Tagore was busy launching the most ambitious institutional project of his career. Three years earlier, on 22 December 1918, he had assembled the students and faculty of his vidyalaya to explain that a new educational experiment known as Visva-Bharati would take place at Santinekatan.\textsuperscript{176} His expressed purpose was clearly in the tradition of earlier attempts to implement the ideal of Brahmo universalism, such as Keshub Sen’s efforts through disciples to study major religions by means of primary sources in the original languages. Keshub’s home at Lilly Cottage became in fact a virtual meeting place of the cultures of the world. In 1921 it was Tagore’s desire to create an “institution which would be a true center for all the existing cultures of the world . . . and where the
wealth of past learning which still remained unlost might be brought into living contact with modern influences.” The motto, taken from a Vedic text, was “where the whole world forms its one single nest.”

In December of that year a meeting was held to announce the formation of Visva-Bharati University. Rabindranath’s own dedication speech neatly summarized his last fourteen years of wrestling with the problems of unity and diversity, universalism and nationalism. Why this university? Tagore answered: because “mankind must realize unity.” He went on to explain that:

The first step towards that realization is revealing the different peoples to one another. . . . We must find some meeting ground where there can be no question of conflicting interest. . . . One such place is the university where we can work together in a common pursuit of truth, share together our common heritage, and realize that artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists have discovered secrets of the universe, philosophers the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged but for all mankind.

Thus, through the intense problem of finding and maintaining a cultural identity in the modern world, we can establish a causal link between Keshub Sen’s New Dispensation Church of the nineteenth century and Rabindranath Tagore’s Santinekatan experiments of the twentieth. In this sense, the New Dispensation should not be viewed so much as a failure as the first serious attempt within the Brahma Samaj to make concrete the renaissance ideal of universalism. Bijoy Krishna Goswami, a former Brahma missionary under Keshub, sought to infuse this spirit into an updated and revitalized form of Vishnavism. Vivekananda, another former Brahma under Keshub and founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, offered the world neo-Vedantism as the basis for religious and cultural unity. Brahmobandhab Upadhyay, another Keshub disciple, carried the messages of Brahma universalism into a de-Europeanized form of Roman Catholicism before his final identity crisis and withdrawal into yellow dog national fanaticism. Sasipada Bannerji, one of the most activist of Sadharan Brahma reformers, started the Debalaya, which aimed to bring representatives of all castes, religions, and creeds together in order to find ways and means of ending hatred and strife.

These experiments, including Tagore’s Visva-Bharati, were utopian schemes to be sure, especially in light of the more extreme forms of Indian nationalism that followed in the wake of European militarism and imperialism. But so long as these utopian institutions remained true to the original intent of their founders, and to the Orientalist legacy, the Bengal renaissance did not die.
NOTES

2. Ibid., pp. 67–107.
3. Ibid., pp. 22–42.
15. Ibid., pp. 263–272.
16. Ibid., p. 266.
19. For an excellent and authentic discussion of Debendranath’s contribution in these three areas see P. K. Sen, Biography of a New Faith (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1950), pp. 144–176.
21. A background to the controversy may be found in Kopf, pp. 201–202.
30. Ibid., p. 4.
31. Ibid., p. 6.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., p. 7.
34. Ibid., p. 21.
35. For a masterful attempt by a convert to establish a historical linkage between comparable religious ideas from Moses and Zoroaster to the Vedic rishis, all culminating in the Christian revelation, see K. M. Bannerjea, *The Arian Witness* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1875).
36. For an excellent discussion of the missionary side of the encounter, see Ali, pp. 22–30.
37. See, for example, R. N. Bose, *Remarks on Reverend K. M. Bannerjea’s Lecture on Vedantism* (Calcutta: n.p., 1851).
38. For an early example by a Bengali convert, see K. M. Bannerjea, *Review of the Munduck Upanishad by Ram Mohan Roy* (Calcutta: Enquirer Press, 1833).
39. Ibid., pp. 9–10.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., p. 8.
45. Ibid.
46. This is beautifully articulated in Rajnarian’s principle of “unity in essentials, variety in non-essentials and toleration for all,” which he develops along with the nationalist position in R. Bose, *A Defence of Brahmoism and the Brahma Samaj* (Calcutta: Brahma Samaj Press, 1870), p. 14.
47. Even during his most “nationalist” period, Rajnarian carried on a lively correspondence with the Unitarian Frances Power Cobbe in which he frankly admitted his debt to Unitarianism. Several of these letters are found in R. N. Basu, *Atma-carita* (Kolkata: Kuntaline Press, 1909), pp. 144–182.
48. There was in Calcutta between 1855 and 1885 an American Unitarian missionary named C. H. A. Dall who among his many activities arranged for thousands of copies of the complete works of Channing, Emerson, and Parker to be circulated free of cost to Brahmos. For additional information, see “Advantages and Disadvantages of Present Age,” *Indian Mirror*, XIV (3 January 1875), p. 4; “American Unitarian Association,” ibid. (7 November 1875), p. 1; “Brahmo Samaj,” ibid. (25 April 1875), p. 4.
52. For a moving defense by Debendranath of his generation’s achievements, see letter from Debendranath Tagore to Keshub Chandra Sen, 8 July 1865, in Sophia Dobson Collet Collection (Sadharan Brahma Samaj Library, Calcutta).
53. Ibid., letter from Keshub Chandra Sen to Debendranath Tagore, 4 July 1865.
54. Sivanath Sastri, who was then a follower of Keshub and yet sympathetic to Debendranath, interpreted the controversy largely as a problem of identity. See S. Sastri, The New Dispensation and the Brahmo Samaj (Madras: Viyahratharunjinee Press, 1881), p. 9.

55. Part of this misunderstanding is reflected in a missionary report. See "The Leader of the Brahmo Samaj, Calcutta, and the Author of 'Ecce Homo,' " Church Missionary Intelligencer, New Series II (October 1866), pp. 300–308.


