Chapter VI

Spiritual Experience and The New Synthesis

In this chapter, we intend to take up the question of a significant ramification of a leading idea of the New Hindu Movement i.e. the idea of personal illumination. The life and activities of Swami Vivekananda illustrate how this ramification occurred.

The search for personal illumination was seen in its pure form in the lives of Keshub Chandra Sen and Bijoy Krishna Goswami. Bankim's exposition of Hinduism does not seem to have concerned itself with this factor - certainly not with the sort of religious ecstasy by which Keshub Chandra Sen set so much store. But it would be far from true to say that Bankim's exposition was only an exercise in intellectualism. His rationalist structure was certainly a triumph of the intellect, but not in the sense of a rigorous logical argumentation, in which every second step is made meticulously to follow from the first. There were serious gaps and unwarranted jumps in his systematic exposition. The introduction of God in the middle of a humanistic discourse was logically unsatisfactory, even allowing for the fact that God in Bankim's conception was not the external God of monotheists, but an all-pervading Personal Being who represented the limit of human possibilities. But if Bankim failed to create a logical structure of cast-iron solidity he rescued his work from degenerating into lifeless intellectualism by punctuating it with universal insights.
that had also the ring of the personal in it, - thereby indicating that he was a true son of his age. He too was a spiritual seeker and no mere doctrinaire. His perception that the classical and the Renaissance conception of humanism emphasizing the fullest development of one's powers but seeking their harmony within the limits of one's own self could not make for the sort of happiness, that was the happiness of a "liberated soul" (नृत्यक्रिया) was not a perception deriving from mere logic. His assertion that Bhakti consisted in turning all the human powers to God and that this was also how their true harmony was achieved was a major religious discovery, one that was inexplicable except against the background of a life-time's spiritual effort.

Actually Bankim, even while giving a rationalist exposition of religion was indicating a way of personal illumination although it was not the sort of illumination achieved through religious ecstasy. He himself was perfectly conscious of the greatness of his discovery, and in one of the many autobiographical passages of his dialogue, the Guru addresses the disciple thus:

"When all the powers are directed towards God, that condition is Bhakti. - This is so hard a saying that I have little hope of your divining its essence by hearing it uttered on a single occasion. I daresay you will face many doubts and experience much confusion in arriving at its meaning. You will probably find many loopholes in it. In the end you may even come to regard it as meaningless prattle. But don't you get discouraged. Turn it over in your mind by taking thought over days, months, years. Attempt to apply it in action. Slowly its meaning will be revealed to you like fire bursting into flames by continuous addition of firewood. If that happens regard it as your life's fulfilment. Of all the truths learnt by man none is profounder. If a man employs his whole life to the learning of proper lessons and
in the end reaches this truth, know that his life has attained fulfilment”.1

Proceeding in a nobler strain, the Guru - who is now seen to be Bankim himself with little attempt at disguise - says:

"Even when I was in a state of extreme youthfulness I used to be struck with the thought: what shall I do with this life? What indeed has to be done with it? Through the whole course of my life I have sought an answer to this question; and the search for the answer has almost brought me to the end of my days. I received many answers current amongst men and went through much suffering to ascertain their truth. I read a great deal, I toiled in authorship, I conversed with many people, I did my stint in the way of action. I spared no pains to reach my life's fulfilment. At long last I came to this truth: when a man directs all the powers he was born with to God, that is Bhakti, and without Bhakti there is no virtue in man. This is the answer I have received. This is the true answer, all other answers are false”.2

A sensitive reader, when going through this beautiful passage, will at once realise that Bankim was here referring to a sort of personal illumination, even though it was a very different sort of personal illumination from the one preached by Keshub and his spiritual brethren. The religious illumination sought by Bankim was a very human affair indeed. It was reached through a life of human suffering and human action from which the motif of self-directedness was removed through infinite pain and the action and the suffering and the pain were all directed to God. There is poetry in such a passage, but emphatically it is not the poetry of mystical communion with God. The illumination sought by Swami Vivekananda, which it will be our turn to discuss now, cannot be

1. Dharmatattwa: Chapter XI.
2. Dharmatattwa: Chapter XI.
understood apart from a reference to the sort of illumination sought by Bankim. Vivekananda's was indeed a search for mystical communion with God - but with a difference.

(a) The Inner Life of Vivekananda

Vivekananda's life has been treated in so many books by so many authors that it might appear futile to attempt a re-examination of his mission by way of discovering in it a significance that has not been taken due care of by earlier authors. But it is clear that hardly a single author has yet attempted an analysis of that mission apart from describing it as a powerful restatement of Hinduism. But it was certainly not the sort of Hinduism preached by Sasadhar Tarkachudamoni and the orthodox School. An understanding of the distinctive features of Vivekananda's religion has been rendered difficult by the fact that the Swami often appears to preach not a single system of 'Philosophic Hinduism' - but the whole body of doctrines ranging from Vedantic Monism to Puranic Polytheism. All this renders it necessary that we should look for some clue which connects the Swami directly with his historical environment, makes him something more than a mere champion of old Hinduism and explains his grip on the imagination of the English-educated generation of the nineties of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th. This clue is furnished by the ramification of the idea of personal illumination. Unlike any other seeker before him, Vivekananda...
invested this search for personal illumination with a new meaning, rendering, in the process, the classic pursuit of a recluse into something very different, into something that never betokened the sort of peace and security sought by men of contemplation, but rather the restlessness of men of prodigious energy who have descried in the distant horizon an abode of bliss that passeth all understanding; but who having once tasted that bliss in a transitory moment of trance have then lost it only to be left with a sense of unbearable desolation nerving them to action, evermore and to a search that knows no end. Vivekananda's new discovery in religion consisted exactly in this: He made the search for mystical communion with God no longer a matter of sundry spiritual practices gone through in seclusion untrammelled by extraneous disturbances but a prototype of all human adventures aiming at human ends and involving human suffering to the uttermost limit as well as human ecstasy of the loftiest kind. A narrative of this adventure in Vivekananda's own life must precede an elaboration of the doctrines by which he rounded off the thoughts propounded by Bankim and included them in a new synthesis by way of a restatement of the philosophy of Vedanta as preached by Sankaracharya.

