Reform and Reinterpretation of Hinduism in Nineteenth Century Bengal
A Rooftop View

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So far as I can see there are four key words or expressions in the title to this essay that need some preliminary clarification. While some may justly begin with 'reform', 'reinterpretation' or even 'Hinduism', I personally would prefer beginning with the expression 'Nineteenth Century Bengal' for two related reasons. First, while reform and reinterpretation of Hinduism occurred in other provinces as well, there is something distinctive about what occurred in nineteenth century Bengal. There is a historical conjunction here of two important elements, the nineteenth century and Bengal, each of which is important in its own way but went on to produce certain unique experiences when historically combined. I am, in other words, trying to suggest that, within the history of modern Hindu hermeneutics, there is a certain significance to nineteenth century Bengal that is not comparable with say, eighteenth century Maharashtra or for that matter, even twentieth century Bengal itself. In the eighteenth century for instance, Bengal had not been effectively colonized and in Maharashtra, the rule of the Peshwas continued until the first quarter of the nineteenth century, with the result that the interpenetration of two cultures and political economies had not begun to take significant effect. By the twentieth century, on the other hand, the keenness for reform and cultural reinterpretation lost much of its power and public appeal; a fact that has been put down to the intensification of Indian nationalism.

In hindsight, we can justly claim that there was an inverse relationship between the success of social and religious reform movements and the deepening of nationalist thought. Nationalism suspected all attempts at reform, whether initiated by the state or individuals and more often than not argued that political freedom

should precede social emancipation. Here it is also important to remember that during the nineteenth century, Hindu Bengalis were a fairly mobile community and as virtually the second colonizers, spread Bengali cultural ideas, motifs and symbols to many parts of upper India. At some places within India, the Hindu renaissance and reform movements reveal palpable tensions between the local ways of life and Bengali cultural hegemony. Public anger against anglicization and the adoption of alien ways of life were often directed equally against the local Bengali teacher or Head Clerk and his English superior.

The term 'reform' is actually problematic. Contrary to common perceptions, it does not have a very long history. On the basis of my knowledge of at least two major Indian languages, Hindi and Bengali, I should like to hazard the guess that there was probably no equivalent for this term in the pre-modern history of these languages. The currently fashionable '*samskar*' in Bengali and '*sudhar*' in Hindi, probably came into vogue and were certainly widely accepted, only in colonial India. Also, it is current historiography that projects religious figures like the Buddha, Kabir, Nanak or Caitanya as 'reformers', not their contemporaries and certainly not these historical actors themselves.

In the context of modern Hinduism, the term 'reinterpretation' too is far from clear and unambiguous. Ordinarily, textual reinterpretations as commonly occurred in nineteenth century India, vitally touch on the question of authority. What are the definitional boundaries of tradition and on what interpretative axis must reformers and re-interpreters base themselves? Also, are texts and traditions interminably stretchable or were there practical limits to this? Could a scholar or reformer relate to a text across a historical chasm of several hundred years? These were some of the problems that came up before activists and the modern Hindu and in some cases, one has to admit, they could not come up with satisfactory answers. Their problems were compounded by several factors. Operatively, there was no one text that could be taken to be the authority for Hindus for social, religious and cultural matters. Here, it would be somewhat misleading to cite the traditional Hindu reverence for *śruti* for, one of the distinctive features of the religious history of modern India was the weakening of the unity of scripture (*ekavākyatā*) that characterized traditional society. Particularly in Bengal, this had hardly been an operative reality, partly because of the relative weakness of the Vedic tradition and partly because the early arrival

of modern education had further eroded faith in scripture and revelation. Throughout the nineteenth century, Bengal was to be the seat of the Vedantic not Vedic revival, whereas the opposite had been the case in the Punjab, under the Arya Samaj. The weakening of the authority of the *śruti* can also be gauged from the fact that in Bengal and in some other parts of India, a *smṛti* text like the *Bhagavadgītā* attained near canonical status.