57. Ibid., pp. 28, 30–32.

58. Ibid., pp. 5–6.

59. Ibid., p. 10–11. 34.

60. Ibid., p. 8.

61. Ibid., p. 23.


64. Ibid., p. 27.

65. Ibid., p. 31.

66. Ibid., p. 37.

67. Minutes of a General Meeting of the Brahmo Samaj, 15 November 1866, in Sophia Dobson Collet Collection (Sadhan Brahmo Samaj Library, Calcutta).

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. R. Bose, "Prospectus to Start a Society for the Promotion of National Feeling Among the Educated Natives of Bengal," April 1866, reprinted in Modern Review, LXXV (June 1944), pp. 444–447.

71. Ibid., p. 444.

72. Ibid., p. 445.

73. Ibid., p. 446.


75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 2 October 1867, p. 474.


80. Ibid.


82. Ibid.


86. Ibid., p. 208.


90. Ibid., pp. 13, 16.

91. Ibid., pp. 6, 7, 9, 10.


93. Ibid., "Brahmoism and Christianity" (27 January 1871).


96. Ibid.


98. For details of "truce" see letter from Keshub Chandra Sen to Debendranath Tagore, 13 January 1871, reprinted in *Brahmananda Shri Keshab Chandra praball*, comp. M. Mahalanobish (Kolkata: Bharatvarsiya Brahmo Mandir, 1941), pp. 55–56.

99. *Brahmo Year Book* (see note 97 above).


101. Ibid.

102. Ibid.

103. "Brahmoism and Christianity," *Brahmo Samaj Chronicles* (see note 92 above).


105. Ibid., p. 132.


107. Girish Chandra Sen was the Keshubite who translated the Koran into Bengali between 1881 and 1886. See his reference to Islamic interest in G. C. Sen, *Atma-jiban* (Kolkata: Gupta, Mukherji and Co., 1904), pp. 55–56.

108. This is also the Christian missionary Farquhar's assessment. See Farquhar, op. cit.


110. For examples of contemporary Brahmo reactions to growing British imperialism, see "Present Struggle for Existence," *Indian Mirror*, XVIII (14 May 1879), p. 2; "Distress of the Middle Class Natives," ibid. (21 May 1879), p. 2; "The Ilbert Act—A Legislative Patchwork," ibid., XXIII (31 January

112. One of the earliest conspicuous examples of this was the case of British discrimination against Jessie Bose, the famous Brahmo scientist who was appointed professor of physics at Presidency College in the class iv bracket of the Indian Educational Service at a grade salary only two-thirds that received by a European in a similar position. When Jessie ultimately won equality he became a national hero. See N. C. Nag, “Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose,” Modern Review, LXII (December 1937), pp. 698–703.

113. Sivanath Sastry, p. 81.

114. The Indian Association, founded on 26 July 1876, was dominated by Sadharan Brahmos of the Ananda Mohun Bose faction made up of Sivanath Sastry, Dwarkanath Ganguli, Krishna Kumar Mitra, Durga Mohun Das, Shib Chandra Deb, and Kali Shankar Sukul. For a good analysis of this faction and their alleged conspiracy against Keshub and the British crown, see D. Datta, Keshub and the Sadharan Brahma Samaj (Calcutta: Nava-Bidhan Press, 1930), pp. 256–257, 261. For a sympathetic point of view by a politicized participant of the Sadharan group who was active in the Indian Association see K. K. Mitra, Krishna Kumar Mittra Atma-carita (Kalikata: Basanti Chakrabarti, 1937), p. 153.

115. For an excellent biography of this unusual Brahmo see H. C. Sarkar, Life of Ananda Mohan Bose (Calcutta: A. C. Sarkar, 1910).

116. Ibid., p. 55. Bose employed Bannerji at the City School, a Sadharan Brahmo institution financed by the Boises, after the latter was dismissed from service. For information on Bose’s role in forming the Indian Association for Bannerji, see K. K. Mitra, “Amadiger sankat,” Sanjibani, I (14 April 1883), p. 2.


118. See especially Keshub’s fascinating final reply to Dall in K. C. Sen, “Philosophy and Madness in Religion,” Indian Mirror, XVI (3 May 1877).


120. N. S. Bose, Ramananda Chatterji (manuscript to be published by Government of India, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting), p. 12.

122. Tagore quoted in Hay, op. cit.
123. Ibid., p. 27.
125. Ibid., p. 153.
126. Ibid., p. 153.
128. Ibid.
129. In fact it was the early generation of Debendranath Brahmos of the 1840s and 1850s who were the least given to emotional excesses in religious expression but were the most conservative in support of social reform.
130. On the other hand, the younger generation of the 1860s including their leader Keshub were extreme religious enthusiasts but were also extreme radicals in their zeal for social reform.
131. Men like Sivanath Sastri, Krishna Kumar Mitra, Sasipada Bannerji, and Bijoy Krishna Goswami—all radical social reformers—were equally devoted to spiritual and theistic concerns within the Samaj.
134. Ibid.
135. Ibid., p. 31.
138. B. N. Bandyopadhyay, p. 17.
140. Ibid., p. 27.
141. Ibid.
142. Ibid., p. 28.
150. Ibid., p. 9.
151. S. N. Hay, p. 31.
152. Ibid., p. 32.
155. S. N. Hay, p. 32.

157. Ibid., p. 64.

158. S. N. Hay, p. 33.


161. Ibid., p. 24.

162. Ibid., p. 42.

163. Ibid.

164. Ibid., p. 87.

165. Ibid.

166. Ibid.

167. Ibid.

168. Ibid.

169. Ibid., p. 132.


171. Ibid., p. 330.

172. Ibid., pp. 44–56.

173. Ibid., p. 402.

174. Ibid.

175. Ibid., pp. 405–406.


177. Ibid., p. 92.

178. Ibid.


180. Tagore quoted in ibid.


182. For a good biography of Brahmobandhab, see P. C. Singha, *Upadhyay Brahmobandhab* (Uttapara, West Bengal: Amarendra Nath Cattopadhyay, n.d.).

