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Interaction of the Gospel and Culture in Bengal

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Another famous Bengali Christian who largely influenced Bengal's cultural life was Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-73). He was credited with leading Bengali poetry to modernity. Born as a Hindu, he accepted Christian faith in 1843, but never forgot the rich heritage of India. He was, according to N.S. Bose, "truly the morning star" as well as the "midday noon" of Nineteenth century Bengali poetry.⁶⁴ In his epic *Meghnadbadh Kayya* (The Fall of Meghnad, 1861) Madhusudan Datta successfully naturalized the "European blank" in Bengali and freed Bengali poetry from the "fettered payer" form and ushered in a new age. He ended the "poetic slumber of Bengali".⁶⁵ His poems were cherished by later Bengali poets like Rabindranath Tagore. The counter culture character of his poems, especially that of *Meghnadbadh* which is about Ravana and his son Indrajit, were dear to the Young Bengali.⁶⁶ Madhusudan "gave Bengal her first modern tragedy, the first social comedies, the first epic, and blank verse, the first sonnet, along with these went a secular elevation of them and mighty music altogether unknown to the men of letters"⁶⁷

Ramtanu Lahiri, a Kulin Brahmin, associated with the founding of Sadharan Brahma Samaj, was a student of Derozio and like his friend Krishna Mohan Benerjea accepted Christianity. He was the secretary of the Derozian Societies for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, circulating Library and Epistolary Association.⁶⁸ He was an influential teacher and his kindness, integrity and devotion to work have been affectionately recorded by Sibnath Sastri who is considered to be the founder of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, the radical group that broke away from K.C. Sen!⁶⁹ He was a strong nationalist and was sympathetic to the agitations that followed the Ilbert Bill controversy (1882) and the contempt case of Surrendranath Banerjea (1883). Ramtanu presided over the first All India National Conference in 1883, which was considered as "the first stage towards a National Parliament."⁷⁰

Lal Behari Day (1824-1894) was another Christian who inspired other Indians by his fight for equal rights in the Church and government. About him Devipada Bhattacharya writes: "Christian

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in his religion, but very much an Indian—this consciousness and pride gave him his distinction as an Indian patriot of the highest order ... a fine patriot and patriot of the finest sense of the term".⁷¹ He valued people's culture and his two famous works, *Folk Tales of Bengal* and *Gobinda Samanta*, not only throw light on the culture and life in the lowest stratum of the rural Bengal but also mark a new stage of evolution of thought in Bengal's literature.⁷² "In him the poor and inarticulate sections of the people found a true advocate of their dreams and aspirations."⁷³ Lal Behari Day edited the *Bengal Magazine* (1872-81), *Indian Reformer* (1860-1), *Friday Review* (1866-69). "Like his contemporary Rev. K.M. Bandyopadhyay (Krishna Mohan Banerjea), Lal Behari had in his bones a genuine love for the ethos and inheritance of Bengal".⁷⁴

Another patriotic figure who is considered to be the father of Indian Christian theology is Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861-1907). Upadhyay was a friend of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore from his youth.⁷⁵ He was under the influence of the great Brahma leader Keshub Chandra Sen for some time and tried to popularize Keshub's ideas of "Hindu Church of Christ" and Trinity as *Saccidananda* among Christians. He was a Hindu in terms of samaj dharma, i.e., living manners, customs, eating and dressing, and observance of the caste and he was a Christian in terms of sadhan dharma i.e., spiritual practice, devotion and quest for salvation. About his theological contribution, K.P. Aleaz writes:

The main contribution of Upadhyaya to Indian Christian theology lies in his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity as *Saccidananda* and the doctrine of creation as *Maya*.... He never tries to reinterpret the Advaita Vedantic concept. What he establishes is that Trinity is *Saccidananda* and that Creation is *Maya*.... Vedanta, to some extent, receives authority to formulate an understanding of Trinity in terms of *Saccidananda*, of Christ in terms of Chit and of Creation in terms of *Maya*.... In as much as he was the first to indicate such a way, he is truly the Father of Indian Christian theology.⁷⁶

Bepin Chandra Pal, a nationalist leader wrote about him: "the ideals of our present nationalism have been obtained from Upadhyay Brahmabandhav to a very extent." Upadhyay's Bengali daily *Sandhya* provided much strength to the 1905 agitation against the partition of Bengal. His earlier weekly paper *Sophia* and monthly, *The Twentieth Century*, witness to his ideas on indigenous patterns of theology and Church life.⁷⁷ He wanted the Church in India to take *ashrama* form. Brahmabandhav died in prison and the body was cremated according to Hindu custom.

