

Religious experiments in colonial Calcutta

Modern Hinduism and *bhakti* among the Indian middle class

Calcutta, 1874: it was one hundred and nine years since the British East India Company had taken possession of Bengal, sixteen years since the British Raj officially took over its rule and seventy-three years before Indian independence.¹ A vast and ancient civilisation lived under the rule of the inhabitants of a small North Atlantic island, who had managed to project their culture, their religion—and their economic interests—into almost every corner of the globe. It was a time when India was the jewel in the crown of the British Raj and Calcutta had been transformed into a Eurasian metropolis second only to London itself. 1874 was also the year when Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, a Vaishnava of the devotional (*bhakti*) school of Chaitanya (1486–1534), was born; he died sixty-three years later in 1937. The span of his lifetime was entrenched in circumstances and events that occurred in and around the city of Calcutta and came to shape the foundation of what is generally known as ‘modern Hinduism’ (the term ‘Hinduism’ will be discussed more in detail at the end of the chapter). For this reason, these years will serve as a suitable focus for this chapter.²

The year 1874 came round at a time of transition in India, when events that began more than a century earlier had started to produce novel patterns of change. In 1757 the Battle of Plassey had paved the way for total domination, as Britain won over French influences in the East. By 1772 the Mughal Emperor Shah Alaam II (1728–1806) had ceded Bengal, Orissa and Bihar to the East India Company; Bengal had become the first region of India to experience British rule and Calcutta had been named the capital of British India (remaining so until 1911). Subsequent years witnessed the unfolding of colonial culture as well as indigenous reactions for and against it. The period

1 This chapter is a revised and enlarged version of the introduction to the author’s doctoral dissertation (Sardella 2010), which is currently under publication.

2 For studies of modern Hinduism see, for example, Sharma 2002, Radice 1998 and Smith 2003.

between 1815 and 1914 came to be regarded as Britain's 'Imperial Century', and the years from 1837 to 1901 as the 'Victorian Era'. The Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 marked the end of the East India Company's autocratic rule and the beginning of control by the British government itself. In 1876 Queen Victoria was named Empress of India and in 1920 Gandhi was elected leader of the Congress Party. In 1939 Britain's colonial domains encompassed 23.9 per cent of the earth's surface (or 13,100,000 square miles), and comprised a total population of 470,000,000 persons (Townsend & Langsam 1941: 19). Throughout this period, Britain's political, linguistic and cultural influence in South Asia profoundly linked India to the rest of the world, until colonial rule ended in 1947.

In the West, the period between 1874 and 1937—the years spanning Bhaktisiddhānta's life—witnessed a series of watershed events that permanently transformed the cultural, geopolitical, technological and scientific face of the earth. Just prior to this period, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had published *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Charles Darwin had released *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and Alfred Nobel had invented dynamite (1867). And within this period, Alexander Graham Bell patented the telephone (1876), Paris hosted the first international electrical exhibition (1881), Karl Benz produced the first automobile (1885), Sigmund Freud published the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), the Wright brothers achieved success at Kitty Hawk (1903) and Albert Einstein published his groundbreaking theory of special relativity (1905). Then the First World War (1914–18) cast a veil of senseless darkness over the world, and its aftermath witnessed the rise of communism, fascism and Nazism. India itself was influenced by these global events on several levels, but nowhere more visibly than in Calcutta, which at around the turn of the twentieth century had become one of the major cross-roads of the world.

Colonial Calcutta

By the time of Bhaktisiddhānta's birth, Calcutta had risen from rural anonymity to become the 'second city' of the British Empire: larger and more magnificent than either Edinburgh or Glasgow and the equivalent in beauty, magnificence and population to famed London and Paris. But like all metropolises, Calcutta also had a darker side. Rudyard Kipling described Calcutta as 'a city of dreadful night, filled with poverty, famine, riot and disease, where the cholera, the cyclone, the crow come and go. . . by the sewerage rendered

fetid, by the sewer made impure, by the Sunderbunds unwholesome, by the swamp moist and damp' (Kipling 1890: 234).