The Reinterpretation of Dharma in Nineteenth-Century Bengal: Righteous Conduct for Man in the Modern World

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This essay, in slightly modified form, was originally written for and read to the symposium on Aspects of Religion in South Asia, conducted in the spring of 1971 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. It will also appear in a forthcoming publication of the symposium papers and is included here by permission of the editor of that volume. Inclusion of the essay in this volume, however, seems particularly appropriate for two reasons. It explores the nature of synthesis in nineteenth-century Bengali thought by examining in detail the change in one fundamental idea brought about by intellectual arguments of that period. Perhaps even more importantly, it examines the philosophical and psychological mechanism which laid the basis for acceptance in the Hindu community of ideas of patriotism, independence, the nation, and democracy. Seen in this light, the reinterpretation of dharma is an intellectual development having basic usefulness and importance to the Indian nationalist movement.

There are several important motifs in Hindu thought, the history of which may be traced in continuity from very ancient times. Among these, the concept of dharma has exerted a dominant influence on both the society and the individual. Conversely, in its treatment by scholars and sages from age to age, it has reflected the modifications of the social order and attendant changes in social usages with the flow of history. Examination of the various views of dharma in chronological sequence would provide a fascinating study of the expansion of social, religious, and political ideas by Hindu scholars. It is my purpose, however, to confine this study to the last major reinterpretation of dharma, which evolved in Bengal during the nineteenth century. As the quality and style of life changed under the impact of historical events, Hindu society everywhere in South Asia was compelled to reexamine its understanding of the order of things, but
nowhere were the motivation and response stronger than in Bengal, the center of British and Indian interaction. In the vigorous intellectual ferment of that remarkable century, the ancient concept of dharma was not discarded but, rather, accommodated to changing society. The manner and extent of its accommodation can be more thoroughly appreciated by reviewing a few simple, yet basic, aspects of the development of ideas of dharma prior to the modern period.

The ideas of dharma and its close associate, karma, are manifestations of a primary concern in Hindu thought from ancient times for maintenance of order. The emphasis in the Vedic period was placed upon upholding the cosmic order. Priests viewed the sacrifice as the vehicle by which this goal could be reached. In their zeal to sustain the cosmic balance, they developed an exceedingly elaborate ritual of sacrifice and gave primary significance to exact performance of the ritual. In an extension of this elementary idea, the conduct of human life was seen as contributing to preservation of the all-important order and, in fact, many relationships and interactions in human life were believed to be parallels to divine relationships and behavior. Just as complex rules developed around the ritual of the sacrifice in an early period, a detailed set of rules regulating human life was gradually formulated. This development was accompanied by a subtle shift of emphasis from exclusive concern with cosmic order. Order in human society itself became a valuable objective.

The code of ethical behavior which was the outgrowth of this process was given systematic treatment by a number of early scholars, most prominent among them the legendary sage Manu. His work, believed to have been composed early in the Christian era, classified the various dharmas into two main categories under which were listed an inventory of duties obligatory in each. The one category, varṇāśramadharma, concerned duties imposed upon an individual by the circumstances of his birth, i.e., caste, and by his stage in life, i.e., āśrama. A parallel can be seen between the earlier idea of sustaining the cosmic order by the proper performance of all the acts which supported it and the later system of varṇāśramadharma in which the world order, that is, the social order, was to be maintained through proper actions of the individuals who made up its component parts. Concern for social order had gained strength through the belief that the individual benefits directly from a society in which all services and actions are functioning in harmony. Thus, if the individual faithfully performed the duties obligatory upon him through his caste affiliation, he provided a necessary service to the society from which he benefited. If he carefully fulfilled the duties attached to his particular āśrama, he contributed to the moral and spiritual well-being both of society and of himself. Manu’s second category, sādhāraṇadharma, con-
sisted of duties imposed on every individual as a human being regardless of his position in society or his stage of progress in life. These duties were steadfastness, forgiveness, application, nonappropriation, cleanliness, repression of the sensibilities and sensuous appetites, wisdom, learning veracity, and restraint from anger.\(^4\) The righteous man was the individual who, with no thought of self, made rigorous efforts to perform all his duties in accordance with the sacred law.

The individual's chief concern, nevertheless, was with himself, for he was responsible for his action alone and not that of any other. His motivation did not lie in a sense of public responsibility but rather in an understanding of the importance of keeping the sacred law for the purpose of his own welfare. In one respect, as noted above, the proper performance of one's dharma secured the welfare of the social order and hence his own derived welfare. In the other respect, the strict performance of one's dharma secured his own spiritual well-being in the future experience of release from rebirth, \textit{mok\textasciitilde sa}. In whatever way it is viewed, the individual's concern was self-directed, though in no sense was it permitted to be selfish. "Hindu morality primarily aimed at the autonomy of the individual, i.e., at making him self-sufficient and self-dependent and free from all external bonds, physical and social."\(^5\)

This notion of dharma, allied as it was with the doctrine of karma, maintained an important place in subsequent Hindu speculative and religious thought. Moreover, its effect on the history of the Hindu people, while difficult to measure, cannot be cast aside. Ideas of dharma submerged individual personality in a fixed role on the one hand and, on the other, strengthened individualism along the lines of individual responsibility, individual action and, in a particular sense, detachment. Furthermore, they implied a worldview and historical perspective in which group roles were fixed and the interaction among them was a reflection of divine action. On this point Bankimcandra was to write in modern times deploring the view of ancient Hindus who saw human history as the history of the gods.\(^6\)

These primary characteristics and effects of the concept of dharma remained essentially unchanged during the course of the medieval centuries. Even reinterpretations which seemed to set forth sharply contrasting views revealed upon examination the same core of understanding.