The Indian Christian contributions to the political independence of the country and national unity are not adequately acknowledged. The Bengal Christian Association started in 1868 to create a national, independent Church have undoubtedly inspired Surrenderanath Banerjea to form the Indian Association of Calcutta⁷⁸ in 1876, that became the forerunner of the Indian National Congress, as we have already noted. The National Church of Bengal, in its turn was probably a result of K.C. Sen's criticism about the "denationalized" state of Indian Christians.⁷⁹ It was Lal Behari Day who first mooted the idea of a National Church of Bengal as a union of all sections of Christians—Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants—on the basis of the Apostolic Creed and with much freedom in matters of ministry and liturgy. This idea was, however, squashed by Alexander Duff, Day's teacher. The Nationalist spirit of Bengal Christians was further raised by the *Bengal Christian Herald* (later, *The Indian Christian Herald*), a newspaper under the editorialship of the radical Kali Charan Banerjea, uncle of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, and Joy Govinda Shome. They declared themselves as "Hindu Christians" and were intensely national as anybody could be. They also organised the Bengali Christian Conference and criticized the missionaries for denationalizing Indian Christians, and making them into compound converts and for introducing Western theological and ecclesiastical differences in India. In 1882 a plan was made to create a self-supporting Indian Church with India leadership, to the dismay and disapproval of the missionaries.⁸⁰ Kali Charan Banerjea and Shome left their churches in 1887 and formed the Calcutta Christo Samaj, along the lines of Brahma Samaj. It had no pastors, no distinction between clergy and laity, men and women, but accepted the Apostolic Creed, baptism and Communion administered by lay people, with no fixed liturgy.

4. Indian Response

a) Reformers

The values of the Western intellectualism and Christianity challenged the sensitive youth of Bengal, producing a sort of emotional revolution and releasing a great amount of creative energy. Three paths were open to them—"to become agnostics and atheists and revolt against all religions as the Derozians, or to join the theist Brahma Samaj which sought renewal of Hinduism from within, or to become Christians."⁸¹

The Young Bengal or the Derozians not only offended the Hindu majority, but also unlike the Brahmans could never infiltrate into the

general public; their movement rather confined itself to the "College Boys." Even after the death of Derozio the Young Bengal movement continued through numerous cultural and intellectual organizations called Academic Association, Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (1838), the Bengal British India Society (1843) which later merged into another political organization—the British Indian Association (1851), and that marked the end of independent existence of the movement. The Young Bengal failed to understand the exploitative character of the British rule; neither they understood the problems of the toiling masses.⁸²

The Brahma movement had its origin in the Brahma Sabha founded by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828. Rammohan in his younger days studied Persian and Arabic, official languages of Bengal at that time, and was influenced by the monotheistic tradition of Islam. In 1803 he published a Persian work, *Tuhfat ul-Muwahhiddin* or a "Gift to Monotheists". After serving the East India company for a period (1805-1814), during which he mastered English, Tantrism, and Jainism and amassed considerable wealth through trade and money lending, Rammohan settled in Calcutta and continued his crusade against all forms of idolatry, polytheism and Sati, that which he started at Rungpur while serving the Company. In 1815 he started the *Atmiya Sabha* or Society of friends, the weekly meetings of which held in Rammohan's Manicktola house, were attended by people like Dwaraknath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Baidyanath Mukherjea and several others from respectable and influential families. In order to vindicate the purity of monotheism in the Upanishads Rammohan published *Vedanta Sutras* in 1815 and in the following years translated *Isa, Kena, Katha, Mundaka* and *Mandukya* Upanishads from Sanskrit. In Rammohan's own words, he wanted to prove that "the idolatry of the Brahmins was contrary to the practice of their ancestors and the principles of ancient books and authorities which they prefer to revere and obey".⁸³ In this fight he was very much influenced by the ethical teaching of Christ. In 1817 he wrote to John Digby, his friend and superior during the Company days, "I have found the doctrines of Christ more conducive to moral principles, and better adapted for the use of rational beings..."⁸⁴ He collected the moral teachings of Jesus from the Gospels in a book titled, *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness* (1820) which was vehemently criticized by the Serampore missionary, Joshua Marshman, that by this selection Rammohan has reduced Christianity into mere ethical principles denouncing the redemptive or atoning work of Christ. Rammohan published the *Precepts* in good faith and was unhappy over the controversy it brought about.⁸⁵