Finally, we negotiate the term 'Hinduism' as distinct from the term *Hindu dharma* or *Sanātana dharma*. Here, the first question to ask us is whether or not like 'reform', this too was a word of recent coinage. Hindu thinkers outside Bengal such as the Brahman reformer from early nineteenth century Maharashtra, Vishnu Baba Brahmachari, preferred using the term *Sanātana dharma*, which incidentally, is not directly connected with the part ethnic, part cultural term, Hindu. The prefix *'Sanātana'* was rather meant to convey the universal and eternal nature of religious truths. Some scholars are now of the opinion that the term Hinduism originated with Raja Rammohun Roy. This is not fortuitous because in the intellectual and cultural history of modern Bengal and India, the Raja was one of the earliest to obtain a copious knowledge of the English language and of the contemporary west. The connection between his exposure to the modern west and his attempt to identify the Hindus with one, homogenized religion (Hinduism) is historically very significant because through this, Rammohun wanted to project the Hindus as a monolithic religious community like the Muslims and Christians at a time, when such unity was considered to be symptomatic of the moral and social progress that a people had made. Identifying the Hindus with a common religion was also vital to the entire reformation. In the nineteenth century, reform was meant to not only bring about progressive changes in religion but also forge together the nascent nation of the Hindus. Hence, any reformist activity had to be seen as touching the lives of all Hindus. This essay therefore argues that reform and a redefined Hinduism critically determined each other.

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There is, of course, an obvious answer to why recounting the history of modern Hinduism ought to begin with Bengal. The province was the first to be colonized, leading to an early and intense exchange of ideas and values between two cultures that were removed from each

other not only in terms of material development but also ways of looking at man and the world. Bengal was not only the first seat of Orientalism which awakened pride and nostalgia for a 'golden' past but was also the province to first feel the impact of the modern episteme; of modern education which threw a moral challenge before indigenous knowledge systems. The historical factor which also contributed to the uniqueness of Bengal is the rapidity with which the political transition was effected in this province When compared to their counterpart in Maharashtra, the Hindu ruling classes in Bengal perceived greater powerlessness for they had had been displaced for a longer time. Under colonialism, they had been only further marginalized by the radical changes to the economy and society. In the hundred years or so following the battle of Plassey, upper class Hindus of Bengal were systematically deprived of their economic power and commercial entrepreneurship. Further, with the spread of modern university education, the new Bengali middle classes, having lost their roots in modern agriculture, finance or industry, were reduced to the life of petty clerks in government and European mercantile offices. From the perspective of reform and reinterpretation of culture, this was an important development. In provinces such as the Punjab or Maharashtra, where British power arrived later and under slightly different circumstances, the political and economic transformation was not as rapid. Both these provinces had enjoyed a degree of autonomy from Indo-Muslim rule, especially after the seventeenth century and the ruling classes therein had a greater sense of involvement with the changes being produced in society. The Peshwas in Maharashtra, for example, had already authorized widow marriages among upper class Hindus which may be contrasted to the great public controversy that broke out in Bengal when the British passed a law in 1856 enabling widows to marry. By comparison the greater controversy generated in Bengal was due to a variety of reasons. For one, it reminded the Hindu elite and intelligentsia of their utter powerlessness in law making and not surprisingly, the widow marriage campaign was seen by its opponents not only as a move to offend traditional custom and sensibilities but also as an undue intervention by an alien ruling class in the internal social arrangement of Hindu society. In the coming years, this class was to oppose all social change attempted through statute. The question of reforming one's own society came to be interpreted as a matter affecting the self-determination of the Hindus. Ironically enough, in this respect, the Hindus of Bengal acquired a particularly bad name

because some of the major instances of social legislation in the nineteenth century such as the abolition of Sati, civil marriages, or widow marriages among upper caste Hindus were introduced by them. Reformers in Bengal, on the one hand, were indeed aggrieved at the fact that social initiatives to set their own house in order were now being seized by the British; on the other hand, they were also of the view that such measures represented a practical blue print for the progressive reordering of their society. This also leads us to the paradox that was distinctive to modern Bengalis. In hindsight they would appear to be among the greatest supporters of British rule but also their strongest critics.