Whether in speculative thought such as the teaching of \textit{vi\textsc{si}\textsc{t\textasciitilde}dvaita}, or in religious movements, as, for example, the cult of the god Dharma,\(^7\) or in purely social reaction such as that of Hindu society under Muslim rule, the concept of dharma remained little altered in scope at the end of the medieval period in comparison to that of the code of Manu. Dharma remained an intensely personal code of conduct, limiting the individual's
perspective to his immediate relationships and to his own progress in life. Obligations to society were those due family, caste, and immediate community. Political ideas consisted chiefly of the duties and obligations of the individual to the king (or, in the case of the king, his duties and obligations to his subjects). Spiritual fulfillment was pursued on the basis of one's own style of life based on the classical four āśrama. Furthermore, the entire code was constructed on a principle of relativity. What signified obligation for one man did not necessarily constitute another man's duty.

The devoutly religious man of late-eighteenth-century Bengal was surrounded by an unsurmountable barrier of duties, obligations, practices, and taboos which effectively cut him off from deep involvement in his fellow man. His entire way of life was directed inward as he strove to maintain his dharma. Nevertheless, not all men of late-eighteenth-century Bengal were devoutly religious. A substantial number of high-caste, educated, and influential Bengalis of that period had developed a worldly-mindedness which gave little place to concentration on observing rigid rules of righteous conduct. While having a certain emotional attachment to the traditional teachings of the fathers, many prominent Brahman families of Bengal had adopted a secular style of life molded by the necessities of position and survival under the Muslim power. At the time of assumption of authority by the British, there existed an elite society in Bengal whose tastes and manners were cosmopolitan, who were often more learned in Persian than in Sanskrit, and who were caught up in administrative and commercial affairs. Members of this group were quick to reach out for a place in the new system, not only in the areas of administration and commerce but in the spheres of culture and social exchange as well.

The elite Hindu society clearly perceived the urgency of accommoda-
tion and synthesis in the various arenas of life. They could look for success under the new authority only by becoming familiar with the methods and manners of the new rulers. Despite British efforts to bring a certain continuity to administrative organization and to suppress disruptive influences on the Hindu way of life, a sense of drastic change must have been apparent to those Hindu elite who were in direct contact with the British. The lifestyle of the British stood in direct contrast to Hindu culture. Perceiving the motivating influences of action—psychological, philosophical, moral—would have been formidable. In addition to meeting the practical demands of establishing a modus operandi, Hindu society had to meet the challenge of superior British technology. Although it took several decades for the significance of that challenge to penetrate Bengali intellectual circles, a superficial appreciation of the British technological superiority was evident from the beginning. The first ventures of
British missionaries into the field of education at the end of the eighteenth century added to the impetus toward learning, understanding and, where possible, making accommodation to British culture, worldview, and philosophy. It became an important means for disseminating British procedures in practical affairs. Thus the pressures to investigate and to assimilate the ideas of the new rulers were many.

The obstacles to smooth accommodation were many, also. The psychological crises brought about by a relationship of superiority versus inferiority were continuous throughout the history of British rule in India. In Bengal they covered a wide range of reactions from anglophilia to anti-British terrorism. The emotional problem was inherent in the situation and could never quite be overcome. A further obstacle to the synthetic process was intellectual: widely disparate points of worldview and attitudes toward life were held by the two cultures. Western views and Western thinkers were often misinterpreted because Hindu understanding and perception rested on Hindu assumptions and conditioning. In yet another area, the challenge to religious belief thrown out to Hindus at an early period by the Christian missionaries evoked from the beginning the strongest response from Hindu society. The resulting schism between orthodox and universalist groups was in one sense an obstacle to the process of synthesis, yet in other ways it was extremely helpful in that it provided the forum in which philosophical views argued out. It is, in fact, this aspect of nineteenth-century development that I would call one of the most influential factors in helping Bengalis to define their social and political views, the results of which have shaped the course of their recent history.

Several aspects of Hinduism in Bengal at the beginning of the nineteenth century should be noted here. There was, of course, that characteristic of Hinduism evident in many ages, a basic flexibility, a tendency to absorb new religious practices and symbols. Furthermore, Bengal had had a long history of religious heterodoxy. Several major reform movements in eastern India had threatened orthodox Brahmanism in centuries past. There was, on the other hand, an increasing lack of interest in piety on the part of certain privileged groups in Bengal. Their wealth and influence made it possible for them to exert considerable pressure for relief from the more irksome rules of dharma and to urge a liberal reformation of religious belief. Among the notable examples of their public efforts are the petitions of several rajas to Brahman courts for permission to arrange the marriages of widowed daughters. A final and particularly important condition of the period was the fact that a small number of Brahman families had become thoroughly secularized, thus making available respected channels for penetrating reinterpretations of basic Hindu
beliefs. From just such a family came Rammohun Ray, first of the great Bengali intellectual leaders of the nineteenth century.

In the year 1800, Rammohan, then twenty-six years of age, was occupied in looking after property belonging both to himself and to his father, a well-to-do Brahman landlord. His father was a Vaisnava and his mother Sakta, but the Rays seem to have been much like other high-caste families who had been engaged for several generations in serving the Muslim administration. Their tastes and lifestyle were entirely secular, and their chief interest lay in the pursuit of business affairs. It was Rammohan's early venture as a moneylender that brought him into close contact with members of the British community. For ten years he was associated with two of them, both civilians, either in an official capacity or by private arrangement. Early in this period, he wrote his first tract, Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin, in which he expounded his belief in monotheism. The tract suggests a fair knowledge of Muslim theology on Rammohan's part and testifies to his knowledge of Persian and Arabic before he learned Sanskrit. He studied the latter language, along with the Hindu śāstra, during his stay in Rangpur from 1809 to 1814. There is some evidence that the pandit with whom he studied, and who was a lifelong friend, initiated Rammohan into Tantrism. It was after he moved to Calcutta in 1815 that Rammohan had closer contact with Christian doctrine through his associations with Christian clergymen both in Calcutta and in Serampore. Writing of Rammohan's life in Calcutta, De comments that he entertained friends and distinguished visitors in his two Calcutta houses, a practice which brought him "in closer contact with a larger world, in which prevailed in those days three divergent types of culture, Hindu, Muslim and Christian."  

