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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Gospel and Culture: Some Indian Reflections

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In this paper we present some of the findings of a commissioned study of the World Council of Churches on Gospel and Culture which we had the privilege to undertake. The Study is an elucidation of a double gospel emerging out of the Indian culture: on the one hand we have the gospel of inter-religious interaction and the consequent composite culture of India and on the other, there is the gospel of God in Jesus arising out of the Indian hermeneutical context, which only mutually ratify one another.

Culture denotes all the capabilities and habits acquired by human person as a member of a particular society, such as knowledge, belief, art, law, customs etc. It is the whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual. It describes the way human beings think, feel, believe and behave. Culture is a comprehensive term and includes the following: (i) patterns and modes of external behaviour; (ii) the productive level of agriculture, industry, services and information, (iii) the social level of political economy or power relations among human beings; and (iv) basic postures, values, beliefs, world views, which form the foundations of a culture and which find expression in art, music, literature, philosophy and religion.

1. The Research Problem

Historically, India has been one of the greatest confluences of different cultural strands. The composite culture of India is a product of borrowing, sharing and fusing through processes of interaction between two or more streams and such cultural symbiosis has given birth to greater vitality and larger acceptability. The composite culture of India has the potentiality to further the process of national integration.¹ Historically India has been a laboratory of cross fertilization of religious ideas. The basic feature of Indian culture therefore, is its integral relationship with Indian religions. Interaction and mutual enrichment between Indian religions are perhaps the most important characteristics of Indian culture.²

It is true that in the past, the marriage between religions and culture had been seen as a danger adversely affecting both by some Western Christian thinkers.³ But in India we think differently; it is

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the integral relation between religion and culture which enriches both these, is the experience of India. Consequently we no longer project the gospel or Christ over against a culture. It is our contention that the gospel is always available along with a particular cultural embodiment alone. So what are the possible diverse cultural embodiments of the gospel in the Indian context is the relevant question for us to answer today. If the gospel is dynamic — and we believe that it is — new meanings of the gospel can emerge through the Indian cultural embodiments of it.⁴ We are keen to listen to these new voices. It is our firm conviction that India has a major contribution in this regard.

So we perceive a double gospel emerging from Indian culture. One is the gospel of integral relation between religion and culture, resulting in cultural symbiosis and a composite culture through an ongoing interaction between religions. The second meaning of the gospel of Indian culture points to an understanding of the gospel of God in Jesus emerging from the Indian culture or rather the Indian hermeneutical context which in reality goes beyond the scope of the previous Christian concepts like 'indigenisation' or 'inculturation'. Both these meanings of the gospel are related in the sense that the understanding of Jesus emerging from the Indian hermeneutical context only ratifies the harmony and integration that exist between religions in India as well as the resultant Indian composite culture. In other words, the gospel of Jesus emerging in India is an aspect of the gospel of composite culture resulting through interreligious interaction. *Our research problem then is, to identify systematically the important features of this double gospel proclaimed by the Indian culture i.e., on the one hand to identify the role of religions in shaping the composite culture of India and on the other, to identify the gospel of God in Jesus emerging from the Indian culture or rather the Indian hermeneutical context which is co-constituted by the Indian self-identity as well as the Indian socio-politico-religio-cultural context.*

There are different works available on the different aspects of our research problem; but we do not have any one work comprehensively dealing with all the aspects of it. For example there are books dealing with the meaning of culture⁵ as well as the specific features of Indian culture,⁶ specially its emphasis on the integral relation between religion and culture.⁷ There are also books available on the Western understanding of culture as well as the relation between culture and religion.⁸ There are again available some works dealing with particular aspects of the Roman Catholic⁹ as well as World Council of Churches¹⁰ understanding of the relation between gospel and culture. There are some works pointing to the Indian hermeneutical context and creative Christian thought as emerging from it.¹¹ But

there is no one work dealing with the gospel of Indian culture in its double aspect i.e., the aspect of inter-religious relations and enrichment as well as the aspect of the new meanings of the gospel of God in Jesus from within the Indian hermeneutical context, seen as mutually integrative. Hence the justification for undertaking this investigation.