The Ideological Basis of Reform

In nineteenth century Bengal as elsewhere, there was no fixed or commonly accepted definition of social reform. Sometimes very large and inclusivistic definitions were given of it, especially by those influenced by current western thought and practice. Raghunath Purushotam Paranjype, India's first Senior Wrangler at Cambridge[1] once drew attention to the fact that in the contemporary west, the term 'social reform' was broad enough to include matters like hours of work, workers' insurance cover and the abuse of child labour in organized or unorganized industry. On the other hand, some expressed unhappiness over the fact that the entire issue of social reform had been somewhat trivialized by including in its purview, matters like the objects of fashion. However, generally speaking, reformers were extremely choosy about the subject on which to agitate and here what mattered more was not the intrinsic merit of the issue but what value it had for the emerging Hindu discourse. Humanitarian concerns were not always the inspiration behind acts of reform. Why else was the evil of female infanticide, noticed as early as 1800, never seriously taken up by Hindu reformers and its abolition in the 1870s, attributable to the intervention made by British officials themselves? On the contrary, there was a disproportionate emphasis on the marriage of upper caste widows, even when they formed an insignificant number in respect of the total Hindu population in British India. The difference in attitude in both cases is explained by a common cause namely, the values entertained by a patriarchal society and the reform movement itself being so dominated by upper caste male concerns. For most Hindu reformers advocating widow marriage, the preferred subject was the child

widow, not women widowed in adulthood. What was at stake here
was the social value put on virginity though people also highlighted
the lifelong hardships that a child widow would have to put up with
if left unmarried. The marriage of child widows also had the
advantage of bypassing in most cases, the question of the women's
choice. In any case, widow marriages did not prove particularly
popular in a province like Bengal, not because society here was
traditionaly more conservative but because Hindu nationalism made
the widow's chastity, a cultural symbol of Hindu resistance. More
widow marriages were celebrated in coastal Andhra than in Bengal,
notwithstanding the fact that leading Andhra reformers like
Kandukuri Viresalingam were deeply inspired by developments in
Bengal. Ironically enough, in princely states, where Indian
nationalism was relatively weaker and developed over a longer
period of time, the history of social reform was generally more
successful.

Broadly speaking, modern reform and reformers were driven by
positivistic notions of time and history, imbibed from the west. In
Enlightenment Europe, it generally came to be believed that man
was capable of interminable progress and that this had been manifest
in both the working of nature and the will of god. Until about the
1860s, the most powerful religious ideology in western Europe was
that of deism that likened the world to a mechanical clock with god
as the clockmaker. The universe was perfect in its conception and
all that was required to realize its perfection was an active and willing
intervention by man, as God's chosen representative. It was,
however, accepted that not all men would be equally able to gauge
god's intentions for man and hence it was assumed that in society,
these would be rightly interpreted and executed by the chosen. In
the nineteenth century, it was precisely this task that a reformer hoped
to carry out. 'Reform' and 'help' were both very self-conscious
activities that such people willingly ascribed to themselves. The
reformer was instrumental to the successful implementation of god's
will for man on earth and he assumed the moral responsibility for
the development chronology that was now beset in the very paradigm
of reform.

The significance of such ideas emerges more clearly when pitted
against traditional Hindu notions—for lack of a better word—of
reform and change. The first point of some importance is that the
Hindu understanding of time is significantly different. It is at best
spirally linear that is to say that while time did move forward, it did