It was during this controversy which continued for four years that Rammohan developed his Christology. Rammohan held Jesus to be a theist, God's Messiah, the Supreme Messenger, a Son, a servant of God, but not God, the Ruler of the Universe. Jesus is the first-born of all creation, produced in the beginning, preexisted in God's purpose for the whole of creation. The unity between Jesus and God is a unity of will and design. Rammohan rejected Christian belief in incarnation as idolatrous and polytheistic, and repudiated the interpretation of Christ' death as an expiation for sin. He found the idea of justice implied in the atonement theories as inadequate and unsatisfactory.

Rammohan was more critical of Hindu religious superstitions and idol worship and this alienated him from the Hindu community who started organizing to oppose his reform moves. They refused to cooperate with him in the formation of the Hindu College that forced him to resign from its committee. He started his own Vedanta College in 1825 to promote Western science and philosophy along with Vedanta philosophy. The College did not continue long. When Marshman stopped publishing Roy's articles in the *Samachar Darpan*, he started his own *Brahminical Magazine* or *Brahman Sebadhi* in Bengali language. He was an admirer of the French Revolution and spent much of his time and energy for introducing Western education, female emancipation—abolition of Sati, child marriage and Kulinism. He was a Benthamite and contributed much to the development of Bengali prose writing as one of the pioneers.⁸⁶

About Rammohan's religion, Max Müller, in an address at Bristol, the place of Rammohan's death, said: "He never became a Mohammedan, he never became a Christian, but he remained to the end a Brahman, a believer in the Veda, and in the One God who as he maintained, had been revealed in the Veda, and especially in the Vedanta, long before he revealed himself in the Bible or in the Koran".⁸⁷ Sankara's is the only school of Vedanta that Rammohan uses as his authority.⁸⁸ But he did not accept Sankara's ontological system. While Sankara distinguished between the knowledge of Brahman and the worship of Brahman, Rammohan held that "higher worship is the worship of God as author and governor of the Universe, without identifying him with any name or form," and this leads to salvation; lower worship is the worship of God in mental or physical image and this leads to rebirth.⁸⁹ The point of Rammohan is that people, irrespective of any discrimination are entitled (*adhikara*) to know and worship Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, an idea which was opposed by Mrtyunjay Vidyalkar of Fort William College and Samkara Sastri of Madras.⁹⁰ Rammohan's distinction between God

and Jesus is particularly important in the context of today's theocentric approach in Indian theology.

Shortly after Rammohan's departure for England in 1830 and his death in 1833 at Bristol, Brahmo Samaj lost its vigour and commitment to reform until Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore, joined the movement in 1843. He had been associated with the Young Bengal movement as a member of its Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge. He had already in 1839 organized *Tattyananjini Sabha* which later became *Tattvabodhini Sabha*, for the propagation of religious truths.⁹¹ *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, under its able and progressive editor, Akshyay Kumar Datta, spearheaded the defensive action of the Hindu society against the missionary attack of Alexander Duff,⁹² Debendranath Tagore, after searching for a long time, "gave up the doctrine of the infallibility of the Vedas, held by Rammohan".⁹³

However, when a new radical group joined the ranks of Brahmo Samaj under the leadership of Keshub Chandra Sen, the Samaj experienced phenomenal growth as well as several break-ups. K.C. Sen joined the Samaj in 1857, and became its Acharya in 1862. He advocated inter-caste marriages and the removal of Purdah which was strongly opposed by the older members, including his mentor, the progressive Debendranath Tagore. This in 1862 led to the first break-up of the Samaj: one group called themselves the "Brahmo Samaj of India" under K.C. Sen and the older group under Debendranath, known as "Adi Brahmo Samaj". Keshub organized branches of his group all over India and thus Brahmo Samaj became the "first All India religious movement shortly to be followed by an All-India political movement led by Surrendranath Banerjea."⁹⁴ R.C. Majumdar evaluates the developments in the Brahmo Samaj thus:

Maharshi Devandranath Tagore, who succeeded Rammohan as the head of the Brahmo Samaj and was the real creator of it as a separate religious sect, proclaimed the freedom of reason from the bondage of ancient scriptural authority. Keshub Chandra Sen, the next leader, proceeded a step further and asserted the absolute freedom of the individual conscience from the bondage of social customs and conventions. Both of them were inspired by English education.⁹⁵

Keshub's Christology is mainly found in four of his lectures delivered between 1866 and 1883: i) "Jesus Christ; Europe and Asia", 1866; ii) "Christ and Christianity?", 1870; iii) "India Asks, Who is Christ?", 1879; iv) "That Marvellous Mystery—the Trinity", 1882. "Beginning with the perception of Jesus as a great man and a reformer Keshub proceeded to recognize him as divine humanity, and went on to rehabilitate him as the second person of the Trinity,

the Universal Logos, incarnate sonship".⁹⁶ He stressed the Asianness of Christ and regarded the Cross as a beautiful symbol of self-sacrifice. Christ, when emptied himself away, heaven came pouring into his soul, divinity filling the void, then making a Divine Humanity. Christ is the son. He existed in God before he was created. Keshub addressed him: "My Christ, my sweet Christ, the brightest jewel in my heart, the necklace of my soul." To him, Christ is not man-God, but God-Man. He conceived Trinity as one substance, one person, but three conditions, functions and manifestations mingling in synthetic unity. Christ is not the Father, but humanity pure and simple in which divinity dwells. Homage to Christ is "not the worship of Divinity but the worship of humanity".⁹⁷ Keshub has anticipated many of the theological perspectives of modern theology that which are basic to the New Testament.⁹⁸

Another major division occurred in the Samaj in 1878 on account of the marriage of Keshub's under-aged daughter with the Raja of Cooch-Bihar, in violation of the principles of the Native Marriage Act and that of the Brahmo Samaj, both of which were largely the creation of Keshub himself. The protesters came to be known as the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Keshub organized his small group of supporters into the Nava Vidhan Sabha (Church of the New Dispensation), a syncretistic and eclectic religion, with Hindu and Christian features. Majumdar writes, "No one can possibly deny that though unsuccessful in its programme of religious reform, the social reforms initiated by (the Samaj) have made a notable contribution to the renaissance or regeneration of Bengal in the Nineteenth century."⁹⁹

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), the foremost reformer in the field of female education was a friend of radical Derozians. Twelve long years of Sanskrit study, though made him the undisputed Sanskrit scholar in Calcutta, proved to be 'of absolute futility so far as his spiritual life was concerned;' on the other hand Western rationalism and humanistic ethics had "won a new convert in Vidyasagar".¹⁰⁰ He believed that "if India were to be rescued from her present degradation, the inert Indian society was to be made dynamic through Western mobility".¹⁰¹ Vidyasagar was a lone crusader in the cause of widow-remarriage. Even social reformers like Rammohan, though severely opposed Sati, was indifferent to the question of widow remarriage.¹⁰² Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the great Christian poet of Bengal called Vidyasagar "the greatest bengali" who have the "genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an English man, and the heart of a Bengalee mother".¹⁰³ Though Indian social structure failed to recognize the humanity of the individual, Vidyasagar saw Upanishads contained a very lofty humanism and he strived hard to save that humanism

“from extinction and rebuild the tradition of humanism.” He was the conscience of the society of his day.¹⁰⁴

Two other persons who deeply influenced the Bengal culture in modern times were Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) and his disciple, Vivekananda (1863-1902). Both of them cultivated a spirit of tolerance and accepted other religions as valid paths to salvation.¹⁰⁵ Vivekananda, in his neo-Vedanta, reinterpreted Hindu theology in terms of social ethics. He organized the Ramakrishna mission, for the purpose of rejuvenating Hindu spirit and morality along the lines of Christian mission.