The present Indian context also calls for the need of such an attempt in a double sense. First of all, in the Indian context of the resurgence of communalism and fundamentalism and they being projected as the desirable element of Hinduism, the composite culture of India resulting through inter-religious interaction and enrichment needs to be focussed upon as the only desirable aspect. Secondly in the context of the ongoing Indian struggle of relating the gospel of God in Jesus to the local cultures, there is a real need to go beyond the stand point of Inculturation and Indigenisation and articulate the gospel as emerging from the Indian hermeneutical context. Thus we are further justified in taking up the present study.

In this work we have followed a descriptive-analytical method executed in terms of the historical, sociological, anthropological as well as the theologico-philosophical insights gathered from the various sources.

2. The Gospel of Inter-religious Interaction and Harmony

One aspect of our research problem was to identify the most important feature of Indian composite culture as one aspect of its gospel. We are able now to conclude that the most important feature of Indian culture is its integral relationship with Indian religions.¹² Each culture develops a vision of reality and religion is the principle which enlivens this vision. The relationship between religion and culture is advaitic.¹³ The cultural symbiosis and the composite culture of India are the outcome of an ongoing interaction between Indian religions. The gospel of Indian culture is the gospel of interreligious harmony and integration.¹⁴

Culture provides a system of meaning and motivation for humans. It is the sum-total of our thinking and living. It is the whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual. At least three levels of culture can be identified, the productive level of agriculture and industry, the socio-political level of economy or power relations and the level of value and meaning.¹⁵ Culture includes knowledge, belief, art, law, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by members of a society.¹⁶ Culture is a comprehensive term which includes not only the patterns and modes of external behaviour but also basic

postures, values, beliefs and worldviews which find expression in art, music, literature, philosophy and religion.¹⁷

Regarding the type of society existed in ancient India (c. 2500 B.C. to 500 B.C.) archeological evidences suggest the existence of a number of cultures, most of them seemingly disparate, such as the Sothi culture, the Harappa culture, the post-Harappan culture, the Gandhara Grave culture, Banas culture, Copper Hoard culture of the Mundā speaking people, the painted Grey Ware culture and the Northern Black Polished Ware culture.¹⁸ None of these can be identified as specifically Aryan. There was no imposition of Aryan culture on the existing Indian cultures, but only a diffusion of it through an acculturation process.¹⁹ The Indo-Aryans lived in the vicinity of Mundās or the Dravidians. There was an ongoing process of acculturation with respect to matters like food habits, iron technology, the development of the caste structure, religious beliefs and practices as well as genealogies and myths.²⁰

Studies by Anthropologists on Indian tribes have shown interaction at the religious sphere between Hinduism and Primal Religions. The Riangs of Tripura and the Tribes of Garo Hills can be cited as examples.²¹ The Tribals now see their own culture in a new light; they are eager to reestablish their culture. Constant orthogenetic (keeping in line with the traditional cultural elements) and heterogenetic (creation of new cultural modes) changes are taking place in Indian culture from the Vedic times down to the present; if Jainism and Buddhism are examples for the former, Islamic conquest and British rule are cited by some as examples for the latter.²²

Sociologically speaking the basic concepts of a theory of society and culture in the Hindu tradition have been *order* and *change*. Order is conceptualised through the principles of hierarchy (*varna* and *jāti*, *purusārthas* etc.), holism (humans, superhumans and gods through *yugas*) and continuity between material and spiritual (through *karma*). Change is thought to be cyclical (devolutionary conception of cosmology and cultural time).²³ Culturally speaking Jainism and Buddhism overemphasised the value of *continuity* and undermined the importance of *hierarchy*. In these religions the principles of hierarchy changed its meaning into moral progression. Regarding *change* they shared with Hinduism a devolutionary view.²⁴ In contrast to the Hindu tradition, the Islamic tradition²⁵ is founded on a worldview which is non-hierarchical as well as historical in ethos. Holism in Islam is based on the unity of the Muslim community. Cultural syncretism was only a part of the movement in the Indian Islamic tradition; a large segment was always in the orthodox line. There was cultural syncretism between Islam and Hinduism, but not a mutual cultural acceptance is the view of some.