Such a narrative must start from a point which antedates the events described in the previous Chapter by several years. Bankim's controversy with the Brahmos occurred in 1884 and his rationalistic exposition of religion was completed only in 1888. But Vivekananda's initiation into religious life occurred much earlier, and its occurrence was wholly independent of
Bankim's exposition. We shall see in due course that in point both of doctrine as well as its social application Vivekananda's religious teaching approximated to that of Bankim closely enough to render the historical role played by both in the national life of Bengal in the succeeding decades a role of almost identical significance. But this must not blind us to the fact that the Sannyasin reached his destination through a course that was very different from that pursued by the writer. The latter's was an achievement of the intellect - the former's of experience. How and when did that experience start?

According to the biographers\(^1\), the years 1880-81 were, in the life of young Narendranath, years of acute spiritual unrest. This unrest did not differ in kind from the intense craving for communion with God, which we have already witnessed in the lives of Keshub Chandra Sen and Vijoy Krishna Goswami. But there was certainly a difference in quality; for Narendranath differed from his older contemporaries by being a man of a very different stamp in certain respects. In the first place 'Naren' was extremely youthful - he was only 17 in 1880; in the second place neither by temperament nor by constitution was he cut out to be a mystic. He had a most powerful physique and there was not a trace of the introvert in him - indeed he was a Bohemian very much given to fun and frolic, whiling away his leisure in

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interminable gaiety sometimes being led to very questionable company by thoughtless pursuit of pleasure. A story is told of his being wheedled into the acquaintance of a rich and beautiful lady from whose amorous approaches he extricated himself only with some difficulty. He himself was not immune from the imperious demands of his superpowerful body, and on one occasion he extinguished an uncontrollable bout of sexual passion by applying a burning coal to his genitals. The act was characteristic, indicating not only a neglect of the usually prescribed course like fasting and abstention from sexually stimulating articles of food by way of chastising the demands of recalcitrant flesh, but also a fierce will power that would stick at nothing to prevent the body, (which in the eyes of the later Vivekanands was only a cloak that entangled the soul within) from running away with its impulses. Speaking about fasting and similar observances, it is interesting that, unlike Mahatma Gandhi, the Swami never preached their necessity although he was absolutely uncompromising in his demand of a spotless calibacy from every prospective religious seeker. This was perhaps the only restraint - admittedly a very powerful one - apart from a childish fondness for the idolatrous lore of orthodox Hinduism inculcated by his mother, that characterised the otherwise easy-going Bohemian life of Naren. He was in great request in all sorts of social circles formed by college boys in Calcutta. He was extremely musical, and his powerful voice resounded the hall when he joined a soiree, and held the audience spell-bound by the generous amenity of its...
Far from betraying any desire for religious ecstasy Naren was gradually drifting away from his ancestral religion, and, when in 1880 or thereabouts, he joined the Brahma Samaj he joined that section of it which had grown as a protest against Keshub Chandra Sen's predilection for mystical contemplation. One of his biographers expressly states that "he did not take kindly to the ecstatic spells of the New Dispensationists nor to their maudlin extravagances in acclaiming Keshub as a sort of Messiah". Whether this opinion is true or not, there is evidence that Naren's joining the Sadharan Brahma Samaj was due more to his enthusiasm for social reforms than to any deep-seated religious craving. Apart from his austerities directed to observing the strictest calibacy - a practice that was of course abhorrent to the Sadharan Brahma Samaj - there was nothing in young Naren to betoken the religious enthusiast. He has actually been portrayed as an agnostic, - as a disciple of Mill and Spencer. Even his passion for strict celibacy was probably an exercise in will-power rather than a preparation for a religious life.

Naren's spiritual unrest during the 1880s has to be seen against the background of these facts. We need not go into the details of what transpired between him and his Guru during the years 1881-86. Every reader of his biography knows how the skeptical Naren was gradually won over to the cult of Advaita; how he was led to shed his disbelief in Kali, the Divine Mother; how on one or two occasions Ramakrishna induced in his favourite disciple the mystical trance for which he was famous, despite the latter's persistent efforts to resist what he began by suspecting as a sort of hypnotic spell; and, last but not least, how Ramakrishna in his dying hours, as if in answer to his disciple's innermost thought, confounded him by declaring that he was an Avatar - the same person, in fact, as in old days used to call himself Rama and Krishna. These are well-known facts attested to by no less a person than Vivekananda himself on many occasions. Every biographer of Vivekananda has mentioned them, and the conclusion they have invariably reached is this: Naren started by being an unbeliever and ended by becoming the staunchest of believers as a result of the mystical experiences he underwent through the guidance of Ramakrishna. The conclusion is no doubt

1. The earliest reference to the mystical experience of Naren is Kathamrita probably in Mahendranath Gupta's "Shri Shri Ramakrishna Kathamrita" Part - II, Appendix; Part - III, Appendix. Naren himself refers to his experiences in Conversation with Mahendranath (Shri'm'). The Conversations are dated March, April, May, 1887 - less than a year after Ramakrishna's death (August, 1886).

2. Prabuddha Bharata, April, 1907: Dr. Brojendra Nath Seal's reminiscences of Vivekananda: An early stage of Vivekananda's mental development.
true but we should be on our guard against putting it so boldly before examining the backlash of his skeptical intellect on those mystical experience through the remaining years of his life. We shall see that the rest of his life was a struggle to achieve a human, a social transformation of the mystical experiences induced in him by Ramakrishna.