Bepin Chandra Pal (1858-1922) who started as a member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, rose to one of the national leaders of India. He has got a clear vision of modern secular India. In the first issue of his English weekly journal named *New India* (1901) he wrote, “This new India is neither Hindu,... nor Mohammedan. The new Indian nation is an organic whole. Its component parts are Hindus and Mohammedans, and Parsees and Christians and aboriginal tribes still living in the primitive stages of evolution”.¹⁰⁶ “Patriotism” he said, is good, excellent, divine only when it further the end of universal humanity. Nationality divorced from humanity is a source of weakness and evil, and not strength and good.¹⁰⁷

Among the literary figures who modernized Bengali literature include Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, whose *Anandamath* is considered as the first Bangali novel—which also contributed the famous patriotic song *Bande Mataram*—, Saratchandra Chatterjee and the nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore is considered as the poet of life, suffering and sorrow, the bitterness of life submerged in the shadows, the misery of women; of the tragic aspects of life which have never been a literary theme hither to.¹⁰⁸ Like Bepin Chandra Pal he also wanted to channelize the streams of nationalism in the direction of “supernationalism” i.e., “World-nationalism”. He dreamed of India becoming an experimental laboratory for world humanity.¹⁰⁹ He was very much influenced by the Christ’s ideal of self-sacrifice, taking on the sufferings of others. He visualized India as a synthesizer and unifier of world cultures, a pilgrimage of world humanity,—*Vishva Bharati* (Universal India).

b) Revivalists

Unlike in the Muslim period, the Hindu orthodoxy during the British period could galvanize strength to oppose any challenge to tradition. Even though Rammohan’s efforts were intended only to reform Hinduism he was strongly opposed by orthodox Hindus even during his Rungpur days.¹¹⁰ To counter Rammohan’s *Sambad*

Kaumudi (1821) Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay started *Samachar Chandrika* (1822). The conservatives had their first organization to protect the traditional social customs and practices in the *Gaudia Samaj*. It did not have the exclusive orthodoxy of the later *Dharma Sabha*.¹¹¹ The abolition of Sati in 1829, the alarm created by the Derozians and the criticisms of Brahmo Samaj led to the formulation of a more militant association called *Dharma Sabha* in 1830 under the leadership of Radhakant Deb of Sobhabazar. The Sabha started the Seal's Free College "To prevent the conversion of Hindu students by Christian missionaries".¹¹² Akshaya Kumar Datta, a progressive himself, wrote:

...even our womenfolk are renouncing their own religion and finding shelter in an alien religion! ... our religion is being destroyed, our motherland is on the verge of ruin and our very Hindu name stands in danger of being obliterated once and for all time.... So, if you desire your own good and that of your family, if you desire good of your native land and if you love truth, then keep the boys away from the missionaries.¹¹³

These Hindu reactions were born out of a desire to defend their tradition as it was "the only way of saving the country from disintegrating forces unleashed by the Christian missionaries and the ultra-radicals."¹¹⁴ The Hindu revivalism which was in the offing since the days of Rammohan Roy 'came to a head with the passing of the Native Marriage Bill in 1872' which legalized intercaste marriages on the declaration that one does not belong to any religion.¹¹⁵ In order to protect traditional Hindu rites the Orthodox group organised the *Sanatan Dharmarakshini Sabha* (Society for the Preservation of Traditional religion) under Kamal Krishna Deb and Kalikrishna Deb of Sobha bazar. They were supported by two movements from outside Bengal: The Arya Samaj and the Theosophic movement. The Arya Samaj with its motto, 'back to the Vedas' wanted to reorganize the society on Vedic ideals and started the *Suddhi* movement (reconversion to Hinduism) however, its impact was negligible in Bengal, while theosophy society got considerable following in Bengal.