To convey a sense of this city's unique mingling of two starkly contrasting milieus as they converged at the end of the nineteenth century, a brief description will follow, freely adapted from two Western memoirs of that time: Zebina Flavius Griffith's *India and Daily Life in Bengal* (Griffin 1896: 66–7) and Anna Harriet Leonowens's *Life and Travel in India* (Leonowens 1884):

The capital city of Calcutta contained a population of approximately one million people and was organized in such a way that British and native districts were kept carefully apart. The British sector extended five miles along the Hoogly (Ganges) River and included a nobly appointed and much-frequented esplanade, which divided the town from Fort William. Along one side of this esplanade were the Government House, Town-hall, Treasury and High Court, and on the opposite side was Fort William, with the fine steeple of the Baptist Cathedral rising just beyond it, high above the surrounding foliage. Then, after passing under a triumphal archway, one emerged onto a spacious grassy area, famously known as the Maidan. Here all the principal roads converged and one was surrounded on all sides by an elegant display of stately architecture. This was the fashionable suburb known as Chowringee, which in every respect made Calcutta worthy of the appellation 'City of Palaces'. All the houses were built in the European style, three or four stories in height and most of them were connected by handsome terraces or open sunny balconies. The more opulent ones had shady verandas or high carriage-porches supported by Romanesque pillars, while some were rendered even more attractive by lush flower gardens with fine fruit trees.

Yet even this rather regal section of town abounded with contrasts and contradictions. Beautiful carriages containing personages of the highest social rank travelled down the boulevard along-side rickety old street-cars, ox-carts, rickshaw-wallahs and the like. On the avenue, the most magnificent European stores were found located within a few meters of poor Bengali natives peddling their wares from small, meagerly appointed shops. And right next door to the Eden gardens, with its electric lights, fountains, and exquisite music, were the shanties of native sweets vendors, who could be seen leaning over pots of boiling oil, making their confections. On any given day within the same vicinity one could see a mingling of English bureaucrats going about at breakneck pace, Chinamen arrayed in red and green silks, Zamindars adorned in spotless white clothes with jewelled chains of heavy gold wrapped around their necks, Parsees walking tall and proud in peculiar stove pipe hats, Burmese wearing red silk handkerchiefs wrapped tight around their heads,

zenana missionaries, Catholic padres and many more. Scattered all through this diverse crowd of people were the watermen with their leather bags of water on their hips, sprinkling the streets to keep down the dust.

In stark contrast to the grandeur of the British district stood the native quarter, known as 'Black Town', the residence of more than three-quarters of Calcutta's entire population. The severe transition between these two opposites was made even more extreme by the architectural pretensions of the one and the crude mud or bamboo habitations of the other. And yet within this relatively impoverished section of the city, with streets all narrow, unpaved and teeming with excessive population there could be found no less than twenty bazaars, well stocked with commodities, goods and articles from all corners of the world: rare and valuable products of the Indian loom; shawls and paintings from Cashmere; kinkaubs from Benares; teas and silks from China; spices, pearls and precious stones from Ceylon; rupees from Pegii; coffee from Java and Arabia; nutmeg from Singapore; the list could go on and on. Here the air was filled with the fragrances of vanilla, saffron, cardamom and sandalwood, all mingled with the scent of hot, newly prepared Bengali sweets, rich with cream and ghee; and here could be heard at all times the principal cry of the market: 'Come please Memsahib, I've got it!' Walking among these relatively few and scattered 'Memsahibs' were the throng of Hindus: graceful nut-brown maidens tripping gracefully with rows of water-jars nicely balanced on their heads; dark-hued young men, clean, washed and robed in pure white, laughing, talking or loitering about; Westernized *babus* sauntering along, dressed in handsome Oriental costumes, but with European stockings and shoes; common street-women, brilliantly attired dancing-girls; *brāhmins*, sepoy, fakirs and swamis, bedecked in various costumes, conversing in manifold tongues and dialects. And, above all, there were strolling jugglers, snake-charmers and fortune tellers, plying their curious arts and completing the picture of an Oriental bazaar. It appeared as if this teeming flow of humanity had been passing and gurgling through the streets of these native bazaars for all the centuries of foreign rule, unchanged in type, character, feeling, religion and occupation. Side by side with the Churches of the Brahma Samaj and the eloquence and sharp intellect of the educated Bengalis and other cultivated natives of Bengal, there were the temples of the goddess Kali and the large festivals in honour of Jagannath. Remarkably enough, among the majority of the native population of Calcutta as well as in the rest of India, the European influence was hardly felt at all.