not do so directly but through a spiral movement. Now, this is very different from the understanding of time in contemporary notions of history where time moves directly and irreversibly in one direction with the result that we witness a succession of events, each unique to itself. In the Hindu view, by comparison, this uniqueness is lost in the possibility of circular repetitiveness. For a reformer, with the presuppositions he had, the latter could be problematic for one of the presumptions here was that the act of reform was a progressive step forward towards the ultimately realizable perfection in man. A modern reformer, in other words, would be extremely confused and exasperated by the possibility of the ills—which he hoped he had eradicated—returning with surprising regularity. Finally, a tendency common to modern reform was judging matters by their practical usefulness. Rammohun Roy, a pioneer in respect of social and religious reform, believed that religion had to have functional validity in society, which is to say that religion could be seen to be an adjunct of society and not as an autonomous category in itself. This is indeed different from the traditional Hindu understanding which saw religion as standing outside society. Even in modern India, a Vedantin like Swami Vivekananda consistently maintained that higher things like religion or spirituality could not be judged in terms of everyday social life. Religion was timeless and transcendental, society and man's material life were temporal and transitory. Pre-modern figures like Kabir or Nanak perceived equality between man and man essentially in spiritual terms, as children born of the same God rather than on the basis of any doctrines of social egalitarianism. A modern reformer like Rammohun was also unique in suggesting that besides securing social comfort, religions could also be reformed with an eye on the 'political advantage' they could bring about. For the times, this was indeed a novel thing to say.

The Distinctiveness of Bengal

The history of Bengali reform appears to have undergone a radical change within the space of a few decades after Rammohun. Whereas the Raja had tended to evaluate the worth of religion from the point of view of its social advantages, his successors rejected this idea altogether. The important reformer and public figure from Maharashtra, Mahadev Govind Ranade, once accused the Bengalis of dwelling far too much on the subject of religious reform at the expense of the social. This is indeed borne out by the attitude of

Bengali reformers in the 1860s and the '70s. At a public lecture that he delivered in Bombay in 1867-68, the Brahmo leader Keshabchandra Sen admitted:

> I do not belong to that school of secular reformers according to whom Indian reform means making stronger garrisons on the frontier, irrigation, female education , intermarriage and widow marriage. If you wish to regenerate this country, make religion the basis of all your reform movements.[2]

Such thoughts were echoed by a host of Bengali reformers including Swami Vivekananda. This apparent backsliding in respect of social reform is in a way surprising since the strength of the conservative opposition in Bengal was not any stronger than in Maharashtra or other places in south India. Bengal did not have to put up with fiats issued from Sankaracaryas excommunicating reformers for daring to attend widow marriages and caste-friction in this province, at least in the nineteenth century was never as intense as it was at some other places. It is also reasonable to assume that relatively speaking, contemporary Bengal would have a larger proportion of graduates or men generally on the side of change and reform. The tendency to project the religious as the more important category is, in a way a reversion to the older argument about the inner spiritual unity of man taking precedence over any social theories on egalitarianism. But more importantly perhaps, this also reflects the argument, first originating in Bengal, that the Hindus were quintessentially spiritual and it was this spirituality that would support them in a modern world, characterized by rapid material change. That India could teach spirituality to the west in lieu of knowledge concerning arts, crafts or industry is an idea strongly put forth by Vivekananda in the 1890s; what is not so well known however, is that this argument has been endemic to modern Bengali thinkers since the time of Rammohun. Here it is important not to lose sight of the fact that his argument about the social determination of religion notwithstanding, Rammohun was a leading figure in the revival of Vedanta in modern India, which, in its outlook is quite non-utilitarian.

That religion, albeit of the 'reformed' variety, could be the basis of Indian unity is an idea clearly implied even by Rammohun for it is he who was the first to claim in modern India that the esoteric knowledge of the *sruti* ought to be opened up to *sudra*s and women as well. Thereby, the Raja aimed at some kind of spiritual and not social democracy for he was otherwise, a scrupulous follower of caste rules.

In Vivekananda's writings and speeches, the monism of Vedanta is made to acquire both an ethical and social dimension. Vedanta is now made more 'practical', which is to say that rather than be pure speculative metaphysics, it was also to include some sense of social responsibility. Rather than encourage world–renunciation, it was to preach an activist involvement in the world. This was indeed a courageous innovation considering that the relatively more powerful sub-tradition within Vedanta, the *advaitic* non-dualism of Śankara, had contributed significantly to break up an older synthesis of *jñana* and *karma* (*jñānakarmasamuccaya*). The important thing about the Vedantic revival in Bengal was that while mostly situating itself within the spiritual lineage of Śankara, it also revealed certain significant departures from the same. Especially, a man like Vivekananda departed from Śankara in arguing that practical, personal experience (*anubhava*) was the authority to be put even before the authority of *śruti*. In a general sense, this represents the philosophical turn against metaphysics, beginning again in contemporary Europe and reaching new heights with the social theories of Comte and Spencer.

