The Impact of the New Hindu Movement

This study is mainly concerned with the history of ideas - history of the growth of the ideas that constituted the foundation of the New Hindu Movement. It would be in order now to briefly indicate the actual effects of the New Hindu ideas.

First, the New Hindu thinkers discovered the essence of religion of Hindus as distinct from caste rules, pollution rules and innumerable lifeless ceremonials. They established that the Upanishads and the Gita were the basic scriptures of Hinduism; they discovered the ethical doctrines of 'Love for all creation' and 'Nishkam Karma.' They showed the way how to attain personal illumination through renunciation. It may be argued that the impact of such discovery was not much, the prevalence of materialistic ideas in our generation apparently justifying that assertion.

Secondly, the New Hindu thinkers conjured up the vision of an ancient Indian civilization and by an interpretation of India's past civilization, they both historicized the Indian past and stimulated a consciousness of history. By their rediscovery and revitalization of a Hindu golden age, they transmitted a new sense of identity, to Bengalis and greatly contributed to modern India's cultural self-image.

The New Hindu Movement again provided the ideology of social and political actions. Bankim's doctrine of moral and political 'regeneration' and Vivekananda's doctrine of
'growth' were particularly effective in this regard. The New Hindu ideas like 'Dharmarajya', 'war of restoration', 'militancy as against mendicancy', 'swadeshi samaj', etc. undoubtedly influenced the course of the Nationalist Movement particularly the Swadeshi Movement.

The movement, on the plane of action, was only a partial success. This is evident from what is said in the previous chapter. The reasons of this failure are complex in nature and their analysis is outside the purview of this study. But it would be true to say that this failure was not due to any inner inconsistency of the New Hindu ideas. In brief, the failure had much to do with the complex social and political condition then prevailing in Bengal.

Against this failure has to be reckoned again the fact that the New Hindu Movement considerably contributed to the development of some aspects of Bengali culture - a glorious literature, a new school of painting, some fine music, and a new type of monasticism in which the humanitarian impulse merged with the search for spiritual illumination. However, it would be misleading to offer a monocausal explanation of the cultural efflorescence in the late 19th and early 20th century, and to relate it entirely to the New Hindu Movement. For instance, it was mixed up with the general background of growing nationalist feelings, which, contrary to a dominant school of historiography, were not the results of rivalry between elite groups competing for power and position. While the New Hindu Movement promoted
promoted such feelings, the movement itself was considerably influenced by the general climate of nationalism. The changing cultural life in Bengal should be studied in this wider background.

(1) It is not generally recognised that the development of modern Bengali literature in the late 19th century owes a great deal to the New Hindu Movement. Admittedly, this literature as regards structure and form was wholly an importation from the West. Thus Michael's (1824-74) literary medium was what may be called the heroic poem in blank verse, both of which devices had good indigenous ancestry in Sanskrit, but were, in fact, in the way Michael used them, much more closely related to the Western varieties than to the Eastern. Bankim's literary medium was the novel and the essay (in such works as Kamalakanter Daptar), the latter wholly deriving from the West, and the former only distantly related to such indigenous forms as, for example used in Kadambari. Strictly speaking, Bankim's medium was not the novel as understood in the West. True, such an early work as Durgeshnandini (1865) closely followed the structure of Scott's historical romances; but with Vishabriksha (1872) began a cycle of 'novels', 'historical' as well as 'domestic', the resemblance of which to the Western form was only superficial. This may be most easily judged by examining the structure of any 'domestic novel' of Bankim's, in which the actions are regulated by a strict adherence to a plot very much in the manner of a Greek tragedy (or at any rate in the manner in which
Aristotle understood that literary form). Also to be noted is the part played by the supernatural in the unfolding of that plot, with the incidents steadily leading to a climax, in the manner of the tragic drama rather than that of the novel. Bankim's literary form is really one of his own creation but if we analyse its elements the influence of Western forms has to be recognised as the dominant one.

A similar remark applies to the literary forms adopted by Tagore. The lyrical form was indeed nothing new in Bengali literature: Chandidas's poems - some of them among the greatest love songs in the world - were cast in the lyrical mould. But our older poets knew nothing of the infinite variety of lyrical forms such as found in English literature. Tagore adopted them all along with the short story, verse, drama and the novel.