The *bhadralok*

The stark socio-cultural and religious division between the British and Indian populations represented by the ‘white’ and ‘black’ towns, here vividly depicted by Griffith and Leonowens, had a long history. The early development of colonial administration and trade created the need for a new middle class, known as the *bhadralok* (literally ‘gentle or refined people’). The *bhadralok* were mainly composed of Bengali Hindus rather than Muslims. It initially included wealthy landlords and later incorporated journalists, teaches, and lawyers, who were recruited from the peasant gentry. The *bhadralok* were respectfully called ‘*babus*’, a title that came to refer to their acquired fluency in English. They worked as brokers to British traders, as interpreters and mediators in jurisprudence, and as assistants in matters of economic and political administration. Some of their defining traits were a tendency towards secular and liberal views, a strong commitment to education—the basis for their social and economic success—and a propensity to assimilate British habits, culture and taste (Bhattacharya 2005). The latter was to some degree the result of the widely accepted opinion among colonial and indigenous educators that Bengalis could improve culturally, socially and ethically only by discarding key elements of their native traditions.

The *bhadralok* preferred managerial and skilled jobs, which distinguished them from the occupations of the *chotalok*, the ‘small people’. The latter was mostly represented by servants, cooks and sweepers from Bengal and Orissa, as well as large numbers of immigrants from Bihar, the United Provinces and other parts of India. They were divided into various ethnic and linguistic groups, and collectively developed their own peculiar forms of religious worship, distinguished from those of the *bhadralok* (Thomas 1997: 25–32). Apart from the *bhadralok* and *chotalok*, a large portion of the black town’s population was constituted of Muslims shopkeepers, artisans, moneylenders and labourers. The *bhadralok* lived socially and culturally removed from the *chotalok* and Muslims, and only broke from their aloofness during occasional philanthropic initiatives, which became more frequent as the nineteenth century moved forward.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the aspiring youth of the Hindu middle class filled the ranks of the *bhadralok*. Eager for employment in civil and professional services, they were carefully screened for admission, on the basis of rigorous examinations, into the few existing public schools. Institutions such as Calcutta University (1857) were created in order to train colonial workers who could serve the interests of the East

India Company, and later the Raj, with loyalty and expertise, and who could work as professionals in a Western secular environment. Missionary schools were also popular among the *bhadralok* due to the quality of their English education, but they were looked upon with suspicion because of what was perceived as an overly critical view of Hinduism, particularly with regard to 'idol' worship and caste.

The relations of the British with indigenous populations were rather varied, and spanned from romantic fascination to racial despising. After the Sepoy war in 1857, the British remained neutral to Indian religious and secular institutions that did not pose a direct threat to their dominion, but increased racial segregation to prevent sedition instead. As the colonial establishment increasingly restrained educated Bengalis from participating in key aspects of colonial culture, the *bhadralok* sought contact with progressive Western religious currents, such as the Unitarians, the Freemasons and the Theosophical Society (founded in 1875). It is from these encounters, and the profuse exchanges that they generated, that important strands of modern Hinduism emerged (De Michelis 2004: 47, 68–70).

