RELIGIOUS FERMENT AND CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

Of the two phases of the Indian Renaissance, as a result of the impact of the West, broadly before and after the establishment of the Universities in 1857, the first was marked by the introduction of the Western system of education and a social awakening, while the second was characterized by a deep ferment and fervour in the religious life and by earnest attempts at assimilating the best of the West in the cultural life of the people of India, as of Gujarat. The social and educational developments, reviewed earlier, show how these developments, inspired by the presence of the English in the country, passed through the stages of action, reaction and assimilation. Developments in the religious and cultural life of the people of India during the second phase of the Renaissance, show that the same process was at work, with this important addition that with the establishment of the Universities, Sanskrit, along with English, was also studied and Sanskrit influence reasserted itself in the life and literature of Gujarat as it did in the rest of the country. The fascination for Western culture was modified and moderated by the renewed love for India's own ancient culture. Western culture found its correlative in the culture of the land and the two, in course of time, began to operate on life and literature, not as rivals, but in harmony as complements to one another. The Western impact, which resulted in a temporary apotheosis of the West, also revealed to the Indians the grandeur of their own heritage and the integral significance of the ancient Indian view of life. The Indian Renaissance as it advanced was seen to be not merely the child of an extraneous spell, but a revival and resurrection of the ancient spirit of the land. Sir William Jones and Rüder and Goethe and Max Muller,
who admired the Indian heritage and interpreted it to the West, made Indians realize the imperishable glory of their own heritage and infused into them the confidence that what the spirit of the land had accomplished once was a height to which they can rise again. They saw that what they admired as the priceless gift from the West was really a part of their own being, a temporarily paralysed limb of their own body. The twin points of earth and heaven, spirit and matter, of reason and intuition and of the individual and society were the very synthesis that lay at the heart of Indian culture.

A very interesting feature of this phenomena of the correlation of these two impulses was the religious ferment and fervour it generated and a synthesis of the two cultures that began to be worked out in the cultural life of the people of India. This religious ferment in Gujarat expressed itself in the foundation of the Prarthana Samaj in 1871, the Arya Samaj in 1875, the Theosophical Society in 1878 and brought forth reformists like Bholanath and Mahipatram, revivalists like Swami Dayanand and Manilal Nabhubhai, and synthesizers like Goverdhanram Tripathi and Anandshanker Dhruva, among others. In the peculiar texture of Indian life, the social, religious and cultural aspects are so intimately interwoven that it is not easy to disengage a social movement from the religious, and the religious from the cultural one; for, in India, culture is essentially religious and religion gives society its distinct complexion. Hence, these movements, though separately treated for convenience, cut across one another and, in fact, move along different paths to the same goal - the integration of the different aspects of life into one. In the earlier stages everywhere the pendulum swings to the extreme, but ultimately the balance is

found through assimilation and synthesis. In Gujarat, a few sought to reform
the religious and cultural life on the pattern of the West; while others in a
sharp reaction set out to revive old Indian values; while yet another group
convinced of the impracticability of either of the two courses suggested a
synthesis of the best of both old and new, East and West—a solution which the
genius of the country has always worked out for itself through the centuries
when faced with something foreign to it.

Though the English had not adopted proselytization of the Indians as
their official programme or mission, the Directors of the East India Company,
from time to time, had called upon the company to give all facilities to the
Christian Missions to do their work in India. The valuable work done by these
missionaries, who set up English-teaching schools and colleges, installed
printing-presses, wrote Grammar books and prepared text-books, was appreciated
on all hands, but their proselytising tendencies and activities also aroused
resentment and considerable indignation among the people. Western education
including sciences, coupled with the propaganda of the Missionaries and the
influence of the Bible, which formed a part of the education in missionary
institutions, led a number of educated young men to grow critical of their own
religion. While some were actually converted to Christianity, and some only
sympathetic to it, not a few among the others were driven to agnosticism and
atheism.