There is a good deal of evidence that Naren, who upon his master's death, launched on a career of almost superhuman toil and suffering in the cause of religion, steadily wore himself out to death by doggedly pursuing the aim of mystical experiences vouchsafed to him by Ramakrishna. Mahendranath Gupta, the chronicler of Ramakrishna's dialogues has recorded a conversation which took place during the middle of 1887, barely nine months after the Saint's death. In this Naren is represented as being in a state of extreme unhappiness and despair at his failure to see God whose very existence appeared doubtful to him. Evidently his intellect doubted the evidence of the mystical experiences till he had mastered his Guru's art of entering into Samadhi, as many times as he chose. Two years later we find him writing to Pramada Das Mitra of Benaras to the effect that though his faith in the guiding hand of Providence was unshakable and though he was in possession of the ideal scriptures and the blessing of the ideal amongst men - meaning of course his master - he had failed to do anything by himself. A year later, during February and March, 1890, we find him seeking the discipleship of Pavhari Baba of Ghazipore in the hope that the
latter would teach him what his master had not - apparently an unfailing system for recapturing the mystical experiences in a permanent and lasting manner. The attempt failed and Naren, now become the Swami Vivekananda of the Ramakrishna Order, set out in search of a Himalayan retreat to attain his goal by uninterrupted meditation. The meditation was no sooner begun than broken by the arrival of terrible news. One of his sisters, a victim of an unhappy marriage, had committed suicide.

Vivekananda was heart-broken. He travelled over the length and breadth of India and for two whole years knew hardly any rest. He visited princes, lords, merchants and was often a guest with the poorest of the poor. He saw India's abject poverty and was fascinated by the deep piety of her poorest children. It was an experience he never forgot and in his later years he was never tired of pointing out the contrast between the poor in the West and the poor in India. In the West, he thought, poverty meant vice and all manner of moral degeneration. But in India the poorest of her children were the repositories of her spiritual greatness. This was the Swamiji's great discovery and it was realistic enough to unfold its full significance to him only after the terrible helplessness of those of his poor brethren and the thousands of Indian women ('the emblems of the Divine Mother') like his own sister had been revealed to him as a sort of unique experience as powerful as the one induced in him by the touch of his master. At any rate, this new experience inspired the Swami to give to his master's teaching an interpretation that changed the whole course of his life.
Before taking up the interpretation, we must discuss this sudden change in the course of Vivekananda's life. The change was actually one from the life of a desiring recluse seeking a Himalayan retreat for meditation aimed at personal illumination to that of a warrior preacher proclaiming in a voice of thunder, the timeless truths of Hinduism to raise a whole unbelieving world to the level of Vedanta and asking this same unbelieving world to raise, in its turn, the masses of India from their state of extreme wretchedness by lending a helping hand. The biographers are silent as to the impact of the news of his sister's death on Vivekenanda. It was in fact tremendous. "I went years ago to the Himalayas, never to come back", he wrote from America many years after. "The news (of my sister's death) reached me there, and that weak heart flung me off from that prospect of peace! Peace have I sought, but the heart, that seat of Bhakti, would not allow me to find it".

Thus he wrote in 1899. It has only to be added that in Vivekananda's eyes the terribleness of his sister's fate was multiplied a hundred fold by illustrating, as it were, the fate of myriads of Indian women whose lot was similar if not identical. The drama was heightened by including in the performance and as part of the same personal history the frightful condition of the Indian masses - in Vivekananda's reckoning so many "Children of Bliss". "It is the weak heart that has driven me out of India to seek some help for those I love, and here I am!" wrote in the

same letter. To Nivedita, he said, "Never forget the word The woman and the people". Such was the background to the transformation of the recluse to the warrior.

Let us try to grasp the nature of this transformation a bit more closely. Vivekananda's mission in the West was, of course, to preach the timeless truths of Hinduism there. But it is clear from his letters that he intended his gift of Hindu scriptural truths to be reciprocated by the American gift of men and money to place the poor in India securely on their feet. "Just as in our country social virtue is singularly lacking, so here (in America) there is little spirituality. I am giving them spirituality, they are giving me money. ........ This is why I have come to America - to earn money by my own effort and devote the rest of my life (in India) to realise this one aim (i.e., to raise the masses of India)".

This was how Vivekananda expressed himself in one letter, conveying unmistakably, the impression of a tradesmanship in religion. Actually such letters were so numerous, and, on occasion, his condemnation of the religious recluse was so violent that he was apt to be mistaken for a mere secular spokesman of "the woman and the people". "Who cares for Bhakti and Mukti ?" - he thundered on one occasion. "Who cares what the scriptures say ? I will go to hell cheerfully a thousand times, if I can rouse my countrymen, immersed in Tamas (sloth, ignorance and timidity), and make them stand on their own feet and be Men. ........ I am not a follower of Ramakrishna or any one, I am a follower of him only who carries out my plans".

Such was the voice of Vivekananda after his dream of personal illumination in Himalayan retreat was shattered by an experience of the condition of India's 'woman and people'. 
But such utterances have to be placed beside the ones that follow in order to bring out the relation between Vivekananda, the fighter for 'the woman and the people' and Vivekananda - the seeker for personal illumination. "I don't want to work", he writes to Nivedita on his second money-earning) mission to America: "I want to be quiet, and rest. .......... But the fate or Karma, I think, derives me on - work, work. We are like cattle driven to the slaughter house - hastily nibbling a bite of grass on the road-side as they are driven along under the whip".1 - "After all, Joe", he writes to Miss Macleod a few days later, "I am only the boy who used to listen with rapt wonderment to the wonderful words of Ramakrishna under the Banyan tree at Dakshineswar. That is my true nature; works and activities, doing good and so forth are all superimpositions. .......... The sweetest moments of my life have been when I was drifting. .......... Behind my work was ambition, behind my love was personality, behind my purity was fear, behind my guidance the thirst for power ! Now, they are vanishing, and I drift".1. "My nature" - (this to Mary Hale) "is the retirement of a Scholar. I never get it"3. Again, - "I have worked for this world, Mary, all my life, and it does not give me a piece of bread without taking a pound of flesh. .......... If ever a man found the vanity of things, I have it now. This is the world, hideous, beastly corpse. Who thinks of helping it - is a fool"4.