When we come to the content of all these works, as distinct from their forms - we are face to face with a very different state of affairs and one can trace here the influence of some New Hindu ideas. This does not mean that the writers preach New Hindu ideas, though such a tale as Bankim's Devi Chaudhurani certainly does that. But some of their works are New Hindu in their treatment of Hindu society, not as an accretion of customs to be blindly accepted or blindly rejected, but as a certain special configuration of human relationships which, in its very restrictiveness especially in female characters, shows the way to a higher fulfilment. They are New Hindu because they sing the heroic glory of Hindus, and seek to
recapture the ancient light of a civilisation characterised by charity and renunciation rather than by war and conquest. They are New Hindu, because by emphasizing the Sanskritic element of a language, which in the most impressive of its achievements gained hitherto, was essentially feminine and lyrical, they seek to fashion another, which, without losing its identity, is suddenly roused into a state of masculine vigour, rendered nervous and stately, and made capable of the loftiest human emotions.

This Sanskritization of diction is important, for it ante-anticipated the general cultural movement which started soon and this was pioneered by Michael who wrote before the New Hindu Movement became a force to reckon with. It is certainly one of the greatest puzzles of 19th century Bengali literature that Michael, who was the most Westernized man of letters of his time, should have opted for a pre-eminently Sanskritic diction as the surest means to divest his vernacular of what was so long considered its native femininity. Despite his superior admiration for the literature written in English and the classical languages of Europe, despite the fact that in blank verse he took Milton for his model, he took his story from Valmiki and he not only did not attempt to Hellenise or at any rate, to Anglicise his diction but took infinite pains to Sanskritise it. As an exercise in the reform of verse and diction, his poem stands out supreme, even after a lapse of a whole century, as indicating what a man of superior genius can do in the way
of raising his vernacular from the status of a rustic language to one that is capable of expressing the noblest and the loftiest sentiments in verse.

If Michael's greatest achievement was his language and his blank verse, that of Bankim was a bounteous crop of the most unforgettable characters in Bengali literature. The most astonishing thing about these characters is their variety - astonishing because apart from Bankim, our literature has all along been strangely deficient in this regard. Bankim's world stands out as the vastness of the Himalayan landscape stands out against the scenery of a beautiful Bengali village. His is not a world of tearful women wasting their lives under the grip of cast-iron social customs, with their highminded lovers looking helplessly on. His is a world of action on the heroic scale, with soldiers clanking their swords in restless frenzy, statesman scheming the destruction of kingdoms, women rushes on horseback to meet their lovers or destroying themselves and their lovers too by the very intensity of their passions, men of vision sacrificing their lives and all else for the sake of their vision, passionate youngmen moving from sin to sin and then to God to seek solace for their lacerated souls - in a word, a world as large as life itself and actions as big as literary art could make them. Bankim is indeed the poet of great actions worthily attempted by heroes who fail to attain their goals. But even in their failure they vindicate his dictum about the great man as being the sort of man who cannot help gambling for mighty sorrows or mighty pleasures, because,
without these, his faculties, ever hungry for more and more expansion, refuse to grow and develop.

"When we say that this world of action and strife is a New Hindu one what we mean is this: Most of Bankim's heroes are cast in the mould of Kshatriyas - being consumed with a desire for expansiveness, sometimes fighting for the realisation of a definite political vision characteristic of the true born Kshatriya (Rajsinha, Satyananda, Bhawani Pathak, Sitaram), sometimes fighting their own passion with Kshatriya manfulness (Pratap, Bhavananda) - but always (with the exception of Rajsinha) destroying themselves tragically by the very magnificence of their desire, which inevitably precludes a lesser end. It is of course arguable that there is nothing specifically Hindu about such writing; just as on the strength of the evidence furnished by the Hindu-Muslim political strife depicted in most of Bankim's historical novels, it has been argued by latter day detractors of Bankim that these novels are Hindu in the narrower sense, that of invidious political propaganda. But to a discerning reader it should be clear that Bankim's heroes are Hindu in a larger sense: they are a literary expression of the regenerative elan which breathed through the whole New Hindu Movement. A brief glance at the historical development of our literature since the 1820s and a comparison with the religious history during the same period (i.e., the period 1820-70) strengthens the same view. As in religion the pre-Bankim period was characterised by Brahmo Reformism, so in literature the period was one of reformistic propaganda starting with such works as Naba-Baboo-Bilas, Michael's farces.
Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Sadhbar Ekadasi*, Tekchand’s *Alaler Gharer Dulal* and so forth. Just as in religion and social customs the earlier period was characterised by Hindu College Westernization, so in literature it witnessed Michael’s attempt at Hellenising the heroes and heroines of Hindu epics. It is against this background that the heroes of Bankim’s historical novels are to be viewed.

