

Chapter X

An Appraisal

Before winding up the study it is necessary to formulate certain conclusions on the development of the Brahmo Samaj as a socio-religious movement under the leadership of Keshub Chunder Sen and the contributions made by him to the social and political awakening of modern India.

1. From 1857 when he joined the Calcutta Brahmo Samaj, through its first schism in 1866, second schism in 1878 when the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj was founded, to the establishment of the Navavidhan Samaj in 1880, for a period of about twenty years Keshub Chunder Sen served Brahmo Samaj with all his energy and devotion and made important contributions to its development. Keshub's contributions and historical role can only be comprehended against the background of the contemporary social and political conditions of India. On the one hand, the Indian society hardly showed signs of progress due to the prevailing customs of child marriage, polygamy, suttee, casteism, kulinism, priesthood etc. Hindu society along with its religion became deeply steeped in prejudice and orthodoxy. On the other, the British rule in India had far-reaching effect on the social, political and economic development of the country.

The Brahmo Samaj established by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828, and sustained and developed by Devendranath Tagore, rose to be 'a power, and a power of no mean order' (Duff) under the leadership of Keshub Chunder Sen. The subsidiary units of the

1. See Chapters III, IV.

Samaj were hardly more than a dozen at the time of his joining the Samaj. This number rose to 124 at the time of the second schism of the Samaj in 1878. The branches of the Samaj had spread throughout India. 'He projected an extensive missionary expedition throughout the provinces of India, unattempted before in the history of the Brahma Samaj, and the new educated middle-class in the great cities of Bombay, Madras, Poona and others, greeted the regenerating message of Bengal's Brahmoism through him.'² Brahma Samaj especially in the sixties and seventies of the 19th century became an all-India national organization. Brahmoism became a national force in India.

Keshub's zeal for social reforms with the help of Brahma Samaj at times surpassed his religious zeal. Keshub endeavoured to the best of his ability to eradicate the evils of the Hindu marriage system founded on idolatry and polygamy.³ The questions of improvement of women's position in society, education and temperance equally exercised his mind. His social reform activities up to second schism were immense.⁴

But since the late seventies the Brahma movement flowed in three distinct courses. First, Keshub's increasing emphasis on mystic ideas and ascetic practices turned Brahmoism into the path of mysticism and individual experience in religion. This indirectly helped the rise of Neo-Hinduism and Advaitism. Second, the line of political agitation represented by Sivanath Sastri,

2. Benoy Ghose, 'Brahmoism and the Bengal Renaissance', vol. VII, November, 1958, p. 34.
See also Chapter III.

3. See Section 'Marriage Act III of 1872', Chapter IV.

4. See Chapter IV.

Anandamohan Bose, Surendranath Banerjee, Nabagopal Mitra gathered momentum day by day and found fulfilment in the establishment of the Indian National Congress. Third, Brahma movement took turn into a line of socio-economic reforms, initiated by Sasipeda Banerjee, Dwarkanath Ganguly, Krishna Kumar Mitra and others. 'Under the impact of the growing political agitation and resurgent Hinduism, the Brahma reform movement gradually lost its distinct identity. It became merged in the broad national movement, but not before performing a great historical role.'⁵

However, Keshub's theological contributions to Brahmoism may be disputed by many. Benoy Ghose observes, 'Truly speaking, his theological abstractions are nothing but curious amalgams of Theism, Christianity, Vaishnavism, Saktism and many other religious doctrines.'⁶ His idea of the New Dispensation has been specially subject to sharp criticism. Farquhar criticizes Keshub's idea of synthesis of spiritual cultures or the 'new eclecticism' in which all religions were harmonized, and which all men were invited to regard as their spiritual home. Keshub and his followers claimed to be the apostles of the new religion and church. 'But this claim, which logically carried out, would have set him, as the centre of the final religion of all time, far above Christ, Buddha, Muhammad and every other leader.'⁸ Moreover, in assimilating Hindu rituals and sacraments with those of the Christian church 'the predominantly Christian character

5. Kanailal Chattopadhyay, Brahmo Reform Movement, p. 170.

6. Benoy Ghose, *op.cit.*, pp. 34-5.

7. See Chapter VII.

8. J.N. Farquhar, Modern Religious Movements in India, pp. 55-6.

of it remained all through manifest.' ⁹

Again, the New Dispensation along with its Missionary Conference and Apostolic Darbar reinforced Keshub's position as the unassailable and inaccessible leader. 'The spiritual culture which was to be the basis of the Darbar's authority gave Keshub an unprecedented power bordering on autocracy.' ¹⁰ The New Dispensation therefore failed to attract the attention of the public and ultimately ended in chaos and confusion after the inventor's death. A modern critic observes, 'In the eyes of many observers Keshub Chunder had ceased to be a "Hindu", the Persian synonym for Indian, or a member of the national religion of India, and therefore forfeited his right to speak for India.' ¹¹ ¹²