The Bengali renaissance

The geographical and administrative proximity of the white and black towns in Calcutta inevitably meant that ideas flowed between the twos despite all attempts at segregation. Hindu ideas were discussed within the Western colony and Hindus absorbed the ethos, worldview and religious sensitivities of their Western neighbours. As a consequence of this interaction, besides a strong appreciation for Western culture and values, a Hindu and Bengali 'renaissance' gradually emerged among the *bhadralok*, which by the early twentieth century created the foundation for a stronger appreciation of indigenous values and culture.³ Some of the elements of the renaissance included: 1) an emphasis on the Bengali and Indian languages rather than English; 2) an eagerness to wear native clothes, such as the peasant male garb—an unstitched lower dress (*doti*), and a shirt generally made of cotton (*kurta*)—rather than Western garments; 3) the establishment of Bengali medium schools for education; 4) a new interest in local food, medicine and means of production; 5) a social awareness of and engagement in the amelioration of the condition of the destitute among the *chotalok*, which became integrated into the mod-

3 The term 'renaissance' has been questioned, see, for example, Raychaudhuri 2002.

ern Hindu mind as a whole; and 6) the shaping of a new regional and national identity. However, in terms of our narrative, the most important trait was the search for *religious* indigenous interpretations that could respond to, accommodate, and ultimately domesticate the various ideas introduced by the West.

Vaishnavism was at the time one of the more popular and active Hindu traditions in Bengal, and it had a long history going back to the sixteenth century and earlier. Its practice is centered upon devotion, *bhakti*, to the deities of Krishna and his female consort Radha. According to traditional understanding, Krishna, the ultimate object of devotion, is possessed of a divine form and personality, with the full range of attributes that make reciprocal loving relationships possible; here both the finite and the infinite are considered to be eternal, loving persons, capable of active emotional exchange. Moreover, while Krishna is considered to be the ultimate origin (or masculine principle), Radha (the feminine principle) is conceived as the personification of all divine potencies. As such, the combination of Radha-Krishna is thought to embody the two essential aspects of one infinite reality. The tradition furthermore regards Chaitanya as a combined incarnation of Radha and Krishna (Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī *et al.* 1999).

During the span of Bhaktisiddhānta's life, Chaitanya Vaishnavism comprised approximately one fifth of the Bengali population. The *bhadralok* perceived Vaishnavism in two rather contradictory ways. On one hand, it respected its cultural achievements in Bengal, from which Hindus had gained significant social and religious resources. It also admired its learned texts and sophisticated poetry, which had greatly contributed to early Bengali literature and inspired renowned poets such as Rabindranath Tagore (Tagore *et al.* 2003). On the other hand, the *bhadralok* despised the erotic tantric practices in vogue among the Vaishnava *chotalok*, as well as Vaishnavism's appeal to the emotions, which was in stark contrast to the secular rationalism and restrained Puritanism prevalent among them in the nineteenth century. It was the latter of these two perceptions that generally prevailed, despite attempts to increase Vaishnavism's reputation by prominent figures such as Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–84) and a number of wealthy Vaishnavas, who regularly published Vaishnava periodicals.⁴

In the 1870s, the Vaishnavas of Calcutta were reputed to be accepting *chotalok* such as prostitutes, outcastes and the rejected among higher *jatis* into their ranks. The more disadvantaged portion of the community formed a dis-

4 Tony Stewart and Hena Basu have collected 122 titles of Vaishnava periodicals published in Bengal between 1856 and 1983 (Basu 2009).