While the Hindu religion is, to some extent, accommodative and elastic,
it has also the strength to preserve itself in its essential form. The activity
of the Christian missionaries was, therefore, a challenge to Hinduism and the
Hindu world reacted sharply and even convulsively to these external impulses.
In Bengal, Ram Mohan Rai, who was otherwise well-inclined towards the ideas
from the West, took up this challenge and founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 with the object of purging Hinduism of its supersitious beliefs and irrational practices. Its fundamental principle was the belief in one God and it was against idol-worship in any shape or form. Its doors were kept open for all while the irreverent references to other religions were forbidden.¹

This reorganization of Hindu religious beliefs which was not only rational, but also in harmony with the essential tenets of that faith, however, failed to satisfy the purists, who sought to revive ancient Indian traditions of religion and culture. But in the context of a rapidly shrinking world with its advanced means of communications, this could not obviously satisfy those, who did not think of progress either in terms of the East or the West. These men, therefore, set about earnestly assimilating the best of both the East and the West and endeavoured to work out a synthesis of the two in the highest interests of their country. This long-drawn process was worked out in Gujarat by the reformers, revivalists and synthesizers in a variety of ways in life and literature through the three stages of action, reaction and assimilation.

As elsewhere, Western education and the impact of the West had produced in Gujarat a new class of educated young men, who were, if not agnostics and atheists, highly critical of their own religious beliefs and practices. With the establishment of the Universities, this was rectified to some extent everywhere in India when Sanskrit and ancient Indian culture came to be studied from a new angle. This led thinking men in Gujarat also to put their own house in order, by working for the reformation of their own religious beliefs and practices in a bid to take the wind off the contention of those missionaries, who sought to establish the superiority of the Christian faith on the ground that, unlike Hinduism, it was

¹ Vide, 'Raja Ram Mohan Rai-nu-Charitra', Sastu Sahitya, p. 146.
eminently free from superstitious beliefs, plethora of gods and goddesses, irrational practices and idol-worship. Bengal's answer to this challenge was Brahma Samaj, founded by Rammohan Roy. The Prarthana Samaj founded in Bombay in 1867 and in Ahmedabad in 1871, was an off-shoot of the Brahma Samaj of Bengal. The Brahma Samaj was suspected, in some quarters, of having Christian leanings. To keep away from this legacy of unwarranted suspicion, the founders of the Prarthana Samaj preferred to call their institution by the name of the Prarthana Samaj, taking a cue from its principal form of worship—prayer or 'prarthana'.

The Prarthana Samaj, under the leadership of its distinguished founders Bholanath Sarabhai (1823-1886) and Mahipatram Rupram (1829-1891), had set its face firmly against all forms of conventional rituals and superstitious ceremonies, which the selfish clergy of the day was only too prone to encourage and exploit for its own ends. It recognised prayers as the only form of worship as a direct channel of communication with God to express the soul's yearning for the divine. This recognition of the prayer as a link between man and God would probably remind one of Tennyson's philosophy and belief in the efficacy of prayer—

'More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.'

This Christian conception of prayer as the golden chain binding the earth about the feet of God, and the Brahma and Prarthana Samajs' recognition of the prayer as the principal form of worship may perhaps be nothing more than a mere coincidence, but the similarity of approach was too striking to be dissociated

1. Tennyson: 'Morte D'Arthur'.
in the public mind. Perhaps, it was this similarity, among other things, which created some suspicion among a section of the people that the Prarthana Samaj, like the Brahmo Samaj, was more than tinged with the tenets of Christianity. Moreover, since the meetings of the Samaj were held, albeit for the convenience of its members, on Sundays, when prayers were sung like psalms, and since the Samaj was against idol-worship, the result was that 'the followers of the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj were at one time suspected of having become converts to Christianity'.

There is, however, no justification or ground for this suspicion, as the men who ran the Samaj were a body of earnest men, whose only aim was to rid Hinduism of its cramping conventions and degrading customs. G.F. Andrews, speaking about the work of this Samaj, testified that it was 'the main centre of social amelioration, which has spread thence in wider and wider circles, and some of the greatest names in social reform have been among those of its past members'.

Inspite of testimonies of this nature and the sterling qualities of its services, the suspicion which the Prarthana Samaj excited in the public mind points to the fact that the masses on the whole did not take kindly to religious organizations, which did not offer them their religion in the traditional form and spirit. An attempt in this direction was, therefore, made by the revivalists, who in a sharp reaction against the encroachments of Christianity and religious reforms influenced by the West, vigorously canvassed for the revival of the ancient traditions of Hindu religion and Indian culture. The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand in 1875 was the culminating point of this reaction.