The ethical redefinition of the Vedanta too has to be understood in this light. One of the recurring criticisms directed against Hinduism in modern times was that it had no clear notion of morality as distinct from religion. The neo-Vedantic tradition wanted to actively contest this view by alluding to the moral possibilities within Vedanta. Vivekananda argued that the most effective moral system could be built on the basis of an inner unity of souls. People would be morally motivated when they realized that helping others was actually helping oneself because the self was ultimately not different from the other.

Concluding Remarks

It would have to be said that within the history of social and religious reform movement in modern India, Bengal occupies an important place not merely because chronologically, these movements arrived here first but on account of the fact that some of the most critical conflicts and tensions within these movements were also manifest here. Bengal was not only the province to first support state-sponsored reform, beginning with the abolition of *sati* in 1829 but also to launch the most reactionary agitation against it, as apparent from the Age of Consent Bill controversy in 1891. Thinkers and writers like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya, most perceptibly on the side of a rational and liberal religion, sharply criticized the state

and non-Hindu reformers like Behramji Malabari for trying to persuade the state to pass laws against premature marriages and the consummation of marriages among Hindus. The Bengali reformer, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who himself solicited the intervention of the colonial government over the remarriage of Hindu widows or the abolition of polygamy, was sharply critical of government's intentions of passing the Consent Act. And Vivekananda, who would be deeply moved by the tears of a widow, was one of the consistent opponents of widow marriages. Such paradoxes, evidently, have to be explained not so much in the light of personal weaknesses or inconsistency as by the contradictions inherent in the times. Though deeply influenced by the moral and social thinking of the west, Bengali reformers and interpreters of religion and society were equally firm in their rejection of such elements of thought or practice, which, in their opinion, were unsuitable to Indian conditions. Thus in his reinterpretation of Hindu society and culture, Bankimchandra constructively used the social theories of August Comte but rejected the 'godless' qualities in Positivism. Activism and a moral responsibility towards the other did indeed become an important part of neo-Hinduism in Bengal but they were often subordinated to categories of god and religion. Bankimchandra, possibly the first to produce a commentary on the *Gītā* in modern times, felt that patriotic duty to the country could be best rendered through the adoration of God. This is significantly different from the position of Tilak whose *Gītārahasya* takes the path of selfless, ethical action (*karma yoga*) to be the supreme message in the text.

The dominant school of thinking on reform within Bengal was most seriously challenged by the emergence of leaders like B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, Periyar, who essentially agitated on social issues like caste and found religion to be the greatest impediment in the path of social reorganization and improvement. It is a fact of some significance that Bengali reform movements were primarily centred on issues concerning women and not caste and that Bengal produced no leader of an all-India standing in this respect. This was a distinctiveness determined both by the traditional ordering of Bengali society where caste differences were relatively less sharper and the fact that educated Bengalis reacted more strongly to western allegations regarding the state of Hindu women. Without stretching the argument too far, I should like to suggest that this possibly has some roots in Bengal's traditional religious ideology, strongly under the influence of *sakta* and *tantric* cults. These cults were known to

be respectful towards women though not necessarily in the social sense. However, in an age particularly known for its creative hermeneutics, a metaphysical value placed on female power (Śakti) could well be transformed into a social empathy for women in society. I find it significant that Raja Rammohun Roy, a pioneer in respect of woman-related reform and in championing the right of property in respect of woman, was a *tāntric* in personal life.

REFERENCES

Basu, P.S. (compiled), (1940), *Life and Works of Keshub Chunder Sen,* Calcutta.

NOTES

1.   The first Wrangler was Ananda Mohan Bose, a man with Brahmo leanings.
2.   Quoted in Basu, P.S. (1940), p. 146.