When we come to Bankim’s female characters this conclusion gets strengthened. It is well known that Bankim’s female characters – all (or at any rate most of them) exhibit a Hindu virtue which in English can only be rendered by such terms as 'faithfulness' or 'chastity', but which is in fact based on a far nobler idea than what these strictly limited words imply. The Sanskrit word 'Satitva' stands for whatever is glorious in a married woman’s existence. Sexual fidelity to the husband is only part of that glory. 'Satitva' means a lot more. It includes a married woman’s dignity – the dignity, that is to say, which demands of the husband an equal fidelity and of society the respect which is a married woman’s due; it includes her religious initiation, the sort of initiation that prepares her for illumination by absolute devotion to the husband and necessarily implies heroic efforts when the husband is a poor creature and has to be led by the hand to be made worthy of that devotion; it includes motherhood, the sort of motherhood that looks upon the work of child bearing as a sort of worship. By the term 'Satitva' is thus implied an austere doctrine with all its component
parts; and Bankim leaves no room for doubt that his heroines are portrayed as embodiments of these virtues. Thus Bhramar stands for the wifely dignity, and would rather seek death than cohabit with a lecherous husband; the weak and irresolute Roma for the social dignity that is a married woman's due, and to regain which the weak and irresolute bride would be suddenly transfigured into a stern crowndaring woman of steel; the mirth-loving Labanya for the hard-hearted punisher of sacrilege, who would think nothing of writing 'thief' in letters of red-hot iron on the back of her lover who was not her husband but for whom her whole soul yearned; and would burst out but for her superhuman self-control; and lastly the heroic couple Shanti and Prafulla for the devotion that would not serve passively but would lead their husbands by the hand to the path of transcendent glory. This also explains the reason why the vital Saibalini, having fallen from 'Satitva', has to undergo a system of penance as excruciating as hell-fire while still in her earthly frame. It is possible that here for once Bankim the moralist has got the upperhand of the literary artist; but it is a measure of Bankim's genius that consciously conceived as embodiments of a Hindu virtue as they are, his female characters are no lay-figures, but are in fact the well-springs of vitality in all his novels.

Coming to Tagore, we are faced with the initial difficulty of deciding how much of his writings were
inspired by the New Hindu impulse. Tagore's literary output is so vast and so various that any attempt to include it all within a single scheme would be misleading. But here our task is simplified by the time limits imposed on our work. His output after 1911, is automatically excluded from consideration here. But even so we must guard against attribution of a New Hindu inspiration to any work of Tagore. In Tagore's case this is all the more necessary because as we saw earlier he was on many points a staunch Brahmo and this has also influenced some of his writings. Take for example, such an early work as 'Visarjan' whose central idea is that the worship of Kali by offering animal flesh at her altar is a vile and cruel practice.

But there can be little doubt that a considerable part of Tagore's works during the closing years of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th shows influence of some New Hindu themes. This is especially true of the poems of Chaitali, and Naivedya, where the forest ideal of ancient India was the dominant theme. These poems with an obvious message. However, dignity and loftiness of diction has saved these poems from being mere vapourings of high minded idealism (as in the case with most works of Hemchandra Banerjee).

There are, however, two works belonging to this period— where the New Hindu impulse is not merely one that adds to neutral material a new dimension and thereby heightens its intensity and deepens its significance, but is directly concerned with New Hindu themes. The first is
a collection of ballads - the sort of historical or semi-
historical tales in which Bankim would have been in his
element, but which Tagore made his own by his very special
way of treating them. These are not poems of action in
any sense but a series of intense moments in the lives of
certain Hindu and Buddhist heroes (and heroines) - moments
mostly of self-inflicted martyrdom in a blinding flash of
self-expansion, described in the fewest of words and with
hardly any adornment of language. There are some other
poems in which the power of renunciation is described
by way of dramatising a single unassuming action of mar-
vellous power. 'Katho O Kahini' is religious poetry of
a new kind, a kind that has no parallel in world literature.