Rammohan's interest in religious inquiry was thoroughly stimulated through these contacts, although he maintained his former business and social interests too. From his investigation of the three religions emerged a strong universalist conviction which manifested itself mainly in his writings on the nature of God. His religious tracts, really begun in a major way at the age of forty, were devoted primarily to advocating worship of a Supreme Being without form or symbolic representation. While Rammohan is remembered chiefly for his preaching of the worship of one God and for his attacks on idolatry, his writings in that connection also contained the first significant change in the understanding of righteous conduct to be voiced in the nineteenth-century Hindu community.

In a strong statement in his Second Defense of the Monotheistical System of the Veds, Rammohan denounced the traditional Hindu doctrine of karma, pointing out the distinction between the Sanskrit term and the English word works. Yet at the same time he cited, in support of his
position, the great Hindu authorities Manu and Sankaracarya, who placed the highest value on knowledge of God through contemplation and worship:

To English readers, however, it may be proper to remark, that the Sunskrit word which signifies works, is not to be understood in the same sense as that which it implies in Christian theology, when works are opposed to faith. Christians understand by works, actions of moral merit, whereas Hindoos use the term in their theology only to denote religious rites and ceremonies prescribed by Hindoo lawgivers, which are often irreconcilable with the commonly received maxims of moral duty: as, for instance, the crime of suicide prescribed to widows by Ungeera, and to pilgrims at holy places by the Nursingih and Koorma Poorans. I do not, therefore, admit that works, taken in the latter sense (that is, the different religious acts prescribed by the Sastra to the different classes of Hindoo respectively) are necessary to attain divine faith, or that they are indispensable accompaniments of holy knowledge; for the Vedant in chapter 3rd, section 4th, text 37th, positively declares that the true knowledge of God may be acquired without observing the rules and rites prescribed by Sastra to each class of Hindoos; and also, examples are frequently found in the Ved, of persons, who, though they neglected the performance of religious rites and ceremonies attained divine knowledge and absorption by control over their passions and senses, and by contemplation of the Ruler of the universe, Munoo, the first and chief of all Hindoo lawgivers, confirms the same doctrines in describing the duties of laymen, . . . the illustrious Sankaracarya declared the attainment of faith in God, and the adoration of the Supreme Being, to be entirely independent of Brahanical ceremonies. . . .

The pursuit of the knowledge of God, through proper worship and exercise of self-restraint, was in Rammohan’s view the highest aim of the righteous man. Closely associated with this aim was the manifestation of righteous conduct in relation to one’s fellow man. This was not the older notion of occupational duties to be carried out conscientiously for the efficient working of society. Rather, Rammohan’s concept of service to one’s fellow man was associated with moral ideas of consideration, compassion, and the Golden Rule. One aspect of his views on worship formed a parallel in principle to the old idea of obligation to exact performance of caste duties, or even exact performance of the sacrifice, to maintain order and balance of the whole. Rammohan taught that each believer was responsible for performing his act of worship completely and with care. If he did not do so, the worship of none of the group could be complete.

In explaining the distinction between the popular understanding of karma and the Western notion of merit, Rammohan led to an important
distinction to be made within the context of Hinduism—the distinction between customs and fashions (traditions and usages) and scriptural authority. It was a distinction that was to be widely used throughout the century by men of various persuasions, and it was related both in origin and usage to another crucial principle of Rammohan’s, namely, the necessity of rational approach to textual criticism in the interpretation of the Scriptures. In his introduction to the Kena Upanishad, he wrote of his work:

It will also, I hope, tend to discriminate those parts of the Vedas which are to be interpreted in an allegorical sense, and consequently to correct those exceptional practices, which not only deprive Hindoos in general of the common comforts of society, but also lead them frequently to self-destruction, or to the sacrifice of the lives of their friends and relations.

The principles of criticism which Rammohan employed seem to have been based on rudimentary perceptions of rational judgment, lacking the scholarly refinements of a later day; but his courage in leading the way to a critical interpretation of the most sacred of Hindu texts was remarkable and its results far-reaching. Contrary to the practice of some later Bengali intellectuals, he made the sacred texts the sole authority for his arguments, but his method of interpretation made it possible for him to prove his point of view.

The teachings of Rammohan’s literature led away from a notion of righteousness based on performance of karma. Righteousness consisted in cultivating knowledge of the Supreme Being through adoration and contemplation. Along with this righteousness was a sense of moral social behavior which directed the individual’s thoughts and attitudes outward to an awareness and consideration of other men’s feelings and conditions. These ideas reveal a dramatic change of interpretation of righteous conduct. While individual responsibility remained strong and personal, the individual’s freedom of action and sense of social involvement were quite different. Men were obligated to act toward other men in a way they themselves wished to be treated. They were to respond to other men’s needs with compassion and sympathy. Dharma placed few other demands or restraints upon them than these attitudes toward others and the performance of the true worship of God. Although Rammohan’s message of moral conduct was liberal and opposed to the sanction of tradition, he was still careful, despite both his luxurious style of life and his writings on religious doctrine, to keep intact his caste standing, a consideration of greatest importance in his day.

Rammohan’s ideas on worship were put into practice in the meetings of the Brahma Sabha, which he founded, and later in those of its successor,
the small but highly influential Brahmo Samaj. The main lines of emphasis put forward by the Brahmo Samajists during subsequent decades were essentially those of Rammohan, but they were much more fully developed and, in some instances, considerably changed. The pursuit of the knowledge of the Supreme Being through worship and contemplation retained primary emphasis. In this connection, a great deal was said also about the cultivation of all the human faculties as part of the discipline of true worship. The attainment of the full potential of humanity was the result of a fruitful search for the knowledge of God. The man who had this quality of complete humanity had developed all the human faculties to their full potential, and he had complete control over them.