Indian culture is a very strong expression of religious diversity and interaction beginning from Indus Valley Civilization to Neo-Vedānta of today. The Siva and Mothergoddess cults of later Hinduism are examples of Aryans adapting some of the features of Indus Valley culture into their own.²⁶ Indian art and culture are a joint creation of the Dravidian and the Aryan genius.²⁷ In India a gradual cross-fertilization took place between the Hindu and Islamic cultures and this led to the evolution of the Bhakti and Sufi movements as well as a new style of art, architecture and music.²⁸ Sikhism was born out of the wedlock between Hinduism and Islam. The compositions of many Hindu and Muslim saints are incorporated in the Adi Granth.²⁹ Christianity has become part of the Indian culture and the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala since the 1st c. A.D. have contributed greatly to this integration.³⁰ It is significant that many of the leaders of Indian Renaissance have acknowledged the significance of Christ in their own particular ways of interpretation.³¹

Many Tribal goddesses like Kali have been absorbed within the Hindu fold.³² The Indian Tribal vision of life emphasizes harmony, equality, collectivism, accommodation and democracy. What is needed today is a sympathetic reconstruction of Dalit history and culture from Dalit oral traditions, rituals, rites and festivals and only such a reconstruction can further the process of a composite culture in India.³³ The principles of *syādvāda* and *ahimsā* of Jainism, as well as *Maitrī* of Buddhism are the finest fruits of Indian culture and civilization.³⁴ Jaina or Buddhist teaching did not claim to break away from the Aryan tradition. Buddhism in its Mahayana form became more and more a theistic religion and by 9th c. A.D. the line dividing Buddhist lay — people from ordinary Hindus became less and less marked in India.³⁵ Hindu culture accepts religious pluralism theologically through the concepts of *adhikāra bhēda* and *Advaita*. In the view of Neo-Vedānta which reinterprets Advaita, each religion is a path leading to the same one God.³⁶

There is an integral relationship between Hindu religious philosophy and Indian culture. The Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata for example, have entered into the pattern of thought, speech and action of Indians.³⁷ The faith that God is the inner-most Reality of all living beings and the whole creation has had much impact on Indian culture.³⁸ Likewise the doctrines of karma and rebirth have influenced Indian culture.³⁹ Ideas like renunciation and concepts like the impermanence of the world and our life in it, are taken seriously by Indian culture and these have their origin in Indian religious philosophy.⁴⁰ Dharma as the ontological basis of the whole range of reality, is the backbone of Indian culture. It is

simultaneously cosmic law, religious ordinances or rites as well as the rules of conduct.⁴¹

Indian culture is the perception of an innate harmony and order (*ṛta*) in the entire cosmos in terms of search for the transcendental. In the *puruṣārthas*⁴² (human goals) we see the blend of the empirical with the spiritual. *Kāma* (desire) and *artha* (wealth) are to be regulated by *dharma* (moral and ritual order) and when correctly pursued these three will lead to *mokṣa* (liberation). The *puruṣārthas* are fulfilled through the *Āśrama dharma*⁴³ involving the four stages of student life (*brahmacharya*), family life (*gṛhastha*), retired life (*vānaprastha*) and life of renunciation (*sannyāsā*). The progressive development of a person's body, mind and spirit are taken into consideration here. India is capable of adapting itself to the impacts of modern cultural trends like rationalism, science, technology and secularism and this is well evident in the Renascent period. Indian secular approach has to be distinguished from the Western one as it is the starting point of religious perceptions. Religious enlightenment constitutes the fundamental source of creativity for Indian culture and the Indian psyche.⁴⁴

Indian culture has strived for a permeation of the spirit in matter, it is the habit of self-restraint. Sharing one's substance with the poor, chastity, austerity, all-round religious tolerance etc. are the aspects of restraint that give birth to Indian culture.⁴⁵ Development issues are linked to questions of justice, liberation and culture.⁴⁶ The transcendental aspect in religions has enabled to challenge and transform oppressive socio-cultural systems. *Satyagraha* challenged untouchability and helped all to organise themselves for justice.⁴⁷ Creative cultural transformation is an essential part of mass mobilisation for political purposes.⁴⁸ The joint family, caste system and the process of secularization are some of the areas in which cultural transformation is taking place in India today.⁴⁹

There is a regional solidarity for the Indian religious culture. The different Indian religious communities are intertwined with each other within regional system.⁵⁰ Elements of diversity are as important as the common and unifying motifs in Indian music, musical instruments, dance forms and dramatic forms. At the same time, painters, sculptors, musicians etc., of India share a broad outlook going beyond the boundaries of their own particular religious faith.