'Kahini' is a work having little resemblance to
'Katha O Kahini'. It is a collection of five poems in
dialogue, three of them adapted from the Mahabharata -
but each1 dealing with a religious theme. Of the five
'Gandharir Abedan' is the longest and calls for special
notice.

'Gandharir Abedan' is one of the noblest poems in
our language. Its subject matter is the infructuous appeal
made by Queen Gandhari to her husband Dhritarastra, the
King of the Kurus, to exile their son Duryodhan for the
the monstrous sin he (Duryodhan) had brought upon the

1. With the possible exception of 'Karna-Kunti Sambad' which
narrates the personal tragedy of the heroic son of Kunti
who, having been early deserted by his mother and remain-
ed unknown to his brothers turned down his mother's re-
quest to go over to their side at the last moment, and
faced death in their hands - unknown, unhonoured
and unsung.
illustrious house of the Kurus by deceitfully depriving his cousins of their kingdom, and bringing dishonour on their noble queen Draupadi in an attempt to disrobe her publicly in front of her oath-bound husbands and all the nobles in the kingdom. The story is almost exactly as told in the Mahabharata and the characters exactly as drawn by the ancient author. Tagore has scrupulously followed in the footsteps of the great predecessor.

'Gandharir Abedan' is unique in being an epitome of the whole Mahabharata within the smallest possible compass, the whole poem occupying no more than a thousandth part of the space covered by the gigantic epic. It is unique in describing within its compass the Mahabharata theme of Dharma in distress pronouncing its fearful triumph through the person of a mother who in her terrible spiritual isolation contemplates the chaos that is slowly going to engulf her house even as the kingly glory sought by her evil son was apparently achieved. The evil son in the stateliness of his self-destructive pride, the infatuated father in complete awareness of the approaching doom but in his infatuation powerless to avoid it, and above all the righteous mother in the profound dignity of her sorrow - all these have been portrayed through a few short speeches of unequalled nobility and an unrivalled balance of style.

The above is an all-too-brief account of our literary achievements during the last half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th. We have had no occasion to go into details and have left out some works of outst-
among them Tagore's earlier short stories, in some of which (such as 'Dristidan, Megh O Raudra'), New Hindu ideas is evident. Also we have left out 'Gora' - possibly Tagore's greatest achievement - in fiction, in which the hero, a New Hindu character, towers above the goody-goody Paresh Babu, whose Brahmoism has in the end, been shown to score a victory over Gora's New Hinduism by a device which convinces nobody and Gora's New Hindu image continues to haunt the reader. But the little we have written amply shows that the greatest achievements of our literature owe not a little of their greatness to the New Hindu afflatus.

(2) Painting: It seems to us that the painting of this period is not as great as its literature. But it is universally recognised that the Neo-Indian school of painting founded by Abanindranath Tagore and his disciples, is the only style of painting created in modern times which can be credited with originality and some amount of excellence. It is also recognised that the excellence of this style derives not a little from Neo-Indian painters' successful attempt at breaking away from the practice of imitating Western form. This does not necessarily imply that the new paintings were New Hindu: at best, they were 'national'. But Abanindranath's Krishnalila paintings, his illustrations of certain scenes taken from Kalidas's Meghduta and Ritu Samhara, his 'Buddha and Sujata' - all these are New Hindu in the sense that they derive their life from the visionary harking back to an ancient Indian civilisation.
which was one aspect of the New Hindu Movement. But Abanindranath's interest in ancient India was romantic and lyrical rather than religious. Thus his 'Buddha' (in Budha and Sujata) inspite of his serene countenance and the traditional posture reminds us of Tagore's Upagupta and his own Kacha (in the picture entitled 'Kacha and Devyani') — both of them romantic heroes rather than givers of a 'peace that passeth understanding'. Abanindranath's paintings are to be judged within these limitations, but once we recognise these limitations we are struck with the variety of artistic expressions of which the New Hindu impelled was capable.