2. One may point out contradiction in Keshub's zeal for emancipation of women and the limitations imposed by him on the same. He was pioneer in bringing out a married woman, his wife from the ancestral family house into the open to attend a social festival of the Calcutta Brahmo Samaj. His activities especially for the cause of women's education were noteworthy. But in either case the achievement was incomplete and half-hearted. In the case of social liberty he advocated a restricted freedom and opposed the Western version of social freedom of women. In the case of education he was not much in favour of higher education for all women. He rather emphasized education more suitable to women's

9. Arabinda Poddar, Renaissance in Bengal, p. 47.

10. Frans L. Damen, Crisis and Religious Renewal in the Brahmo Samaj (1860- 1884), p. 326.

11. Charles H. Heimsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, p. 97.

12. Shanti L. Mukherjee, The Philosophy of Man-Making, p. 25.

nature, domestic happiness and upbringing of future generation of India. In the later years he took great interest in the ideals of ancient Indian womanhood and established Arya Nari Samaj.¹³ This ambivalence in Keshub's attitude to the emancipation of women marks him out as a 'traditional modernizer'.

3. One of the positive contributions of Keshub to the social and political awakening of modern India is the idea of freedom and social equality.¹⁴ Though such movement was already started by Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshub 'fought incessantly for acceptance of individual reason and conscience against external authority and of democracy against any autocracy in any form of government.'¹⁵ But the limitations in the form of 'inner voice' and 'divine injunction' imposed by him on the absolute use of freedom and social liberty made his cherished ideal appear to be contradictory. In the later days he distinguished very little between freedom of conscience and temporal freedom. Moreover, by building around himself a personality cult he practically acted against his mission of absolute freedom. 'Thus, the former apostle of democracy was now viewed as its enemy, and as an autocrat misusing power in the name of divine inspiration.'¹⁶

4. There seems to be a contradiction between his nationalistic views^{16a} and his professed loyalty to the British Crown.^{16b} Keshub as discussed above contributed largely to the cause of nation-building by emphasizing the re-orientation of ancient Indian

13. See Chapter VI.

14. See Chapter VIII.

15. A.C. Banerjee, 'Brahmananda Keshub Chandra Sen', A.C. Gupta (ed.) Studies in Bengal Renaissance, p. 81.

16. Arabinda Poddar, op.cit., p. 50.

16a. See Chapter IX.

16b. See Chapter VIII.

culture and the necessity of a national religion of India. He advocated reform of the traditional marriage system and Hindi as the lingua franca of India striking hard at the barriers of caste, creed and provincialism. Moreover the proclamation of loyalty to the Crown as 'an article of the creed' of the New Dispensation Church¹⁷ in the era of increasing national consciousness seems contradictory. It has been criticized as 'a retrograde step from the point of view both national and individual emancipation.'¹⁸

5. Keshub, as discussed above (Chapter V) was the pioneer in introducing cheap journalism (Sulabh Samachar) for the benefit of the poor and ignorant masses. He exhorted them to rise from stupor through the columns of Sulabh Samachar. However, he 'neither sustained the inspiration nor indulged in such pronouncements for any length of time. As such the chances of developing a bond of belonging together through such agitational approaches were frittered away.'¹⁹ Moreover in the later years Keshub tried to make Brahmoism more acceptable to the greater public, especially the Hindus. He thus laid emphasis on the psychology and the puranic spirit of image-worship already largely accepted by the common run of men in Hindu society. He tried to establish his identity with the people and not merely with limited number of enlightened men. But 'the eclecticism in religion with westernized bias and Anglophilism in the field of political behaviour stood as

17. See Chapter VII.

18. Shanti L. Mukherjee, op.cit., p. 25.

19. Poddar, op.cit., p. 58.

stumbling blocks on the way to its realization.'²⁰

6. Keshub carried forward the message of love, unity and synthesis. He contemplated a church unsectarian and catholic in character. But he failed to avert the schisms in the Samaj especially the second schism for which he was mainly responsible. He failed to inspire his followers with these ideals. His followers, after his death, could not dispassionately and successfully bear the responsibility entrusted to them by their minister. 'Thus in Keshub Sen's church, which had been founded to give battle to ethnocentricism, nationalism, and parochialism, his followers could not disown their sectarian passions.'²¹