Involvement in the well-being of others was an equally strong principle of the Brahmo Samaj, and the ideal was transformed into practice through a variety of social services. The Brahmos were extremely active in the field of social reform, particularly as it related to the status and treatment of women, education, and medical service. The motivation, in part, was similar to Rammohan’s ethical ideal of the Golden Rule, but it had curious overtones of the older notion of a properly functioning society. In the first edition of Tattvavodhini Patrika, the official organ of the Brahmo Samaj, an editorial signed by “A” (undoubtedly Aksay Kumar Datta) pointed out the dependence of human beings on each other for survival, as compared to other animals. He argued that God had given man this nature, and the person who ignored that fact did so at his own peril. The essay challenged traditional views and customs on several levels. It completely rejected the traditional practice of asceticism implied in the third and fourth stages of āśrama dharma and equally endorsed the first and second stages. Man, it said, belonged in human society in an active way, not only because men depend on each other’s help in the material and temporal affairs of life but also because men depend on each other for the transmission of knowledge and wisdom. This particular line of argument operates somewhat on the “vested interest” aspects of varṇa dharma, that is the proper performance of man’s duty to uphold a society which, in return, offers him the necessities for maintaining his own life.

The Brahmo Samaj generally took a rather sympathetic view of the division of society into castes. But the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, a splinter group from the Brahmo Samaj, took a strong position against caste, advocating and performing intercaste marriages.

While the Brahmo Samaj carried forward ideas of Rammohan’s with regard to righteous conduct, it also revived aspects of older concepts which played a much more minor role in Rammohan’s writings. The idea of maintaining order and balance of the whole by the proper performance of worship, the idea of interdependence of human beings as an underlying
motive for service, and the emphasis put upon discipline of the human faculties and control of the passions—all were in harmony with age-old Hindu beliefs.

There were several other streams of religious and social thought in Bengal contemporaneous with the Brahma Samaj movement. In the first half of the century, the most radical group was Young Bengal, a faction of young men who formed themselves into the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge. Their early activities created a furore in Calcutta's upper-class Hindu society, the effects of which reverberated through the controversies of the remainder of the century. They held nothing of the old customs and taboos sacred. Their whole effort was directed toward denying completely their Hindu heritage. Although a few members of the faction converted to Christianity, most of them came to maturity with a satisfying, if somewhat curious, blend of a restored general belief in Hinduism with European rationalism. It was their youthful fascination with the latter that had resulted in their rebellious pranks against Hindu customs and institutions. Fondness for the philosophies of the West was to remain constant with others as well, who, coming after them, were also recipients of Western education.

The intellectual and social reforms of the Brahma Samaj and the radical actions of Young Bengal were not without counterreaction in conservative circles. The preaching of Rammohan Ray had aroused several prominent defenders of traditional Hinduism to response. In the days of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, the name of the poet and editor, Isvarcandra Gupta, became closely associated with the cause of the traditionalists who argued mainly in defense of the use of images and symbols in worship and social regulations in common usage, deriving from the doctrines of varṇāśramadharma and sādhāraṇadharm. They represented both the Sakta and Vaisnava sects of traditional Bengali Hinduism.  

In the latter part of the century, Vaisnavism itself was reinterpreted by a number of Bengali intellectuals, foremost of whom had been, in his youth, a protégé of Isvarcandra Gupta. The label of conservatism inherited from Isvarcandra has attached itself to the name of Bankimcandra Chatterji to this day. Yet a careful reading of his literature reveals an astonishing mixture of Saktism and Vaisnavism, traditional and Brahma Samaj doctrines, Sankhya philosophy and European positivism. From a point early in his career, his literature was devoted increasingly to the theme of Hindu nationalism, a theme which was supported by a defense of Hindu institutions. During the 1870s and 1880s, Bankimcandra was, perhaps, the most influential novelist and journalist of Bengal. When, finally, his religious monographs appeared, it is doubtful whether they
created the same sensation aroused by his earlier literature; yet they were to exert a strong influence on the development of twentieth-century thought through such channels as Aurobindo.

It was particularly Bankimcandra's monograph, *Dharmaratattva*, which provided the doctrine of nationalism used so widely in twentieth-century Bengal. But this monograph is also among the most significant of the nineteenth-century statements of dharma. Bankim's reinterpretation of the ancient concept brought together the various strands of nineteenth-century thought into a whole that reflected the synthesis of ideas which had been achieved by the last quarter of the century. Bankimcandra cannot be credited with great originality of thought. Most of his ideas can be traced to other sources. But he was able to write down those ideas with greater power and appeal, and in a somewhat more systematic fashion, than any of his Bengali contemporaries. Furthermore, his formulation of a systematic theology and moral code was more extensive than most works written in that century with the possible exception of the Rammohan Ray literature.

Bankimcandra's religious background was Vaisnava. In his monographs, the sole basis in Hinduism for his arguments was Vaisnava faith and doctrine. He supported that branch of Vaisnavism which views the world as primary reality and the relationship between the soul and the Supreme Being as dualistic. Without a fundamental perception of this kind, there would have been a certain difficulty in developing his doctrinal statement in *Dharmaratattva*. His delineation of the character of Krishna provided him with an example of his meaning in the definition of dharma, a method similar to some aspects of Christian teaching concerning Christ. On the theological level, Bankim's position was quite different from Rammohan's. It opposed the idea of a quality-less God and supported belief in an avatār, namely Krishna. It was founded upon the Gita and related texts, but owed little, or nothing, to the Vedanta.