tinct sub-caste, named the *jati* Vaishnavas, which was placed just above the outcastes. Their spiritual teachers, however, were usually *brāhmaṇas* called Goswamis or Gośains, which added some degree of prestige to the community as a whole. In order to be regarded as a Vaishnava and receive initiation it was sufficient to pay a fee to a Goswami and arrange for a festival that included distribution of sanctified food (*mahotsava*), usually to those closely related to the initiating guru (Hunter 1875: 66–7). According to the 1872 census report of Calcutta and its surrounding district (the 24 Parganas), the number of Vaishnavas by *jati* or initiation was only about 36,000. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that a considerable number of Hindus were informally involved in the worship of both Radha-Krishna and Chaitanya (Hunter 1875: 72–3). Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism was instead more popular among the Hindus of the rural areas of greater Bengal, which included the Eastern regions of Orissa, Manipur, Assam and Tripura. In the following section, some key modern Hindu figures will be discussed in more detail, particularly with regard to their contribution in shaping the perception of Chaitanyaite *bhakti* in Bengal. Their common trait was that they all belonged to the same privileged and educated class, the *bhadralok* (Fuller 2009).

Rammohun Roy

There is general scholarly agreement that the Bengali renaissance was inaugurated by Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), a landowner and prolific writer (Fuller 2009).⁵ He inspired the engagement of the *bhadralok* with colonial institutions such as the Asiatic Society (1784), with the press, the Christian missions, and with the recovery of the Indian past carried out by British archaeologists and Indologists. He was born into a *kulin brāhmaṇa* family (the highest rank) in Radhanagar in West Bengal and his father, Ramakanta, was a Vaishnava. Roy, however, contrary to his family's beliefs, championed a rational monotheism inspired by the *Upaniṣads* that was strongly aligned with Islamic and Christian un-iconic sensibilities. In other words, he came to reject the image worship that was practiced by the Vaishnavas of Bengal and others. He published non-dualistic explanations of the *Vedānta-sūtra*, which he later came to view as a viable alternative for modern Hindus to the gospel, which he had studied under the guidance of Christian missionaries. He planted the

5 For a comprehensive study of Roy's life, thought and historical context see, for example, Robertson 1999.

seed of a modern Hindu bourgeois religiosity that was particularly tailored to the *bhadralok* (Hatcher 2008). In other words, he became the prototype of a ‘householding spiritual seeker’ (*grhastha brahmavādin*) who lived in the world while pursuing spiritual aims.

In 1828, he founded the *Brahmo Sabhā*, along with Dwarkanath Tagore (1795–1846) and other local *brāhmaṇas*, for the purpose of worshipping the impersonal absolute, *brahman*. The institution was the beginnings of what later became the Brahmo Samaj, the most dynamic reform movement of the Bengali renaissance. Roy campaigned on several occasions for social, political and religious reform, and achieved remarkable results that had long term effects in shaping the intellectual frame of the *bhadralok*. His achievements included a rational outlook on religion and a historical, critical approach to religious texts, as well as a new awareness about the status and treatment of Hindu women and political rights. Nonetheless, his effort to eradicate image worship from Hinduism had no lasting effect.⁶ His allegiance to *Vedāntic* non-dualism, however, created a precedent that was followed by a large number of Hindu intellectuals such as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and former president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975).

Bankim Chandra, Bipin Chandra Pal and Keshub Chandra Sen

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–94) was a *brāhmaṇa* and an accomplished writer.⁷ He was among the first students to get a degree from Calcutta University, and he made a career as a deputy collector and magistrate. Of particular interest to our narrative was his work, *Krishna-Charitra* (1886), in which he presented the Vaishnava deity of Krishna as a dignified national hero (Chatterjee 1991). He regarded, however, many descriptions of Krishna’s life in Vaishnava literature as morally unsound and as interpolations, particularly in regard to some explicit sections in the tenth book of the Vaishnava work *Bhāgavata Purāna*, which deals with the amorous exchanges between Krishna and his female companions, the *rāsa līlā*.⁸ His writings became a recognized source of inspiration for the nationalist movement and his poem,

6 Regarding Roy’s historical critical perspective, see Roy 1820.

7 For an introduction to Chatterjee’s religious thought, see Harder 2001.

8 *Rāsa līlā* is a circular dance. For a translation of the section of the *Bhāgavata* dealing with it see Bryant 2003 and Schweig 2005.