2. Letter to Miss Macleod, Alameda, California, 18th April, 1900. Ibid., pp. 431.
3. Letter to Miss Mary Hale, 22nd March, 1900, San Francisco, complete works, vol. VIII, pp. 503.
What is clear from a comparison of such utterances is this: the transformation of Vivekananda from the religious recluse of the Himalayan retreat to that of warrior for the woman and people was achieved at a terrible price which was ultimately to kill him. A warrior whose vocation was determined by the "weakness of his heart", that is to say, by his sensibility taking fire from the condition of "the woman and the people", while his whole soul demanded a solution to the riddle of personal illumination attained momentarily and then lost, must have a tremendous struggle going within himself and giving him no rest. Now intense the struggle was in the case of Vivekananda, can be judged from the fact that during the nine years from the date of his Chicago address till his death, he worked like one possessed, flinging himself across the world as if in a whirlwind talking, lecturing, bringing people round to his point of view, sometimes tearing them asunder by a mighty force from their settled avocations and condemning them to a whole life-time of toil and suffering, sometimes killing them outright by sheer exhaustion; injecting super-human vigour into the faint-hearted, infusing a part of his superabundant energy into the lazy and the lack-a-daisical, - in a word, acting like one in a terrible fit of madness. He was wearing himself out, slowly, steadily and irrevocably. An American admirer, watching him in the course of a lecture in 1896 noted:

"Never had I seen the Master look as he looked that night. There was something in his beauty not of earth. It was as if the spirit had almost burst the bonds of flesh and it was then that I saw a foreshadowing of the end. He was much
exhausted from years of overwork, and it was even then to be seen that he was not long for this world. I tried to close my eyes to it, but in my heart I knew the truth. He had needed rest but felt that he must go on". 1

Another, describing the effect of the Swami's presence on people about him wrote in the same year.

"He could rivet attention on himself: and when he spoke in all seriousness and intensity - though it seems well nigh incredible - there were some among his hearers who were literally exhausted. In one case I know of a man who was forced to rest in bed for three days on the result of a nervous shock received by a discussion with the Swami." 2

These descriptions bring out two aspects of the struggle within Vivekananda - one, the utter exhaustion of his body brought about by a quantity of work no human flesh would endure, and the other his superhuman will-power growing steadily even as his body was going to pieces. In other words, it was Naren over again in the practice of chastising the demands of recalcitrant flesh to make the spirit shine forth in all its splendour. He was striving in his person to render the fight for the cause of "the woman and the people" an act of terrible renunciation. Actually he was striving to render that fight a substitute for meditation in the Himalayan retreat.

The interesting thing about Vivekananda was this. Such a struggle, instead of making him fearfully abnormal, attracted to him men and women of all sorts whose love for him was tinged-

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2. Ibid., pp. 400.
with infinite tenderness. "We saw him leave us", wrote another admirer, "with the fear that clutches the heart when a beloved, gifted, passionate child fares forth, unconscious, in an untried world". Such words written about the lion-hearted Vivekananda strike us with wonder. But it is perfectly obvious that his friends' love for him was not merely the love one feels for a great religious teacher. In the first place his lion's heart itself found expression in a sort of courage which was in some sense very exceptional and by that very reason calculated to inspire people with love rather than mere veneration. Unlike most men of religion he exemplified, a courage which was not of the stoical, forbearing kind, but rather of an exceedingly youthful and masculine one. Nivedita has narrated an incident in England in which Vivekananda, while travelling across some fields in the company of two English friends - one of them a lady - was assailed by a mad bull which came tearing towards them. The Englishman ran away, but the lady sank to the ground quite exhausted by her attempt at running. The Swami at once planted himself between the bull and the lady and escaped sure death only by the bull's turning away at the last moment. Such incidents were by no means exceptional, and the Swami easily won the hearts of people he came across by such demonstrations. But these do not explain the tenderness with which he was treated by most of his admirers. His letters bear ample testimony to such tenderness."

"Mr. and Mrs. Sevier", writes the Swami himself, of two of his...

1. Ibid., pp. 412.
English friends, "have clad me when I was cold, nursed me better than my mother would have, borne with me in my weakness, my trials; and they have nothing but blessings for me". The biographers assure us that these elderly people, while looking upon the Swami as their master in their search for religion, at the same time, treated him as their son. Similarly, of his American friends Mrs. Bull and Miss Josephine Macleod, Vivekananda writes thus: "Mrs. Bull and Miss Macleod have been to our country, moved and lived with us as no foreigner ever did, roughing it, and they do not ever curse me for my luxuries either; they will be only too good to have me eat well and smoke dollar cigars if I wish". There is only one explanation for such love and tenderness; these were inspired by the very recklessness of Vivekananda's struggle and his terrible renunciation for the cause of "the woman and the people". This is brought out more clearly by the writer from whose description of Vivekananda as a "beloved child faring forth in an untried world" we have just quoted. This writer precedes this description by actually comparing Vivekananda's religious mission with his project of raising of the masses of India by American help, and he leaves us in no doubt that it is the latter mission that, in his mind, gives to the Swami's character a tragic intensity, which is unthinkable in a man with a purely religious mission. To quote the writer's exact words:

"He spoke of holy men who at a single glance converted hardened sinners and detected men's innermost thoughts .........
But these things were trifles; always his thoughts turned back to his people. He lived to raise them up and make them better and had come this long way in the hope of gaining help to teach them to be, practically more efficient. We hardly knew what he wanted; money if money would do it; tools, advice, new ideas. And for this he was willing to die tomorrow.  

It is unnecessary to labour this point any further. What we are trying to establish is this: In Vivekananda the spiritual unrest of the 1870s, of which the greatest symptom was a desire for personal illumination through religion, reached its fulfilment in a manner which was as unexpected as it was captivating in its intensity. The illumination sought by Keshub Chandra Sen, Bijoy Krishna Goswami and Ramakrishna Paramahansa was through mystical communion with God, - a method, of which Ramakrishna was the greatest exempler. Vivekananda was Ramakrishna's disciple, and it was he who preached to the world his Master's doctrine that 'direct experience' of God - was the alpha and omega of religion. Religious practice is nothing if it does not lead to direct experience - such was the substance of his preaching. Yet in his own life it was not the trances of Ramakrishna that he sought, not at least after his failure to achieve them in a Himalayan retreat. He socialised, as it were, the doctrine of personal illumination by transforming the gospel of salvation for one's own self to one of dedicated humanitarianism. This is not to say that he superseded the one for the other - quite the contrary. In the watchward for all future monks of his master's order he united the two. 'Atmano