But notwithstanding the above contradictions and the dissipation of his original movement Keshub's contributions to the awakening of modern India undoubtedly remains significant. Prof Zaehner observes, 'The Brahma Samaj... injected into Hinduism a social conscience it had never had before.'²² The credit for the same goes more to Keshub Chunder Sen than to any one else. Brahma Samaj launched a comprehensive programme of social reform under his inspiration and leadership. This type of reform movement became vital for the emancipation of the individual and nation. He emphasized rather the inward development of the individuals and the nation than mere material development. Through Good Will Fraternity, Brahma Vidyalaya, Sangat Sabha, Bharat Asram and

20. *ibid.*

21. David Kopf, Brahmo Samaj, p. 286.

22. R.C. Zaehner, Hinduism, p. 204.

various such institutions, he tried to build up individual and national character. In the case of politics he pleaded for an ethical foundation (Chapter VIII). He took the British rule to be providential and repeatedly urged the British Government to promote India's moral regeneration and not limits its help merely material development. 'He was reported to have once told Suremranath Banerjee to allow him to elevate the masses morally and socially before the latter agitated for their political emancipation.'²³

Keshub contributed largely to the growth of nationalism in India 'by making Indians aware of themselves as one nation and by his successes abroad and at home which made them feel proud and self-reliant.'²⁴ He laid emphasis on a true religion, free from sectarianism and orthodoxy ; Hindi as a lingua-franca ; inter-marriage among Indians²⁵ and unity and homogeneity of India. Keshub carefully reviewed the essential requirements for unity among the people of this vast sub-continent. He was the first to arouse the hope through his all-India movement that an Indian unity could be forged through religion. In this matter he acted as a formative influence on later nation-builders like Swami Vivekananda and others.

Keshub emphasized the necessity of the uplift of the lowlier classes from the thraldom of ignorance and humility. He rightly assumed that the future society either in India or elsewhere would be ruled by the vast masses, 'the men of consequence'.

23. Poddar, op.cit., p. 42.

24. M. Borthwick, Keshub Chunder Sen, p. 232.
See also Chapter IX.

25. K.B. Sen, 'Inter-marriage and India's Rebirth', Will India Be Free ?, p. 36.

Keshub wrote, 'There will come a time on earth when the proletariat will not remain dumb, will not remain lying on the ground in misery... In the advanced countries there has already begun a class-war.'²⁶ As discussed in the preceding pages (Chapter VIII) Keshub was not a socialist in the strict sense of the term. In spite of the growing popularity of socialism in Europe Keshub did not associate himself with the socialist movement. He mainly advocated the moral regeneration of his country. But the way in which he tried to arouse the ignorant masses through the columns of Sulabh Samachar was more akin to the socialist measure for rousing the proletariat. Moreover, the foundation of an Industrial School and a Working Men's Institution aimed at providing work education to the middle class people, and moral education to the working classes respectively. The impact of the reformist nature of British socialism and the British industrialized society on Keshub cannot be ruled out.

In spite of limitations of the idea of the New Dispensation Keshub's formulation of synthesis of religions was significant both religiously and sociologically for achieving communal harmony, and spiritual unity among the human races. It still remains important from its objective point of view. It has thus been described as 'probably the greatest intellectual adventure of the nineteenth-century Bengal.'²⁷

Last but not least, Keshub's life, as we noted before, was a constant striving for the life universal, for the harmony

26. 'Men of Consequence', Sulabh Samachar, 31st Sraban, 1278 B.S. (1871 A.D.), Part - 1, No. 40, p. 159, transl. by P.S. Basu, Life and Works of Brahmananda Keshav, p. 277.

27. D. Kopf, op.cit., preface, p. XVI.

of the East with the West. All his philosophy of life and society was founded on the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. The spirit of universal fellowship in Keshub marks him out clearly²⁸ a 'sophisticated cosmopolite with subtle, eclectic intellects.'

Thus we see, in the final analysis, that Keshub Chunder Sen contributed in two ways to the awakening of modern India. In one way, Brahma Samaj under his leadership played a historical role in modernizing Indian society striking hard at the core of its orthodoxy. On the other, Keshub was responsible to a great extent for the growth of Indian nationalism and the development of freedom and social equality. The limitations of Keshub should not be ascribed to the subjective factor alone. The alleged contradictions in him, if viewed objectively and not apologetically, reflect the contradictions of his age. Keshub's thought reflected his vision of a regenerated India, responsive to the demands of the emerging society.

28. *ibid.*, p. 250.