Civilization⁵¹ is a subclass of culture. If civilization is the outward manifestation, culture expresses the inward aspect of social existence. Culture is the efflorescence of civilization. If civilization is the organisation of life which makes a civil society possible, culture is the resultant of such organisation and expresses itself through

language and art, philosophy and religion, social habits and customs, and political institutions and economic organisations.

Some striking features of ancient Indian civilization⁵² were that the people were humane and they enjoyed life both in its material and spiritual aspects. The whole of South-East Asia received most of its culture from India; by 4th c. A.D. Sanskrit was the official language of the region. Even the whole of the Far East is in India's debt for Buddhism. Indian influence on Neo-Platonism and early Christianity is a possibility. Indian religious literature centered on philosophy has influenced the thought of Europe and America in the last two centuries. There is a unity underlying India's cultural diversity and our national unity has to be in terms of this cultural unity.

In order to arrive at a better understanding of Indian culture we need perhaps to know the major Western discussions on culture⁵³ Earlier the West had understood culture as the spirit of the age, as the subjective order which effects objective action. Karl Marx thought that to explain cultural phenomena we have to examine the material elements which constitute the base. However, in 20th c. Marxism has undergone a revision to effect a working-class culture over against the bourgeois culture.⁵⁴ Functionalism⁵⁵ intertwines a cultural emphasis with an analysis of real social action and a norm of 'universalism' is identified, which sometimes can have tension with 'particularism'. Structuralism⁵⁶ and semiotics are suggested as the principal alternatives to functionalist approach to meaning. Cultural structures are not only informing social patterns, but they really determine them. According to Post-structuralism⁵⁷ social structures and social actors are mere expressions of cultural discourses and codes and these in their turn are mere reproductions of political and economic constraints. Dramaturgy⁵⁸ articulates cultural autonomy by carving out a special role for the individual. Weberians continue to conceptualize culture as an internally generated symbolic system that responds to compelling metaphysical needs. Today questions of salvation for example, are understood in terms of more general conceptions of activism, conscience, community, and individuation.⁵⁹ Durkheimian theory views cultural systems as organized into symbolic antitheses of sacred and profane and they are the basis for organized social communities.⁶⁰

The Western understanding of the relation between culture and religion helps Indians to get a clearer picture of the integral relation existing in India between these two. The notion of modernity as a secular order replacing religion was sociologically expounded by Karl Marx and Max Weber. Peter Berger who synthesises Marx and Weber has shown that religion in the West has lost its public institutional base and as a result it can no longer provide cultural unity. Due to

the rise of alternative interpretations of life, religious beliefs have become subjective; institutional religion has been depoliticized. There is antagonism between religion and modernity.⁶¹ But people like Durkheim do not agree that the modern Western culture is secular. Modern societies have their own unique 'religious' culture of deification of the individual and modern culture is thus sacred and not secular. For example, in the twentieth century, there is a religious dimension in the whole fabric of American life and this may be called the American Civil Religion. In recent years there is suspicion regarding the power of reason to create an unforced cultural consensus and this epistemological change is the indication of a cultural shift in the West.⁶² Today Post-modernism stands for more local, particularistic character of knowledge with an emphasis on experience and self-realization.⁶³

Thus, though the case of the West may be different, India shows an integral relation between religion and culture, resulting in cultural symbiosis and a composite culture through an ongoing interaction between religions. It is our finding that this cultural symbiosis and the resultant composite culture is one important aspect of the gospel of Indian culture. The gospel of Indian culture is the gospel of harmony and integration. This is not to claim that there are no conflicts or tensions in the history of the evolution of Indian culture. Rather, it is many a times through conflicts and tensions that the gospel of harmony and integration of Indian culture was manifested.