1. Ibid., pp. 411.
moksharthan Jagaddhitaya Cha' - for one's salvation and for the service of all - this was the watchword of the Order. But no watchword is ever fool proof: just as the search for one's own salvation may degenerate into a selfish longing for the Himalayan retreat, so the proposed service for all may degenerate into secular altruism; also for all we know the unity may be illusory. Vivekananda's life was a struggle to achieve this unity: to serve humanity by an act of terrible renunciation and to render personal illumination a flashlight into "the sum total of all souls", which, - as he put it - was, "the only God I believe in, and above all my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races". It was how he resolved the spiritual unrest that started during the 1870's. To say this is not to belittle the achievements of Keshub, Bijoy and Ramakrishna, but to point out that, whereas these three pre-eminently embodied the truth that religious thirst when arising from the depths of the soul, is not to be quenched by programmes of social reform, - Vivekananda prevented that thirst from getting lost in a quagmire of subjectivism by giving it a social meaning, but at the same making it retain all its intensity. This was the significance of his inner life.
(b) Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

Before taking up Vivekananda's teachings in their philosophic formulation we must understand in which manner they followed from the teachings of his master. From the 'Dialogues'¹ ('Kathamrita') we know that the most characteristic teachings of Ramakrishna were two in number: The first was his overriding emphasis on religion as a matter of personal illumination rather than of social reform and belief in certain doctrines; and the second was his doctrine of Universalism - his assertion that all religions led to God. It should be clearly understood, however, that it was not these teachings but rather the form in which Vivekananda put them, and, more than that, the dramatisation of Hindu greatness in the person of the Swami that took the world by storm. If it be true that without Ramakrishna there would have been no Vivekananda, it is no less true that, without Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's teachings would have remained confined to a coterie of mystics, at best giving rise to a cult of Ramakrishna rather than to a restatement of Hinduism, which in Vivekananda's eyes, was the essence of Ramakrishna's teachings. It would not be an unfair assessment of Ramakrishna's contribution to the religious scene of 19th century Bengal to say that this contribution was essentially in the nature of a personal influence rather than of ideas that were of any great historical importance. The ideas that proved to be of the

1. *Sri Sri Ramakrishna-Kathamrita* by Sri Ma (5 vols).
greatest historical consequence were due to Vivekananda in the sense that he formulated his master's teachings in a certain manner which was by no means the only manner in which those teachings could be interpreted. We have already seen that Ramakrishna's emphasis on religion as a matter of personal illumination rather than of social reform and belief in certain doctrines was interpreted by Keshub Chandra Sen and Bijoy Krishna Goswami in a manner which had little, if anything, to do with service to humanity. In Vivekananda's interpretation the relation between the two was central. Again Ramakrishna's doctrine of Universalism, namely his belief that all religions led to God, could easily lead to the sort of eclecticism that gave rise to Keshub's New Dispensation which was a conglomeration of beliefs and practices deriving from diverse religious sources; in Vivekananda's formulation of this doctrine, the Universalism was a way of expressing that fact that all religions were an approach to Advaitism. It is of course arguable that Keshub and Bijoy, since they never professed to be disciples of Ramakrishna, were hardly in a position to interpret the latter's teachings correctly. But there is a good deal of evidence to show that even amongst the direct disciples of Ramakrishna there was some skepticism regarding Vivekananda's teaching of service to humanity as in any way connected to Ramakrishna's teaching of personal illumination as the essence of religion. To bring out the relative contribution of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda in the religious debate of the 19th century, an examination of this evidence is essential.
The writer of "The Dialogue of the Swami with a Disciple", has narrated an incident in which Swami Jogananda, a direct disciple of Ramakrishna is shown to be finding fault with the project of founding a Mission in the name of Ramakrishna for humanitarian and educational work, on the ground that Vivekananda was acting under foreign influence and that Ramakrishna's "method of doing things was different". Vivekananda replied to the effect that Ramakrishna, who was the embodiment of infinite ideas, could not be confined within the limits his disciples would prescribe for him. It is obvious that such a reply was tantamount to evading the issue raised by Jogananda, and it clearly indicates Vivekananda's propensity to look upon his master's teachings as extremely flexible, admitting of a variety of interpretations not directly indicated in the form in which Ramakrishna had expressed them.

Another incident was more serious. According to the standard biography:

"One of the Swami's Gurubhai's was (on a certain occasion) taking him to task for not preaching the ideas of Shri Ramakrishna and challenging him to prove how his plans could be reconciled with their Master's teachings. For Shri Ramakrishna insisted, above all, on Bhakti and the practice of Sadhanas for the realisation of God, while the Swami constantly urged them to go about working, preaching and serving the poor and the diseased - the very things which forced the mind outward, which was the greatest impediment to the life of Sadhana. Then again, the Swami's ideas of starting Maths and Homes of service for the public good, his ideas of organisation and of patriotism which were undoubtedly western in conception, his efforts to create a new type...

of Sannyasin with a broader ideal of renunciation, and others of a similar nature were incompatible with Shri Ramakrishna's ideal of renunciation and would surely have been repudiated by him."

This passage is extremely revealing, bringing out, in the most unmistakable manner, the difference between Vivekananda's interpretation of his master's teachings and that of some of his brethren. No less revealing is the fact that, here again, Vivekananda did not attempt to bring his brother-monk round to his point of view by argument and reasoning. He ridiculed the poor man for his obsession with personal salvation and reduced him to silence by a passionate outburst. As the writer of the standard biography put it:

"Growing more and more serious he thundered on:

You think you understand Ramakrishna better than myself! .......... your Bhakti is sentimental nonsense and makes one impotent, you want to preach Ramakrishna as you have understood him which is mighty little." 1

The biographers tell us that this outburst thoroughly scared the brother-monks who were henceforth extremely careful to avoid a repetition of such outbursts by questioning Vivekananda's interpretation of their master's teachings.