To the interpretation of the ancient Vaisnava texts, however, Bankimcandra brought the same principle of textual criticism which had guided Rammohan's interpretation of the Scriptures. Bankimcandra had received a more extensive training than Rammohan in Western philosophical thought through the medium of Western education, and he borrowed widely, not only from its method but from its content as well. In this respect, he differed from Rammohan in that he took materials for developing his doctrine from a broad variety of sources. Quite contrary to Rammohan and the Brahmo Samajists, he was prepared to argue the value of certain traditional social views on the basis of custom and usage. But even though he generally supported caste as an efficient means of organizing society and the traditional role of women in society,
he was completely intolerant, as were these others, of the endless ritual demands and taboos established through the centuries by priestly Brahmans in the name of dharma.

Dharma, in Bankimcandra’s definition, was a matter of the heart. Oppressive social rules and taboos, he wrote, were a devilish invention, but “devotion to God, love for mankind, and quietness of heart, this, indeed, is dharma.” True dharma, he taught, was founded on purity of heart (cittasuddhi). This was the foundation of the Hindu religion, and whoever had this purity of heart needed no other religion. The manifestation of cittasuddhi, in Bankim’s view, was control of the senses, the sensual appetities. The theme of self-discipline, or firm control over the physical being, is very old in Indian thought. Like the idea of dharma itself, the ideal of self-control appears over and over in various guises in the many religious and philosophical systems indigenous to South Asia. In the nineteenth century, it was advocated by Rammohan, the Brahma Samaj, traditional Hinduism, and ultimately by later religious thinkers such as Bankimcandra, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, and Vivekananda. In this connection, Bankimcandra taught the necessity of cultivating all the human faculties, mental as well as physical, to attain manusyatva, one of the primary goals of dharma. On this point, he not only gleaned inspiration from the teachings of the Brahma Samaj, but also anticipated the philosophical basis of Rabindranath’s Mānuṣer Dharma.

From these general views of dharma, as well as from his investigation of the philosophies of Spencer, Comte, and Mill, Bankimcandra, in the later years of his life, formulated a doctrinal view of dharma which was set forth mainly in his monograph Dhrmmatattva and, in part, in the monograph Kṛṣṇacaritra. His teachings incorporated long-standing views of Hindu tradition and new ideas introduced from Western thought. In this synthesis, dharma was still, in fact, the principle by which the fully developed man conducted his life in the modern world:

The expression and maturing, the consistency and fulfillment, of all our physical and mental faculties in every part is dharma. This dharma is dependent on cultivation, and cultivation is dependent on actions [karma]. Therefore karma is the chief means to dharma. This dharma may be called duty [svadharma] [svadharmanapālan].

Dharma was not to be understood as having two categories, each with its separate code of obligatory duties. Although Bankimcandra supported the organization of society into castes, he did not endorse the distinction between varnadharmā (one’s duties to others) and aśramadharmā (one’s duty to oneself). Rather, Bankim he believed that man, in the cultivation of all his mental and physical faculties, having achieved completeness,
satisfied the demands of dharma in all its aspects and in one operation.\textsuperscript{33} In effect, he denied special rules of conduct applying to certain men according to the circumstances of their birth and taught a code of conduct to be followed by all men in all conditions, a code analogous to \textit{sād-hāranadharma}. The great example of the complete man was Krishna, who satisfied all the ideals of manhood—physical, mental, intellectual, and ethical. Following his example, modern man could attain these high ideals by keeping righteousness itself as his primary motivation:

The cultivation and fulfillment of all the faculties, indeed, is dharma. That you will do neither for yourself nor for others. You will do it because it \textit{is} dharma.\textsuperscript{34} Those faculties are related to oneself and to others; in their cultivation, one's own welfare and the welfare of others [are] accomplished together. Consequently, if you understand dharma in this way, removing the distinction between one's own welfare and another's welfare is an objective of the theory of culture.\textsuperscript{35}

Although one should perform the actions of dharma not with regard to self or to others but because they were dharma, he believed in a motivating agent which led the righteous man to maintain his high standard of conduct and self-development. That motivating agent he called \textit{priti}, love which is completely selfless and all-transcending. He identified this love with bhakti, which he defined as that state of mind existing when one has become a follower of God, having cultivated all the human faculties. The manifestation of \textit{priti} and bhakti in respect to man's outward conduct corresponds to an ethical principle Bankim claimed to derive from two sources: the words of the ancient Hindu \textit{śāstra}, "\textit{ātmavat sarvvabhūteṣu yāḥ paśyati sa paṇḍitah}"; and the words of Christ, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."\textsuperscript{36}

The objects of \textit{priti} were ranked by Bankim in their order of importance, and the actions associated with each level were commented upon. In each case the primary concern of action was for saving the particular object of \textit{priti}. He defined the four great stages of love, at once similar to Darwin's theory of evolution, Herbert Spencer's three stages of social development, and the Hindu four āśrama of life. The development of \textit{priti} began with love for oneself. The remaining stages were love of family, love of country and, last and highest of all, love of God. Although love of God was the highest stage of \textit{priti}, the highest level of its manifestation in earthly relationships was love of country, a theme based largely on Herbert Spencer's view of the importance of the life of the social organism over the life of its units.\textsuperscript{37} The presentation of his message, however, bore a great likeness to Vaisnava doctrine.

The result of this \textit{bhakti} is love for the world because God is in every being.
There is no contradiction between love for the world and love for oneself, love for one's own people, love for one's own country. To begin with, whatever conflict we feel arises because we do not exercise care to develop all of these faculties with lack of desire. That means that there is a lack of proper cultivation. Moreover, I have understood that saving one's own people is a much greater duty than saving oneself, and saving one's own country is much greater than saving one's own people. When bhakti toward God and love for all people are the same thing, it can be said that, apart from bhakti toward God, love of country is the greatest duty of all.\(^{38}\)

In Bankim’s definition, one’s duty in the matter of saving his country included giving his life for it when called upon to do so.