The spirit of re-awakened Hinduism and the beginning of political consciousness found expression in the *Jatiya Mela* founded in 1867 (renamed, *Hindu Mela* in 1872), *National* paper founded by "National" Nabgopal Mitra in 1865, *Jatya Sabha* (National Society) by Raj Narain Bose who has been affectionately called 'the Grandfather of Indian Nationalism'.¹¹⁶ The news appear founded by Sisir Kumar Ghose—*Amrita Bazar Patrika* (1868)—also inspired political and social consciousness. Surrendranath Banerjea who acquired the sobriquet of "Surrender Not" became an all India symbol of

nationalism. The first President of the Indian National Congress met in Bombay in December 1885 was an eminent Bengali lawyer, W.C. Banerjea. In the second session of the Congress held in Calcutta in 1886 decision was taken to merge the National Conference started in 1883 by Surrendranath Banerjea and others with the Congress. With the arrival of Aurobindo Ghosh from England in 1893 a new spirit of extremism was blown into Bengal politics.¹¹⁷ When Aurobindo left politics and retired to his asram at Pondicherry, the extremist fire was carried on by Subhash Chandra Bose. The partition of Bengal in 1905 sparked the spirit of Swadeshi and provided elements of unity and self-reliance all over India. Muslim leaders like Abdul Rasul, Gusnavi and Liaquat Hussain also extended their support to Swadeshi ideas.¹¹⁸

5. Analysis

The analysis and interpretation of the Bengal Renaissance can not be done without inviting questions and criticisms. The role of British administration, orientalist and missionaries are often either over-emphasized or devalued. Some would consider Bengal Renaissance as a revivalism of Hinduism in reaction to Christian missions. Others would consider it as a positive effect of British rule and English Education. Still others would see it as a response of Hinduism to the modern challenges raised by Western liberal and Christian forces. Our task here would be to examine these claims and see what role the Gospel of Jesus Christ played in the cultural awakening of Bengal and India at large; and how the Hindus and Indian Christians perceived Gospel and its values differently from the missionaries. We may also identify how the Gospel received deeper and new meanings through the culture of Bengal.

a) The changes that brought about by India's contact with the West have been generally evaluated by Indian writers in the following way: By the second half of the Nineteenth century the traditional forces in Bengal were considerably shattered. The age-old caste restrictions about "food, drink and sea-voyage" have started disappearing. Caste mobility was increased and certain lower castes were able to rise above their traditional position.¹¹⁹ Concept of India as a nation emerged. Zeal for reform overpowered the age long apathy and inertia, new conceptions of morality and religion and a new sense of the value of the individual replaced the traditional value system.¹²⁰ A new style of Bengali literature emerged.¹²¹

M.M. Thomas, an Indian Christian thinker, has analysed this cultural revolution in the following way: i) a movement from the vision of an indifferenced unity of human beings, world and God

towards differentiation, leading to a heightened sense of individuality. ii) a movement from the concept of the world as nature to the world as history. iii) a movement from the sacred to the secular, from traditional authority to rational analysis, preparing the way for science and technology, freedom of politics and society from the control of institutional authority, increasing emphasis on personal freedom and social justice. iv) Understanding of history as the sphere of "personal being in love and community, a goal where all alienations are overcome".¹²²

b) Three types of movements were partners in the struggle to create a new spiritual awakening in India: i) the movement inspired by ideas of secular humanism with a liberal or socialist emphasis. ii) the movement oriented to the reform and renewal of traditional Hindu religion, metaphysics and ethics, and iii) Christianity with its educational and service enterprises, and the development of congregations which are more than mere traditional ethnic groups.¹²³ Main channels through which modern ideas have found their way to India, according to S. Natarajan, an Indian historian, are "British rule, English education and Christian missions".¹²⁴

The British rulers, notwithstanding their declared policy of 'benevolent neutrality in religion and social matters,' inspired by liberal humanism and encouraged by the demand and cooperation from the advanced Indian reformers, enacted much social legislations, regulating practices of female infanticide, sati and slavery, challenged the traditional concepts of caste and sex which were built upon inherent inferiority and superiority among human beings and promoting the idea of equality of persons before law.¹²⁵ About the contribution of English education, Majumdar writes: "Fifty years of English education brought greater changes in the minds of the educated Hindus of Bengal than the previous thousand years."¹²⁶

In the opinion of Natarajan,

Christian missions have incidentally and indirectly done much good to the country. The fear of Christianity has been the beginning of much social wisdom in India.... Social service, as distinguished from social reform, is a new feature of Indian life which we owe chiefly to the example of Christian missions.¹²⁷