3. The Gospel of God in Jesus Emerging from the Indian Hermeneutical Context

The second aspect of our research problem was to identify the second meaning of the gospel of Indian culture. The second meaning of the gospel of Indian culture points to an understanding of Jesus being evolved from the Indian hermeneutical context which in reality goes beyond the scope of the previous Christian concepts like 'indigenisation', 'inculturation', 'contextualisation' and 'adaptation'.⁶⁴ It should be noted here that both these meanings of gospel are related in the sense that the understanding of Jesus emerging from the Indian hermeneutical context only ratified the harmony and integration that exist between religions in India as well as the resultant Indian composite culture.⁶⁵ In other words, the gospel of Jesus emerging in India is one aspect of the gospel of composite culture resulting through interreligious interactions. It is the gospel of cultural symbiosis. Because of the integral relation between religion and culture in India it is equally the gospel of religious symbiosis.

a) India's creative contributions to the emerging gospel

Inculturation goes against the Indian vision of integral relation between religion and culture resulting in cultural symbiosis and composite culture. This is because it separates religion and culture and then tries to take in some cultural aspects, after Christianising these.⁶⁶ It is in order to counter-act this wrong notion that the role of our hermeneutical context is being taken into serious consideration. What really happens is, the hermeneutical context decides the content of the gospel of God in Jesus and this can be called the gospelation of the context as against the contextualisation of the gospel.⁶⁷ Consequently the understanding of the gospel emerging from different contexts have to be seriously and carefully identified. For example the Neo-Vedāntic Christology⁶⁸ as well as the Dalit theology⁶⁹ deserves our consideration. These then become the gospel of Indian culture. So the question how various cultures and religions will understand Jesus in their own way is the real question. What are their contributions in identifying the new meanings of Jesus is the question. It is these new meanings which represent the gospel of Indian culture. If the theoretical basis for Inculturation is Inclusivism,⁷⁰ from this we have to grow into the standpoint of Pluralistic Inclusivism.⁷¹ Pluralistic Inclusivism inspires each religious faith to be pluralistically inclusive i.e., on the one hand each living faith is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to its conceptual content and on the other hand inclusivism is to transform its meaning to witness the fulfillment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths. This is what India and Indian Christian theology need today. This ratifies the paradigm shift⁷² that is taking place in Indian Christian thought regarding the understanding of truth-statements from absolute static, monologic or exclusive ways to deabsolutized, dynamic and dialogic — in a word : relational ways. Pluralistic Inclusivism stands for Indian dialogical theologies which encourage the relational convergence of Indian religions,⁷³ through the new meanings that emerge in the understanding of the gospel from within the Indian hermeneutical context.

The hermeneutical context or the horizon out of which Indians understand anything that they understand consists of the coconstitutive factors of their self-identity as well as the Indian religio-cultural and socio-economic realities.⁷⁴ Indian self-identity⁷⁵ lies in the convictions like in our knowing-process there exists nothing externally ready-made that can be adapted, indigenized, incultured or contextualised because knowledge is formulated in the very knowing process; and understanding is a continuous integrated

process involving humans and their Innermost Reality, the *Ātman* simultaneously. Also the religio-cultural and socio-economic realities⁷⁶ of India together constitute the Indian ethos out of which the gospel emerges. In the Neo-Vedāntic Christology itself this fact is implicit as for example it is the Practical Vedānta which fights against oppression, injustice, and inequality that people like Swami Vivekananda upheld to arrive at an understanding of Jesus. Hence Vedāntic theology can function as a counterpart of Dalit theology.⁷⁷

Dalit theology is the theology of the oppressed people in India. The caste — factor adds to the complexity of Indian socio-economic realities and Dalit theology takes this factor into account.⁷⁸ It is the very dalitness which is 'Christian' about Dalit Theology. Pathos or suffering is the beginning of knowledge; the dalits know God in and through their suffering.⁷⁹ In the view of dalits Jesus Christ was himself a Dalit; servitude in the *sva-dharma* of Dalit God.⁸⁰ The dalits and the tribals are the indigenous or *adi* people oppressed nationally in India and a pan Indian political ideology of the indigenous people can bridge the gap between the dalits and the tribals.⁸¹ Dalits can work towards this. Dalit theology also gives the inspiration to fight against the oppression of women.