Vande mataram, became one of the national songs of India. It is today his most remembered contribution.

Bipin Chandra Pal (1858–1932) studied at Presidency College in Calcutta and was attracted early on to the Brahmo Samaj. He was also influenced by a high caste Chaitanya Vaishnava and member of the Brahmo Samaj, Bijoy Krishna Goswami. Inspired by Surendranath Banerj, he took an active part in Bengali politics and embraced for a time political extremism together with Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Aurobindo Ghosh. He is widely regarded as one of the fathers of modern India. He developed a Vaishnava ‘idealism’ that viewed the progress of society as the unfolding of God’s immanent presence in history (Pal 2002). He was quite influential in the independence movement and his most remembered contributions are found therein.

Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–84) is among the most eclectic personalities of the Bengali renaissance.⁹ A member of the Brahmo Samaj in 1856, he founded his own movement ten years later. Known as the Brahmo Samaj of India, it was born out of a schism within the original Adi Samaj. His movement also became a counterforce to another offshoot: the more liberalist and secularized Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Sen came under the influence of Ramakrishna and created a universalist ‘New Dispensation’. It was inspired by Christian thought, Chaitanya Vaishnavism and various other Hindu religions. Sen instituted lay systems of practice and his experiments with communal living can arguably be regarded as the prototype of the modern lay ‘*ashram*’, so popular today around the world (De Michelis 2004: 49). Sen’s exploration of Hindu ‘spirituality’—that is to say, the emphasis on internalization and experience beyond ritualism, religious dogma, organized religions and priestly mediators—had a great influence in the shaping of modern Hindu movements. According to Sen, religious ‘enthusiasm’ was at the heart of the religious life, and his revival of Chaitanya *kirtan* on the streets of Calcutta created a new interest in Vaishnava *bhakti*, particularly among the *bhadralok*. The charismatic movement that he created, however, did not survive his death, since it lacked a sustainable institutional form.¹⁰

9 For an introduction to Sen’s life and thought see Kopf 1979: 249–86. On the New Dispensation see Damen 1983.

10 Regarding the often neglected relation of Sen to Western esoteric movements see De Michelis 2004: 49–90.

Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) is the most well known figure of this period among peoples in the West. He promoted a particular notion of Hindu religion, often labelled *neo-Vedānta*, inspired by, but not equivalent to, Śaṅkara's non-dualism.¹¹ It rose to prominence in the early twentieth century and has now become the standard view of the 'essence' of Hinduism among most Indian and Western intellectuals: that is, in opposition to the popular belief in image worship of gods and goddesses, Hinduism, in its highest essence, views the flickering world of individual senses, form and personality to be ultimately unreal. Ultimate reality, according to this perspective, consists of an impersonal, formless spiritual essence, called *brahman*, which pervades and constitutes the timeless foundation of all temporary material manifestations.¹² This non-dualistic understanding had important practical implications for the spread of humanistic, rationalistic and egalitarian ideologies, because of its emphasis on the equality of all human beings. Indeed, it is likely that the embracing of a parallel view by Gandhi and several other prominent leaders of the nationalist movement facilitated the motive of invalidating the notion of a racial hierarchy and legitimized resistance against British colonial domination. In 1893, Vivekananda was invited to present his views on Hinduism to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Exceedingly well-received, it quickly became the West's standard understanding of Hinduism's philosophical core.

One year later, Vivekananda travelled to New York to found his first Vedānta Society, and after returning to India he founded the Ramakrishna Mission. The primary aim of the former was spiritual enlightenment and well-being, while the latter has primarily been promoting the education and uplifting of India's populations (Beckerlegge 2000). And although Vivekananda's Vedānta Society never became a mass movement, the Ramakrishna Mission is still greatly popular and influential in Bengal.