To this we may also add the point made by Arend Van Leeuwen that it has been the new economic arrangements popularized by the British administrator that made "such a revolutionary impact on all levels of Indian society".¹²⁸ Similar to the land reforms happened in France just before the Revolution, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, that which had become one of the important factors that led to the overthrow of feudal vestiges, the Permanent Settlement of 1793 in Bengal, created a new class of land owners replacing the community

or clan ownership, and disintegrated the traditional hierarchical society of Bengal.¹²⁹

c) Even though majority of the officials of the British East Indian Company were hostile to any kind of missionary work in their territories, there were people like Charles Grant, the evangelical Chairman of the East India Company's Court of Directors, who thought Indian territories were allotted by providence, not merely that they might acquire profit from them, but that they diffuse among the inhabitants the 'light and benign influence of the truth, blessings of a well regulated society, improvements and crafts of active industry.' William Wilberforce, the evangelical leader of the social reforms in England also wanted to transform Indian culture by the gradual introduction and establishment of British 'principles and opinions, laws, institutions and manners, religion and morals'.¹³⁰

Consequently there was an identification of Christian values and western values. While the Orientalists and missionaries like Carey differentiated between English education and Indian cultural change, the Anglicists viewed English education as the only way to effect cultural change in India. English education, British liberal values, as these are certainly informed by the Gospel, have been viewed one and the same.

d) The six centuries of Muslim rule did not produce any sort of revival within Hinduism. Within certain boundaries Hinduism enjoyed peace. What it produced was apathy and inertia, indifference and superstition, stagnancy, torpidity and virulence of society. On the other hand the British rule created a climate in India for the opening up of Indian mind to the wider world situation; this exposure helped them to compare themselves with Western countries, to explore the reasons for their backwardness and stimulated them to take risks in re-organizing traditional social patterns, man-woman relationships, inter-caste and inter-religious relationships.

e) The Orientalist's attempt to link the classical Sanskrit with the European languages and their discovery of the rich heritage of Vedic culture and their analysis of subsequent degeneration of the Hindu society, helped the newly educated Indians to dig into their past and Hindu resources for the renewal of society, from their own culture. The Hindu reformers rejected the Christian idea of superiority that they alone hold the key to the regeneration of the benighted Indians.

f) The Bengal Renaissance was not altogether an uncritical acceptance of the western ideals and values. The attack of Christian missionaries of Hindu customs and the conversions they effected, alarmed the Hindu intelligentsia and created in them a desire to defend their culture which was fast eroding. The reformers and the revivalists, except a few, were not lying back on their immediate

past, but delved deep into the beginning of their history which they found to be compatible or even superior to the western culture and values. The role the western ideas and values played was to challenge the sleeping giant to awaken itself and find its own identity. The Hindus were able to galvanize their latent energy and resist the "Christian virus" and acquired a certain immunity against it.

h) Christianity was feared as an enemy to the ancient culture and religion and the Hindus fortified themselves successfully against it, even though Jesus Christ was acknowledged and appreciated. Samuel Rayan, an Indian Christian theologian, has raised the question: "Had the Christ of the Gospels been introduced to India in a context of equality and freedom and had the meaning of the cross and the dimensions of love been presented in a different manner, more positively and respectfully, would there not have been a wider, deeper, more beautiful response?"¹³¹ Our answer would be, Yes.

h) The European contact with India has never been a one-way traffic. The West learned their own deficiencies and came out of their self-imposed superiority to recognize the richness and variety of other cultures. Christianity itself was challenged by the lofty Hindu concepts of religion; God, Dharma and tolerance. Samuel Rayan makes the following observations: i) Hindus in the Nineteenth century welcomed Christ of the Sermon on the Mount, the ethical Christ, not of the dogmas and mystical obfuscations. ii) They recognized Jesus as an Asian and felt close to him, a Christ different from the 'denationalizing European Christ of the missionaries and their warring denominations'. iii) Christ as *the* incarnation was unacceptable to most Hindus, while Christ as *an* incarnation was welcome. iv) Some worshipped Christ as Saviour, Son of God and God-Man, but differently understood from traditional Christian orthodoxy. This Christ was the centre of a new dispensation, a Universal Church, harmonizing the religions of the world. v) There were others too who looked upon Christ as liberator from social and religious oppression.¹³² The poor looked to Christianity a source of liberation not only from social bonds but also from the spiritual bonds that made them social slaves.