Macaulay's dream of creating, through Western education, a new class of

educated Indians who would be Indian in blood and colour, but English in everything else, had ostensibly failed to materialize, since the young men educated on the Western lines, especially after the establishment of the Universities during the second phase of the Indian Renaissance, instead of being English in everything, liked to be Indian in everything without throwing away the gains from the West. It is true that in their first flush of enthusiasm, the early reformers, in trying to overhaul their society with its varied beliefs and time-honoured institutions, had destroyed, in the process of reforming it, much that was valuable in the old without substituting anything substantial in its place. Later, those who attempted to fill up the vacuum and rehabilitate old Hindu religion and cultural life with institutions and beliefs of a distinctly Western complexion, like the Brahma Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj, succeeded only in accentuating the conservative reaction, since the masses and not a few thinkers saw in those attempts only further evidence of the wanton destruction to which ancient Indian traditions were submitted in the past. They failed to realize that 'industrially much is achieved under European auspices, but the indigenous culture arrives in the effort of absorbing European things at a stand-still.'

A leading modern poet from the West - Stephen Spender - has recently pointed out the danger inherent in tampering with the indigenous culture and religions of the East under the influence of the West. 'If we are going to talk about religion, it seems to me', he observed, 'we ought to try and at least have some idea of what the nature of religion is. Above all, religions are beliefs, which come from particular areas and are connected with particular rituals, particular symbolisms, particular traditions.... It seems to me that in the eastern part of the world, there is a great danger of there being a

revolution without transformation. That is, danger of past forms being rejected and a disastrous kind of modernism—being introduced, which has no relation to the past whatever. He concluded by saying that 'what those from the West could do was to warn.'

Shelley imagined the West Wind to be both a destroyer and preserver. The 'West' wind which visited India since the English came to this country, was in its first sweep mostly a destroyer, driving the dead, pale, pestilence-stricken multitude of old customs, beliefs and superstitions to their grave. But the seeds of ancient Indian traditions were somehow preserved and the dead leaves themselves served as a manure on the soil of Sanskrit to help this ancient plant to sprout again. In the Eastern part of India, Swami Ramkrishna and Vivekanand; in the south, the Theosophical Society and Annie Beasant, in the West, Swami Dayanand; in the North; Swami Ramtirth and Shraddhanand, represented the different facets of this revivalism.

In Gujarat, Manilal Nabhubhai was the spearhead of this movement. Narmad before him had recanted his former belief in the Western type of reform, which was probably an intelligent anticipation of the reaction which was soon to overtake the country. When turning to the West for everything was still the general tendency of the day, 'this turning to the East began with Narmad; his reading of history and of the Scriptures; realization of the futility of the mere externals of English customs and manners adopted as reform; and the unexemplary behaviour of the reformers themselves, had set him thinking, and the conclusions he arrived at urged him to announce them boldly and truthfully in the interests of the country even at the risk of personal loss of prestige.'

had given to his people the battle-cry, 'Plunge into the battle: success waits ahead' and advised them against retreating from the field, was also the first to address his countrymen in the most conservative Aryan way as, 'Oh, you Aryas,' and ask them to retreat. Later developments in the country absolved Narmad of inconsistency and an Englishman, after about a century, ironically proved him right by holding out a warning against a disastrous kind of modernism being introduced, which has no relation to the past whatever.  

The people of Gujarat in the middle of the nineteenth century were persuaded to believe that the West was the only entity to count in the field of learning and culture, but when in about 1870-75, those educated in the Universities, founded in 1857, turned to the study of Sanskrit and ancient Indian culture, they realized that their own heritage was not inglorious. Then it appeared that reform was something like a god that had failed. Even while greeting a Western monarch, King George V of England, who was on a visit to India, an Indian poet from Gujarat - Nanalal - could not but stress this point that though the light of this land of the Aryas was dim and old, it was certainly not extinguished.

The seeds of ancient Indian traditions undemolished by the 'wind' from the West even in the heyday of Western influence sprouted themselves when, as already stated, University men along with English and Western sciences also studied Sanskrit classics and ancient Indian view of life. This renewed interest in indigenous culture, no doubt, sometimes led to an over-emphasis, but by and large, it expressed itself in reminding the country that its ancient heritage was neither

inconsiderable nor inglorious and to regain it was neither difficult nor unwise. This, in substance, was the constructive side of the work of revivalists, who cried a halt to the inroads made by Western ideas in the religious and cultural life of the Hindus. Manilal Nabhubhai and Swami Dayanand, the founder of the Arya Samaj, were the protagonists of this revivalism in Gujarat.