During the same general period in which all of the above figures lived and worked, there was another: born a *bhadralok*, powerfully intelligent, well-

11 Rambachan 1994. For a critical study of Vivekananda see Sil 1997. Regarding his movement see Beckerlegge 2006. For a discussion of the term Neo-Vedanta see Dasgupta 1999.

12 Vivekananda for example states that 'image-worship cannot directly give Mukti; it may be an indirect cause, a help on the way. Image-worship should not be condemned, for, with many, it prepares the mind for realization of the Advaita which alone makes man perfect.' (Vivekananda 2006: vol. 5, p. 316).

versed in Western thought, but representing a religious perspective that was in many ways out of step with the apparently progressive currents of his time. That individual, still little known despite the fact that his influence has become widespread, is Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī.

Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī and the *bhakti* renaissance in Bengal

Bhaktisiddhānta represented a medieval religious tradition that claimed to hark back to a seminal understanding of classical Indic thought. That tradition was Chaitanya Vaishnavism and that understanding was *bhakti*. Here it is important to once again note that among most of his *bhadralok* contemporaries the primary tendencies were towards non-dualism, nationalism, humanitarianism, egalitarianism, rationalism, social consciousness, and the use of religion as a conceptual and practical partner in the achievement of these aims. These individuals were in search of new religious and cultural identities that could domesticate the ideas of the West, creating reform movements that were competitive with the more traditional strands of classical and medieval Indic thought. Being one of these more traditional strands, and beset with a number of other 'unattractive' features, Chaitanya Vaishnavism was generally absent from their selection list.

As has been hinted at earlier, although in its original dress this tradition had a profound philosophical basis, over the years it had divided into three forms, none of which were very appealing to most of the Bengali intelligentsia: the first was its popularized form, which they considered to be sentimental, morally weak, licentious and mostly the religion of the ignorant and illiterate lower class; the second was its caste-oriented form, which they considered to be elitist, nepotistic, socially callous and far too old-fashioned and out of step with modern times; and the third was its mystical-ascetic form, which they considered to be too otherworldly. Given this, one might legitimately wonder what it was about this tradition that so attracted Bhaktisiddhānta, who was every bit as savvy as the rest. The answer is that it was largely due to the fact that first his father Bhaktivinoda (1834–1914) (perhaps the greatest influence in his life), and then he himself, became acquainted with the original medieval writings of Chaitanya's immediate and most significant followers, Rūpa, Sanātana, and Jīva Goswami. As a result, he concluded that all three contemporary forms were misrepresentations of what was a highly austere, philosophical, moral, disciplined and egalitarian tradition.

Eventually Bhaktisiddhānta came to embrace what he viewed as the original core of this tradition, and dedicated his adult life to the recovery and propagation of its teachings. He did this primarily through the establishment of a pan-Indian religious institution, the publication of newspapers and journals, the printing and distribution of classical and medieval texts, and the writing of original commentaries. Throughout his life he travelled widely about India, lecturing and initiating disciples, and he won the esteem of numerous important Indian and European figures. He was also a controversial and unconventional character who spoke out against such things as caste barriers, ordinary gender roles and sections of the Goswami elite that he found abusive. He introduced such innovations as the establishment of Vaishnava *saṁnyāsa* and the offering of *brāhmaṇa* initiation on the basis of qualification rather than birth. In pursuit of these aims he employed modern methods of institutional organization and modern forms of communication and transportation that caused a good many indigenous eyebrows to rise. His statements against the modern non-dualist Vedāntic mainstream, as well as his critique of religious involvement in political and humanitarian work, became controversial and made him a maverick even among the *bhadralok*.