Christianity learned to distinguish itself from Western culture and Indian Indian cultural elements found its way to theology and worship. The ideas of "Hindu Church of Christ", Christ as Divine Humanity, i.e., the "incarnate Sonship", Trinity as *Saccidananda*, Creation as *Maya*, Cross as self-sacrifice, celebration of Lord's Supper with rice and water instead of bread and wine, all these could be taken as pioneering efforts in the direction of an Indian Christian Theology, a pioneer effort to liberate theology from the Western context.¹³³

i) India Christians began to think themselves as Indian Christians distinguishing them from Western Christians. They rejected the idea that by becoming a Christian one should accept Western cultural values. They resisted attempts to deprive them of their cultural roots and aspired to develop within the Hindu cultural fold. They found Christianity not as a fulfillment of Hinduism, but Christ as building bridge to Hinduism, closing the gap between Hinduism and Christianity, East and West, Religion and religion. Some found Christ as completing the revelations of the Spirit in all religions.¹³⁴ In the words of P. Chenchiah, an Indian Christian theologian, Christian theology builds bridges from Jesus to Judaism and Hinduism and not bridges from Judaism and Hinduism to Christ.¹³⁵ This is "continuity in the reverse". Such a dialogical perspective have led to the discovery of the spiritual horizons which saw the fact of religious plurality and began to understand the various symbol systems not only as many paths leading to God but as God's many ways of coming to us in our concrete historical situations.

j) Christian contact with India did not replace the old culture, but a new culture has begun to take shape which had the ideas of universalism and tolerance at its core. It also holds the idea of relativity of religions even while accepting the unity and absoluteness of truth. The new culture that emerges have the features of *Sanatana Dharma*, the eternal and universal religion, not on the basis of homogeneity of dogmas, but commitment to truth. The new culture that emerges have the potentiality to create a world culture, which is not based on one religious culture but on the convergence of many cultures where religions and cultures will not lose their identity but find fulfillment in one another.

The emerging world culture in India can destroy the monopoly of truth by one particular religion and culture and make the pluriform world cultural traditions parts of a whole. The new world culture has in it the acceptance of the role of religious dimension of human existence, without destroying its secular character, and respect for all people.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the interaction of two cultures, Indian Bengali culture and western Christian culture. In this interaction various kinds of new approaches emerged. On the western side we have seen the secular orientalist who appreciated India's past and helped the Indian culture to recover its lost heritage. Also there were the Anglicists who wanted to remodel Indian culture along the English lines. Among the Christian missionaries there

were Orientalists like Carey and Anglicists like Duff. On the Indian side there were reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy who wanted a cultural renaissance absorbing the liberal spirit of the western culture and revivalists like Radha Kant Deb who considered almost everything western to be dangerous. Indian Christians included radicals like Derozio and Krishna Mohan Banerjea who wanted to reinterpret culture and tradition in the light of reason and Brahmabandhav Upadhyay who could describe himself as Christian in terms of spirituality (*sadhan dharma*) and Hindu in terms of social practice (*samaj dharma*). In this interaction of cultures the west could imbibe Indian spirituality and the Indians could open themselves to the western humanistic ideology. The Indian Christians, as a result could shake off the western dominance in many areas of theology and church life. Many Indian Christians like Krishna Mohan Banerjea and Brahmabandhav Upadhyay were in the forefront of nationalist politics. The western contact with India resulted in the opening up of both cultures to one another. Macaulays and Duffs began to disappear as well as the genre of the Indian conservatives. People who could objectively view their own culture and other cultures began to feel the emergence of a new world culture. Leaders like Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi who influenced the national scene dreamed of an India with its various cultural and linguistic streams, evolving into a miniature world culture rooted at the same time in Indian identity as well as in the secular and liberal ideologies, amalgamating the different cultural values and perspectives. For them India has been no more Hindu, Muslim or Christian as the world is no more Christian, Muslim or Hindu. Through the interaction of different cultures a new world culture is emerging and India has a significant contribution towards its development.

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