(3) Ramakrishna Mission: How potent the New Hindu formula of uniting humanitarian service with the search for spiritual experience was, can be judged from the fact that very many respectable religious missions founded in India since Vivekananda's death — have combined both these aims and have closely resembled Vivekananda's organisation in this respect. In humanitarian service, indeed, the record of some of these missions does not compare unfavourably with that of the Ramakrishna Mission. But the Ramakrishna Mission was the pioneering body in such service and we shall content ourselves by recording some of its achievements.

If the mission founded by Vivekananda did nothing but undertake the many acts of service it performed by establishing hospitals, relief centres and many other
charitable bodies over the length and breadth of our land, it would have nevertheless earned our undying gratitude. In this respect, the record of our religious bodies in the past was far from admirable. Hundreds of religious bodies had flourished in our country previous to the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission, but none of them was ever known to take up humanitarian service as part of its work. Nivedita, in emphasising the epoch-making nature of Vivekananda's mission, when considered from this angle, has tried to gloss over the deficiency in this respect — of earlier religious bodies by remarking that: "In India the head and front of the demand made on a monastic order is that it produces saints;" but such a charitable view hardly takes account of the fact that the number of saints born in India has never been proportionate to the number of its matha or monasteries. However, the impact of Vivekananda's mission, is evident from the fact that there is hardly one respectable religious order in the country which does not at least pay lip service (if no more than that) to the now-well-established custom that a religious order must justify its existence by taking up humanitarian work in the first place. In this respect the founding of the Ramakrishna Mission was a truly 'epoch-making' event.

But humanitarian service is after all secular work, and one can argue that such work could as well be performed as satisfactorily by a secular body and even by a department of the State. The significance of the humanitarian
work performed by Vivekananda mission is that it prevented charity from being polluted with the stink of the workhouse and the soullessness of unemployment doles, and raised it to the level of a sacrament.

Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the great historian, who was an eye-witness of the sort of work performed by Nivedita and some of Vivekananda's disciples, on the occasion of the plague which broke out in Calcutta in 1898 has written:

"when the sweepers had fled away, (I) chanced upon a white woman one day clearing the streets with broom and basket in hand. This was none other than Nivedita;"

Again, "If the stench of garbage accumulated in a narrow lane repelled even the practised sweepers, (another disciple) would non-chalantly snatch the basket and spade one of them and set about removing the decomposed heap till the sweepers too would step forward... At the end, he would congratulate them and embrace them warmly, regardless of their social distance or dirty bodies. Or if there was an uncared for patient he would hug him and nurse him to recovery." The disciple referred to was Swami Sadananda.

These two examples give us some idea of the glory with which Nivedita and Sadananda had invested their humanitarian work. Unfortunately, this aspect of the matter has received little notice in official histories of the Ramakrishna Mission. Even Swami Gambhirananda's 'History' gives one the impression that the Mission's achievement consisted in the bigness of the tasks it undertook; as if the institution founded by Vivekananda in the name of his Guru would justify itself by the number of hospitals and schools it founded. The examples we have given, few as they are, should make it clear that at least
in the case of Nivedita and Sadananda a higher justification of 'service' was operative. That this justification was by no means absent from the 'service' undertaken by some other monks is evident from the following statement made by Nivedita, who however withheld the name of the 'Sanyasin' in question. As she put it:

"I know of one disciple, who, in the early days of the Order, was so filled with the impulse of this reverence (for work as worship) that he sucked the sores of the lepers to bring them ease."  

The mission founded by Vivekananda is the only offspring yet in existence of the New Hindu Movement. The year 1911, saw the death of Nivedita, who was in some sense the closest spiritual heir of the great Swami. The continued existence and the gradual expansion of the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission after 1911, admirable and wholly praiseworthy as those activities are, are no refutation of our statement that the New Hindu Movement became moribund with the dismantling of the Swadeshi Movement, when politics tended to overshadow the religious impulse of the movement. It would be churlish to harp on the failures of so great an institution as the Ramakrishna Mission but it can hardly be denied that since 1911, this institution has not even attempted to take up the two outstanding schemes of Vivekananda. First, the 'raising' of the masses through religious education spread

by itinerant monks all over the country and the devising of methods by which these masses could be helped in their problem of subsistence; and secondly, the 'raising' of our women.