An American disciple of the Ramakrishna Order has recorded another brother-monk of Vivekananda as saying: "If we had dreamed of the labours that lay before us, we would not have spent our strength in severe austerities or taxed our bodies by privations and long wanderings. All that was asked of us, we

thought was a simple life of renunciation obeying in humble spirit what our Master had taught us". - Clearly, in his thinking, Vivekananda's teaching was something different.

Such evidence could easily be multiplied. The three incidents described above make it abundantly clear that Vivekananda's interpretation of his master's teachings differed substantially from that of the generality of his brother-monks who were apt to look upon their master as a teacher of personal salvation - and indeed such is impression derived from a careful reading of the dialogues of Ramakrishna recorded by Mahendranath Gupta. It is true that Vivekananda's biographers try to explain away the dissimilarity between the teachings of the master and his foremost disciple by narrating an incident in which Naren's appeal for personal salvation was pooh-poohed by Ramakrishna on the plea that he expected greater things from his favourite. But this incident hardly explains the very different forms in which the teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were respectively expressed.

The only explanation which suggests itself is this. Ramakrishna's influence on Vivekananda was personal rather than intellectual. Intellectually Vivekananda was a child of the age to which he belonged: his interest in religion was more social than personal. He was fully alive to the challenge thrown to Hinduism by Christianity and, in a far more formidable way - by the western Enlightenment. He faced the challenge, not
defensively, as even Bankim, in the ultimate analysis, faced it, - but aggressively, in the manner of a conquering hero, throwing the whole weight of his superpowerful body against a hostile world. This is the reason why his message strikes us as something quite different from his master's, who, of course knew nothing of that challenge, and never cared to formulate an answer to it. But Ramakrishna's influence on Vivekananda even if personal, (rather than intellectual) was tremendous. To Vivekananda no language was too extravagant when it applied to his master. He was 'Avatara Varistha' - the greatest among Incarnations; he was greater than Buddha and Krishna and Christ; he could create a hundred thousand Vivekanandas if he chose. Such language is explicable only on the hypothesis that it was Ramakrishna from whom Vivekananda learnt the lesson of renunciation and the art of that divine intoxication, in which, a man, spurning even the faintest semblance of a desire for gold and the love of the sexes, sailed out, fearless, in search of something which, while it inevitably killed the body, liberated the soul and made it shine forth in a transcendent brightness. Such a hypothesis explains the dissimilarity of Vivekananda's message from that of his master in a much more satisfactory way than any heroic effort to fit the Swami's words into the procrustean bed presented by the dialogues of Ramakrishna. To see this more clearly let us now take up the message itself.
(c) Vivekananda's Message

Intellectually, Vivekananda's kinship was nearest with Bankim, and it is by studying the close resemblance of the former's thoughts on the Activism of Vedanta and his doctrines of Impersonal Pantheism with the latter's pronouncements on the Activism of the Gita and Personal Pantheism, that we reach the heart of Vivekananda's message. As we explained in Chapter - IV, Bankim's interpretation of the doctrine of Action as preached in the Gita consisted in breaking away from all the classical commentators who argued that, by Action, the Gita had meant worship of the ritualistic type prescribed in the scriptures. According to Bankim, it was not Vedic sacrifices or worship of the ritualistic type that was enjoined in the Gita, but rather that true worship which consisted in acting for God who pervaded all humanity. As Vivekananda put it:

"Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds. This is the only god that is awake, our own race - 'everywhere his hands, everywhere his feet, everywhere his ears, he covers everything'. All other gods are sleeping. What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the god that we see all around us, the Virat? When we have worshipped this, we shall be able to worship all other gods. Worship is the exact equivalent of the Sanskrit word, and no other English word will do. These are all other gods, - men and animals; and the first gods we have to worship are our countrymen".

The important point here is to note that the God of Humanity preached in such an extract was with Vivekananda, as with Bankim before him, not an allegorical god, constructed with the

1. 'The Future of India', Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, vol. III.
object of dramatising his notion of serving "the woman and the
people", but it was actually the very essence of Vedanta as he
preached it. We have seen that Bankim's humanistic approach to
religion necessitated a conception of God whose worship was to
lead to the fullest development of all human faculties in a
perfect condition of harmony amongst one another, and in
particular to the fullest development of the faculty of love so
as to embrace all humanity. In Vivekananda's words:

"Where is the eternal sanction (of ethics) to be found
except in the only Infinite Reality that exists in you and in me
and in all, in the self, in the soul? The infinite oneness of
the soul is the eternal sanction of all morality, that you and I
are not only brothers - every literature voicing man's struggle
towards freedom has preached that for you - but that you and I
are really one. This is the dictate of Indian philosophy. This
oneness is the rationale of all ethics and spirituality".  

(The Mission of the Vedanta).

Here we come to the central doctrine preached by
Vivekananda. The oneness of all creation is a metaphysical
doctrine preached by the so-called Vedanta philosophy. But
Vivekananda extracted the religious core of this doctrine out of
the metaphysical cobwebs under which it had lain hidden for
centuries, and converted what had been a life-denying pessimistic
creed held by a handful of mystics into the cornerstone of the
religion of the Hindus.

In its classical form, the religion of Vedanta, as
distinct from its philosophy, was a creed with an extremely
dogmatic and narrow-minded conception of Personal salvation. It

was essentially monastic and mystical: meditation and Yogic practices were supposed to be the only system of practical piety connected with it. Vivekananda was the first to make the ethics of love for all fellow beings a necessary component of this creed, and, by the introduction of that component, he made it available to people of all walks of life and destroyed, by one stroke, the monopoly so long enjoyed over it by mystics. What he said in effect was this: The unity of all creation, if it was to be a true unity, could not possibly be the result of some mystical experience alone, for that would be a denial of its universality - but had to form a part of the normal human experience of everyone. The way this could be done was through love. As he put it:

"Love for God and compassion for all creation, - this is what Chaitanya preached and this is no doubt admirable. It is admirable from the standpoint of dualist who believes in a Personal God separate from creation. But for us, who are Monists, this notion of separateness of God and Man is a notion that is apt to subject us to bondage. Our principle is, therefore, love, not compassion. According to our faith, the notion of compassion as applied to creation is a presumption."