The really interesting feature of all this, however, was the content of the teachings that Bhaktisiddhānta propagated, which were based on the theory and practice of a personalist, theistic *bhakti*. It stood in stark contrast to the non-dualism that had become so prevalent among most of his contemporaries, and was out of step with the progressive, highly politicised and phil-anthropically-oriented tendencies of his times. These teachings were deeply theistic, presenting the highest truth or 'Supreme Godhead' as personal rather than impersonal and with form rather than formless. In this regard he championed Vaishnavism's iconic practices, as well as the ultimate reality of the form, realm and activities of a Supreme Being. He did so not on the basis of popular sentimentalism and eroticism, but on the basis of a complex philosophical understanding that posed a direct challenge to the non-dualistic views of Vivekananda and others.

Through the work of the Gaudiya Math (the name of the institution that he founded), Bhaktisiddhānta's voice gradually gained prominence in India. Nonetheless, after his death in 1937 his movement largely disintegrated due to a crisis of succession that ended in schism, and it seemed as if his life and work would remain a mere footnote in the annals of religious history. Some thirty years later, however, a watershed event would propel his movement to unexpected heights, and rapidly spread his perspective on the teachings of Chaitanya throughout the world, making tens of thousands of non-Indian

followers along the way. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896–1977), a *bhadralok* who had been educated at the Scottish College in Calcutta that Vivekananda attended, received initiation by Bhaktisiddhānta in 1922. Upon the explicit request of his guru to present the teaching of Chaitanya *bhakti* to the West, he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement) in New York in 1966. Bhaktivedanta's goal was to introduce Chaitanyaite *bhakti* first in the United States and Canada, and then to Great Britain and other parts of the world—a venture that ultimately created an indigenous counterflow to the Christian missions that had provided his education in colonial Calcutta in the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

Any discussion of India from the point of view of the West must deal with the problem posed by the colonial past and the ways in which India was colonized, interpreted and constructed to fit into an imperialist agenda. The terms 'Hinduism' and 'religion', for example, are themselves quite problematic, since they are born of Western and Judeo-Christian thought, and may not reflect the complexity and diversity of Indic traditions well enough. A translation and transmission of terms and concepts from one cultural domain to another is required, but it is bound to be merely tentative and approximate, since a comprehension of the full meaning of words and concepts related to Indic religions presupposes an extensive grounding in the rich religious thought of India. John Darwin has therefore suggested, to cite an example, that 'European accounts of other cultures and peoples should no longer be treated as the "authorized version", however full or persuasive' (Darwin 2007: 14; see also Chakrabarty 2000).

To add to the complexity of the hermeneutical challenges of this discourse, Noel Salmond has pointed out a number of stereotypes specific to Indic religions common in the West, such as that India is highly iconic while the West is an-iconic, that Indian religions are focused on mystical absorption and metaphysical abstractions, while Western religion is ethical and rational. Other stereotypes are that India is otherworldly, whereas the West is this-worldly (Salmond 2004: 3–4). These perceptions wrongly assume not only that Indic religions have one essence and are monolithic, but also that there is an unbridgeable dichotomy between 'East' and 'West', an ontological difference that makes impossible any real cohesion and ultimate reciprocal understanding.

Bhaktisiddhānta lived on the border between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, between the black and the white towns of Calcutta, between India and the West, and between two world wars. His effort to search for and apply *bhakti* to the social, political and cultural crises of his time is important for grasping the vitality and dynamism of Indic religions in our time. It is also important for appreciating the struggle carried out by a growing Indian and Hindu middle class to bridge the gaps between East and West, and on the basis of indigenous culture produce new ideas for reciprocal co-operation, which in the case of Bhaktisiddhānta were related to the idea and practice of *bhakti*.

Vivekananda's non-dualism largely defined Hinduism both for India and for the West, and although that definition may yet remain fixed somewhere in the Western scholarly and popular psyche, the alternative of *bhakti* personalism presented by figures such as Bhaktisiddhānta, and its potential to problematize non-dualism, constitutes an important addition to our understanding of the history and philosophy of modern Hinduism.

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