Manilal Nabhubhai (1856-1898) was one of those University men — he was a graduate from the Elphinstone College, Bombay — during the second phase of the Indian Renaissance who, for all their Western education, were firmly rooted in the culture of their land. K.N. Munshi, while describing Manilal as ‘the philosophic exponent of orthodoxy’ and as a believer in the changeless essentials of ancient traditions ‘built on firm foundations of self-discipline, on comprehensive view, on the reality of Vedant’, on the unity of Yoga’, speaking in ‘no uncertain voice to modern Gujarat of the glorious heritage of Aryan thought’, considers him as one who gave ‘the battle-cry of the future — ‘No surrender to the West’.

The focal point of the Indian Renaissance is perhaps 1857, the year of two great events — the attempt at overthrowing foreign rule and the founding of the Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. The patriotism of the University men was directed into more sound and constructive channels. They were not completely swept away by the West as the preceding generation of reformers had been. Thanks to the teaching of ancient classics, their sense of self-respect was rehabilitated and the visionaries amongst them dreamt of a synthesis of all that was best in the East and the West. If the reformists leaned to the West as a source of their inspiration, the revivalists, in their turn, sought their inspiration for everything from ancient India. It was soon realized that a precipitate movement to close the door on the West was unwise and to go back to

the East in a bid to revive Aryan ways of life was an anachronism in the context of a rapidly changing world. This brought forth a new trend in the relations between the East and the West in the country. This new trend was the search for the balance through synthesis or assimilation of the finest points of the cultures of the East and the West.

Of this new cultural philosophy, the most outstanding spokesman, in Gujarat, was Goverdhanram Tripathi (1855-1907). He found the ancient Indian heritage too precious to be wantonly destroyed and the gains from the West too great to be summarily rejected. Goverdhanram's prescription was neither a surrender to the West nor a blind attachment to the East. He believed in an assimilation and synthesis of the graces of the two. Thus, the initial pro-Western phase of the Indian Renaissance, which was followed by a pro-Indian conservative rejection of the West, found its equilibrium and culmination in a vision of the philosophy of cultural synthesis and assimilation in the second phase of the Indian Renaissance in Gujarat.

The ideal which governed Goverdhanram was almost Puritan in its earnestness and loftiness and reminds one of Milton, for, Goverdhanram, like Milton, was a product of the Renaissance and perhaps, like him, its finest flower. His 'Sarasvatichandra' in four volumes was like the quintessence of what was essentially good in the Indian Renaissance, which brought also the Reformation in its wake. Goverdhanram believed that 'Indian society and religions, orthodoxy and reform, visionaries and practical people, Indians and Englishmen, even the Government, States and the subjects must yield to this irresistible process of reciprocal

assimilation'. He had no doubt about the final outcome, for he emphatically declared that 'none of them whether of Eastern or Western boast will be able to resist yielding to this process in this way and to this end, more or less, sooner or later'. Goverdhanram believed that the enlightenment which issued from the study of the great works of the East and West was beneficial for the people of his country, but he also saw that a complete identification of a modern people with the sources of that enlightenment was not possible, since there were fundamental differences between the thoughts and customs of the English and the Indians, as there were varied differences between those of the age of ancient Sanskrit learning and of modern times. He, therefore, could not recommend either a complete swing to the Western culture or to the ancient Indian one, nor could he suffer his country to be at a stand-still and to stagnate. The only wise course, according to him, was to assimilate the best of both and work out a new synthesis with an open but critical mind.

The first three volumes of 'Sarasvatichandra' in which his vision stands enshrined depict 'the stages of the transition, where communities, under the influence of one or the other of these civilizations, were startled by the near approach or close contact of the rival civilizations and received one or the other with curiosity, suspicion or distrust'. The fourth and the last volume is mainly concerned with the part played by the educated Indians, like the hero of the novel, who work as mediators in bringing about a happy fusion of the three elements - the ancient and modern Indian and Western cultures. Goverdhanram showed

how the dream of assimilation and synthesis might materialize in the country.
As he put it, "what is a dream to-day might be a reality to-morrow". 1

His story was rather a peg on which to hang his thoughts, views and
visions. Lengthy dissertations, reflections and quotations, which may appear
irrelevant and even annoying to the average novel-reader, were, in fact, relevant
to his main purpose. In his hand, the novel was like a trumpet of a prophecy.
He saw that the country's fate lay, in the final analysis, in its capacity, as
it had always been through the centuries, for assimilation of all that was
best in the alien culture with its own ancient one, thus connecting him, on the
one hand, with ancient seers who prayed, 'Let all the good thoughts come to us
from all directions' (Rig Veda) and on the other, with the moderns like Mahatma
Gandhi, who remarked, 'I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about
my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any'.