Bankimchandra’s nineteenth-century doctrine of dharma rested upon the ancient notion of a code of righteous duty for which each individual was completely responsible. Moreover, it restated the importance of the idea of karma, although the term was given a quite different meaning. It seems significant to later use of Bankim’s doctrine that, in writing of karma, he reemphasized a philosophical view which Hindus understood well and which had been denied by such nineteenth-century religious thinkers as Rammohan and leaders of the Brahmo Samaj. The definition and description of righteous duty were changed considerably, making all of man’s obligations acts of love toward God, expressed in acts of love toward his fellow men and country.

In his doctrine, however, was woven the Brahmo Samaj idea of cultivation of all the faculties. Rammohan’s concept of achieving one’s full potential of righteousness through adoration (that is, worship) of God, though Vedantist, was not very different in principle from Bankim’s Vaisnava view of bhakti as the essential element in the operation of dharma. These two systems of thought, moreover, emphasized a new aspect of righteous conduct. While still directed inward in the sense of teaching strong personal responsibility and negation of desire, they put a sharply different emphasis on human relationships. Actions and attitudes toward others were based on an ethical principle which included empathy, the feeling of care toward others that one experiences for oneself. This new dimension laid the foundation for the great social service programs conducted by a number of Hindu groups, chief among them the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission.

The new concept of relationships moved the circle of concern and responsibility beyond one’s own people, that is, family or community, to a much larger unit. The maximum unit indicated by Bankimchandra was the whole world. But in practical application, one could not save the whole world. One was responsible for saving the largest unit to which he belonged on the basis of cultural affinity. Thus emerged the concept of the
nation. The object of political action was defined, and, indeed, the completely foreign concept of political action was brought within the fold of traditional Hindu dogma. At a later period, Aurobindo was to write in emotional terms of Bankimcandra’s having given the mantra and converting a whole nation in a day; but the fact cannot be denied that with Bankim’s doctrine of dharma, an acceptable philosophical, religious, and psychological basis had been laid for the twentieth-century nationalist movement.39

Not the least important of these aspects was the influence exerted by the nineteenth-century religious writers in asserting that textual criticism on a rational basis was the only acceptable procedure for the intelligent man in approaching the interpretation of the scriptures. This principle was founded upon and, in turn, supported the idea of individual judgment. The growth of that idea among the educated people of India could only serve to strengthen not merely the emergence of views of self-determination but also the very acceptance of democracy as a form of government.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the synthesis was complete. Dharma remained intact, but redefined. With it was associated still the concept of karma, though drastically reinterpreted. Primary concern was still directed inward in the sense of responsibility for one’s actions and morality in an attitude of selflessness. But dharma was no longer compartmental. It was a moral principle which operated in all aspects of a man’s life, directing the whole and integrating all the noble faculties of humanity. It was motivated by love of God, a love manifested in one’s view of all other men in whom God resided. It demanded that one give himself completely to the service of all men who held the truth as he did and were bound together by this view of life. The preservation of that society held first priority over all other demands of life. In its breadth of scope, it could give place to Rabindranath’s concept of Universal Man or it could also support Hindu nationalism, depending on where the emphasis was placed. The events of history proved to be decisive. The emergence of the state fulfilled the greatest dharma of all apart from love of God—saving one’s owndcountry.

NOTES

1. The word dharma was used by various religious and philosophical systems of ancient India to denote a number of concepts and ideas having considerable difference of meaning. The word dharma is used in this essay to denote a code of ethics, social law, customs, duty—those principles, having divine origin and divine imperative, which were intended to guide each individual on his journey from birth to death.

2. The idea of emphasis on social order being an extension of the emphasis on
order in the sacrifice is, admittedly, just one of many views on the subject.


5. Ibid., p. 8.


7. For a description of this cult, see Shashibhusan Dasgupta’s *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946), pp. 297–396.


9. Ibid., p. 503: “His ancestors, in the latter half of the 18th century, served the Mohammedan rulers of Murshidabad and acquired property in some capacity or other.”

10. Ibid., pp. 514, 515.


12. To be understood as prayer and contemplation of the Supreme Being.


16. Among the more prominent of this number were Isvarcandra Vidyasagar and Bankimchandra Chatterji.

17. *BSCC*, p. 35.

18. S. K. De, op. cit., p. 528. Another of Rammohan’s contemporaries, Ram Ram Basu, expressed his inability to convert to Christianity in spite of his attraction to its teaching because of the importance to him of maintaining his caste standing. His *Rājā Pratāpādityacaritra* gives further evidence of the great importance he placed on caste affiliation.

19. For example, see Sridhar Nyayaratna’s sermon to the Brahmo Samaj printed in *Tattvabodhini Patrikā*, vol. I, no. 8, p. 61.

20. These two sects are not mutually exclusive.

21. The reinterpretations of Vaisnavism in Bengal over the past five centuries are manifold.


23. One intriguing aspect of Bankimchandra’s literature is the Vaisnava doctrine of his monographs and the Sakta appeal of his novels. While the latter have certain Vaisnava elements, the overwhelming religious and emotional appeal is made through the *devi*.

24. His position on Hindu widow remarriage was based on this argument.

25. Bankimchandra, like Rammohan, was a Brahman.
28. The completely developed state of all the qualities of humanity.
29. Rabindranath, a Brahmo, undoubtedly was influenced to some extent by Bankim’s writings.
30. These were foremost among the many Western philosophers he quoted.
31. *Duty* is Bankim’s word. He wrote the English word in parentheses after the Bengali word *svadharmmapālan*.
34. The italicizing of the word *is* translates the Bengali emphatic particle.
36. Ibid.
39. An interesting analogy suggests itself between Bankim’s doctrine of nationalism based on dharma and the relationship of dharma and *mokṣa* in ancient Hindu thought. The role of dharma in providing a basis for the idea of *mokṣa* (i.e., as defined in the Upanishadic context, freedom) is, in part at least, that of demonstrating the necessity of freedom by creating awareness of being in bondage. National freedom could, in part, be seen as necessary on the basis of public and private bondage; but this perception could be greatly strengthened by the view of dharma as a binding obligation toward one’s country from which he would gain release only as the country achieved freedom.