This passage is extremely important as it brings out in a most logical manner, Vivekananda's original contribution to Vedantism. Classical Vedanta sought the unity of God and His creation in mystical experience. But Vivekananda pointed out that even if we apply this notion of unity to our normal human experience, we have a way of achieving that unity and that is through the sort of love that does not desire any return. This is how Vivekananda made Vedantic Monism a creed of universal applicability by relating it to our normal human experience.
Thus far Vivekananda's views are identical with Bankim's, and the sort of reasoning Vivekananda applied to the pantheistic notion of an all-pervading God to extract from it the ethics of service and love, could as well be done on the basis of a God who was pantheistic and personal and not on the basis of Impersonal Pantheism. For it is clear that Vivekananda's reasoning as well as Bankim's was based on the notion of pantheism alone and not on the personality or impersonality of that pantheism. It is, therefore, important to examine the divergence of Vivekananda's views on that point.

(d) Pantheism - Personal and Impersonal

As we saw in Chapter IV, the most important article in Bankim's humanistic approach to religion was his insistence on Bhakti to God as the essential factor in the fullest development of human powers in a perfect condition of harmony. His God, too, was, of course, a humanistic God in the sense of being a God who was the limit of human possibilities, and His all-pervadingness was required to make an individual's faculty of love all-embracing. These criteria of a God-head were satisfied by the Hindu conception of a Personal God who pervaded all creation. But Bankim left unanswered the question of the existence of such a God apart from remarking that, in his belief, the existence of such a Personal God "becomes self-evident to one who has developed his faculties and has
rendered his heart pure". It was thus very much a matter of belief and the question was not really answerable on the plane of intellect but was relegated to that of religious practice.

Vivekananda, following the clue supplied by classical Vedanta philosophy, suggested that religion did not really require the existence of a personal God but that the hypothesis of the divinity of the soul was enough to constitute a truly rational religion. This hypothesis was of course implicit in the supposition of a divine unity subsisting in all creation, and Vivekananda proceeded to show how this could form the basis of a religion.

Again following the lead supplied by classical Vedanta, Vivekananda asserted that religion consisted in realising the divinity of the soul. This divinity was demonstrable in the sense that it could be actually realised and bliss was attainable; the soul that was in bondage could really become free. Absolute purity of body and heart, total renunciation of lust and gold and burning love for all fellow-beings liberated the soul while still in body.

(e) The New Synthesis

Yet it will not be true to say that Vivekananda's Neo-Vedantism - as it has been called - excluded the sort of Personal Pantheism preached by Bankim. Bankim's was an attempt at reforming the doctrine of Bhakti, which in orthodox Hinduism
is inculcated by the cults of Rama or Krishna by discovering their 'Kernel' after separating their 'husk'. The ethical 'Kernel' discovered by him consisted in the doctrine of 'work aimed at God' and 'love for all fellow-beings' which was a direct corollary of the metaphysical doctrine of pantheism. The religious Kernel was Bhakti towards a Personal God who was the limit of human possibilities. Vivekananda followed Bankim as regards the ethical Kernel closely enough to give the impression of an identity of views in this matter. As regards the religious Kernel of Hinduism, Vivekananda's views were of course different, but it is far from true to say that Vivekananda repudiated the doctrine of Bankim towards a Personal God; actually he applied Ramakrishna's dictum that every religion was a way to God to the whole body of sects and creeds which went by the name of Hinduism, and attempted to achieve a new unity and new synthesis. In this as in his Neo-Vedantism Vivekananda was a true reformer.

Ramakrishna had asserted that all religions were equally true. This was of course in the nature of a paradox, because if monotheism was true pantheism could hardly be so without landing us in a palpable contradiction. Vivekananda resolved the paradox by asserting that, as regards dogma, only Vedantic Monism could possibly be true because it presupposed only the divinity of the soul, — the notion of a Personal God, monotheistic or otherwise, being essentially in the nature of an untestable hypothesis. But as regards a system of ethical
and religious culture, and also as regards a 'relative' view of an 'absolute' truth - all religions could unhesitatingly be declared true. Each of them prescribed systems of religions and ethical culture that purified the heart; each of them emphasized a certain aspect of the divinity which could not help being included within the total view that was, of necessity, indescribable, because every human description of Divinity was in the nature of things, incomplete.

With such a view of religious truth, Vivekananda was of course the sternest critic of certain religious sects who were slack in their ethics, while he had nothing but unqualified approbation for their conception of Divinity. He vigorously condemned the followers of the so-called Yamachara Tantras, with whom religious culture had degenerated to the level of sexual orgies, and pronounced the existing Vaishnavic cult of Radha and Krishna, glorifying the illicit union of the two, as veritable poison. The wheel thus came full circle on the religious stage of Bengal since the days of Rammohan who had started his reforms by denouncing the Vaishnavism of Chaitanya, but on how different an outlook!

(f) Hinduism Becomes a Missionary Religion

How different that outlook was can be judged from the fact that, within the distance that separated Rammohan from Vivekananda, the conception of the relative position as
between the religion of the Hindus and the other great religions of the world had undergone a sea-change. Whereas Rammohan had felt it necessary to seek in the Upanishads the seeds of a Monotheism which would closely resemble the sort of monotheism held by the Unitarian sect among Christians and to supplement Hindu ethical speculations by publishing a compendium of percepts of Jesus for the benefit of the Hindus, Vivekananda would be satisfied with nothing short of a flooding of the Western world by Hindu ideas. According to Vivekananda: Hinduism was the "mother of religions" - the others were its "patchy imitations". Just as the rationale of all ethics was furnished only by the notion of a God who pervaded all creation, which was characteristically a Hindu notion, in the same manner, it was Hinduism alone that taught the realisation of the Divinity within us while still in the body, and prescribed a system of religious culture to that end. These were the ideas, which, together with Hindu Universalism, worded by Ramakrishna in his celebrated formula, 'Jato Mat, Tato path', and re-explained by Vivekananda in the manner we indicated just now, could justly claim a hearing before a parliament of all world religions, the rest among which had nothing to match these ideas in breadth of vision and spiritual loftiness. With these ideas Vivekananda dreamed of conquering the world, and if he succeeded in making only a very modest

1. "This is the great ideal before us, and everyone must be ready for it - the conquest of the whole world by India - nothing less than that". (The Work Before Us : Complete Works, vol. III).
beginning, he certainly imbued Hinduism with a spirit of unprecedented aggressiveness. Hitherto Hinduism was apologetic and thought nothing of borrowing, from other religions, ideas that were supposed essential for its own recovery. With the arrival of Vivekananda a point was reached where, in the traffic of ideas started by Rammohan as between Hinduism and other world-religions, the former's place was no longer on the receiving end of the line but on the donor's.