According to Vedāntic Christology the central lesson of the life of Jesus to an Indian is the undermining of the false antithesis between human person and God.⁸² Jesus had a non-dual relation with God the Father and he is inspiring all the humans also to have the same relation with God through the renunciation of the lower self. Jesus shows us our true nature which is divine.⁸³ The abandonment of the ego and the soul's arisal to a sense of its universality is the meaning of the cross.⁸⁴ Resurrection is the passage from the death of self-absorption to the life of unselfish love, the transition from the darkness of selfish individualism to the light of universal spirit.⁸⁵ The Christian dogmatic assertions like the atonement theory and the innate vileness of human nature are distorting the meaning of the gospel.⁸⁶ In such a context Advaita Vedānta can help us to regain the lost universal message of Jesus.

The thought of Indian Christian theologians emerge from the Indian hermeneutical context i.e. from within their self identity in interaction with the Indian religio-cultural and socio-economic realities; and the theologies of Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya⁸⁷ and K. Subba Rao⁸⁸ are worth noting as examples. These theologies go beyond the scope of Inculturation or Indigenization, as they manifest new meanings of the gospel of Jesus through receiving the contributions of the major Indian religion, Hinduism.⁸⁹ They ratify the fact that India proclaims the integral relation between culture and religious philosophy and consequently between culture and the gospel.

Even though Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya made a distinction between *sadhana dharma* (spiritual practices) and *samaj dharma* (social practices), in effect his *samaj dharma* i.e., Hinduism had influenced his *sadhana dharma* and this is well evident from his acceptance of the concepts *Saccidānanda* and *Māyā* as they are without alteration in interpreting the Christian doctrines of God and Creation. According to him *saccidānanda* is Trinity and *Māyā* is the best concept to explain the Christian doctrine of creation.⁹⁰ It is because of this radical conclusion that one can see him going far beyond the method of putting an already formulated Christian theology in Vedāntic terms, even though he himself started with such a method. Thus inculturation gets corrected through the contributions of Upadhyaya.

In Advaita Vedānta, *Sat-chit-ānanda* (Being-Intelligence-Bliss) indicates the Supreme Being, Brahman. Upadhyaya pointed out that to speak of Brahman as *Sat-chit-ānanda* means that Brahman knows Himself and from that self-knowledge proceeds His eternal beatitude. Brahman is related of necessity only to the Infinite Image of His own being mirrored in the ocean of His knowledge. This relation of Being (*Sat*) to Itself in self-knowledge (*Chit*) is one of perfect harmony, bliss (*ānanda*).⁹¹ In the view of Upadhyaya the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity is 'exactly the same' as the Vedāntic conception of Brahman as *Sat-Chit-ānanda* because in the Trinity (Father, Son and the Holy Spirit) the knowing Self is the Father, the known Self or the self-begotten by His knowledge is the Son and the Holy Spirit is the spirit of reciprocal love proceeding from the Father and the Son.⁹²

According to Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, *māyā* signifies the will-power (*saṅkalpa*) of God. It means that creation is by the power (*śakti*) of the will (*saṅkalpa*) of God.⁹³ The term *māyā* involve three truths: God is not necessarily a creator; creatures are non-beings, transformed as it were into being; and this transformation is caused by the mysterious power of the will of God.⁹⁴ It is Upadhyaya's declaration that this Vedāntic doctrine of *māyā* which explains creation and the Christian doctrine of creation are identical because, according to Christian doctrine of creation also, God does not create out of necessity but through the overflow of his perfections; creation has no being in itself, what it has is derived being and creation in the effect of the divine thought.⁹⁵ He even said that the term *māyā* can express the meaning of the doctrine of creation in a far better way than the Latin root *creare*.⁹⁶

Upadhyaya's involvement in the National movement (1901-1907)⁹⁷ has to be seen as a continuation of his theological struggle and his innovation of the idea of 'total independence from the British' has to

be understood as a continuation of his theological innovations of Trinity as *Saccidānanda* and Creation as *Māyā*. There is a movement and growth from one to the other which sometimes we are unable to perceive. But to the extent we are unable to perceive this connection we are unable to understand the enigmatic personality, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya.

(To be continued)

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