(g) New Hinduism

We are now in a position to sum up the doctrinal results achieved by the efforts of Bankim and Vivekananda, within the years - 1882 – 1902 – results which at long last brought the religious debate of the 19th century to a decisive issue. First of all we should enumerate the doctrinal results one by one.

1. The first result was philosophical. An analysis of the humanistic position regarding the search for happiness was shown to necessitate a turning of the human faculties to God in order to lead them to their fullest development in a perfect condition of harmony. This result was due to Bankim alone, who showed that this humanistic approach to religion led to the teachings of the Gita.
2. The second result was theological. It centred round the conflicting claims of Monotheism and Pantheism to superiority as regards theological truth. The superiority of Pantheism was asserted by both Bankim and Vivekananda, - Bankim basing his argument on grounds of reason which militated against the conception of an essentially external God ruling the universe from a seat in heaven. Vivekananda called the conception tribal, and pointed to its historical evolution in Judaeo-Christian religions, which was by way of constant strife amongst Jewish and Babylonian tribes. He pointed out that, Monotheism was, historically, the result of a triumph of the tribal God Moloch Yahveh, over other tribal gods and that even in subsequent history its triumph over other races was achieved by blood-shed and persecution.

As regards Pantheism, both Bankim and Vivekananda showed that it was, amongst Hindus, a true religious conception and not an abstract truth of metaphysics. With the Hindus it was connected with the conception of a Personal God of love and of the Divinity of the soul. Both of these conceptions showed ways of spiritual fulfilment, - the latter, in particular, teaching a lesson in spirituality which aimed at realising the Divinity of the Soul while still in the body. No other religion taught ways of salvation which were not essentially conjectural and unrealisable in the flesh.
3. The Third result was ethical and was a direct corollary of the theology of Pantheism. If God pervaded all creation, love towards him would be a mockery if it did not include love for all fellow-beings. Both Bankim and Vivekananda regarded the theology of Pantheism as providing the rationale of all ethics. Both of them pointed out that it was the peculiar glory of Hinduism that it alone, of all world-religions, did this. It was true that other religions preached love of humanity as much as Hinduism did, but the worship of the external God of their conception had no necessary connection with love of humanity. It was therefore an extraneous result, requiring a special commandment or special revelation to make the love effectual. It was in Hinduism alone that love of God and love of Humanity were indissolubly linked.

4. The Fourth result was the synthetic, Vedantic approach to the multiplicity of sects in Hinduism and more generally to the whole body of religions existing in the world. This approach was already foreshadowed in Bankim's commentary on the Gita. "I am available to all worshippers irrespective of their mode of worship"¹; "They also who worship other gods are actually worshipping me even though their mode of worship might not be according to the proper form"² - these verses were explained by Bankim as

1. The Bhagavadgita Chapter IV, 11.
2. The Bhagavadgita, Chapter IX, 23.
voicing the gospel of religious toleration. Vivekananda, following Ramakrishna, developed the notion further. He declared all religions true, in so far as they were different modes of spirituality, - in other words, different modes of realising God, - even though, as regards dogma, only the Vedantic theory was possibly true because in Vedanta alone the practice followed directly from the dogma. As Vivekananda preached this doctrine of synthesis, it was no longer a message of uncritical toleration of every obscure sect that traded in religion. It was a powerful critical apparatus to examine every species of spiritual practice by the results it aimed at. If it brought one nearer to God, it was all right irrespective of the dogma it preached - this was Vivekananda's teaching.

We should only add that with the development of these four doctrines was begun a new era in Hinduism which should be characterized as 'New Hinduism' rather than orthodox Hinduism. The newness of the doctrines comes out most clearly in their relation to the New Learning of the West. It is true that it was Bankim alone who addressed himself to a systematic examination of the religion of the Hindus in the light of the New Learning. But Vivekananda's preaching of the ethical core of Hinduism was inspired by that learning no less than Bankim's was. Ramakrishna's message could as well be interpreted as a
species of mysticism without deriving any activist meaning from it. That interpretation would have certainly failed to meet the challenge thrown by Brahmoism and Christianity, the essence of whose criticism consisted in pointing out that Hinduism in its mystical flights was supra-ethical, and in its popular idolatrous forms, asocial. Both Bankim and Vivekananda addressed themselves to answering that criticism by discovering the ethical core of Hinduism, which was the ethics of love and service. Again, the examination of the doctrines of monotheism and pantheism and of their relation to ethics was conducted on a strictly rational plane, and the superiority of Pantheism was established critically without any appeal to orthodox sentiments. In Vivekananda's synthetic approach to the multiplicity of religious sects in Hinduism was indicated a powerful force of unity without any concession to the infamous practices which, amongst a great many sects, flourished under the guise of religion.

In the light of these facts the charge of 'revivalism' that has sometimes been levelled against the new movement by a number of interested parties is open to question. If by 'revivalism' is implied a term of derogation, if it be said - as some latter-day apologists of the Brahmo faith have said, or rather, implied - that Bankim and Vivekananda sought to revive the whole spectrum of beliefs and practices

1. Vide Rammohan's criticism of Hindu Idolatry quoted in chapter I.
associated with Hinduism which eventually undid the glorious achievements of Brahmoism, then that charge, in so far as it is confined to religion properly so-called is evidently baseless. The qualification is important, because the charge of 'revivalism' cannot be adequately answered before discussing the New Hindu attitude to social reform as also the New Hindu efforts in the direction of reinterpreting some of the achievements of the ancient Indian Civilisation.