(A) Varieties of 19th Century Rationalism in regard to Religion:

In Chapter Three, we used the phrase 'rationalistic method' to characterise Bankim's approach to religious questions. We shall see now that the application of this method to religion in general and to Hinduism in particular was Bankim's most significant contribution to the religious debate of the Nineteenth Century; and it was also productive of the most lasting consequences.

As noted in the previous Chapter, this method consisted in a rationalist attempt to answer the rationalist objection to all religions - the objection, that is to say, not against idolatrous Hinduism alone, but against the general religious position. The course of the history of rationalism in Europe since the 18th century has shown that there have been two broad phases in that history. The first was the pre-Darwinian phase in which the rationalist objection to religion was directed against the two pillars of orthodox religions, - scriptural revelation, and church. But the general rationalist position in the Eighteenth Century was not atheistical, but a plea for some sort of Deism. This is not to deny that some of the philosophers of the French revolution, and a few other philosophers, - the most noted among whom being David Hume, were thorough-
going atheists. But as a general statement of the Eighteenth Century rationalist position in regard to the religious question, this description is largely true. Rationalists in the Eighteenth Century denied the authority of the church and the truth of scriptural revelation, but they felt that the existence of God was a 'necessity of reason', as the elaborate mechanism of creation seemed to point to a supremely intelligent artificer. This was the celebrated 'argument from design' for the existence of God. Also, the need for some system of morality in the organisation of all societies seemed to point to a Supreme Moral Being.

This Eighteenth Century approach to religion underwent a complete change since the publication of Darwin's monumental work. The design in the creation was now seen to be a work of evolution, and with this last prop of supernatural existence removed from the hands of the religiously-minded, religion itself ran the hazard of being brushed aside to make room for total atheism. This, in a nutshell, was the post-Darwinian rationalist position in regard to religion - a position that has persisted to this day.

The consequence of these movements of thought in Europe was not confined to Europe alone. The introduction of English Education in India was a vehicle of transmission of this influence to India and this made the new generation of Indian students profoundly influenced by these currents of thought. We have already referred to a letter of Macaulay's in which he noticed the trend towards atheism in the
English-educated public of Bengal. It was certainly not a widespread trend during the earlier half of the century, but it cannot be denied that a section of the young Bengal Group (the so-called Derozians) was affected by it. It has been said that the Brahmo-Movement was an answer to the challenge of European Rationalism and that of Christianity to Hindu religious beliefs and Hindu social customs.

In Chapter-I, we referred without criticism or comment to this popularly held theory of the origin of Brahmoism. To appreciate the significance of Bankim's work, it would be pertinent, to discuss, at this point, the specific Brahmo position in regard to rationalist criticism of religion.

We quote below some passages, one by Rammohan Roy and the others by Keshub Chandra Sen to illustrate that position.

Rammohan writing in 1820, in his preface to his work, "The Precepts of Jesus", thus refers to pre-Darwinian Rationalism:

"A notion of the existence of a supreme superintending power, the Author and Preserver of this harmonious system, who has organised and who regulates such an infinity of celestial and terrestrial objects; and a due estimation of that law which teaches that man should do unto others as he should wish to be done by, reconciles us to human nature, and tend to render our existence agreeable to ourselves and profitable to the rest of mankind. The former of these sources of satisfaction, viz., a belief in God, prevails generally; being derived either from tradition and instruction, or from an attentive survey of the wonderful skill and contrivance displayed in the works of nature." 1

This extract, especially the underlined words, clearly indicate that Rammohan was not averse to using the so-called 'argument from design' to prove the existence of God. But his reference to 'tradition' and 'instruction' is a clean indication of his approval of scriptural revelation.

Rammohan, while not unacquainted with the sort of Deism popular with eighteenth century philosophers held to scriptural revelation as the foundation of his philosophy. The novelty in his method consisted in this: As a religious universalist - possibly the first of its kind in India or elsewhere - he recognised as revealed truth not only the scriptures of Hinduism but of Christianity and Islam as well; and upheld the monotheistic doctrine in all these scriptures. In regard to Hindu scriptures this was no easy matter, he, therefore, had recourse to the Hindu doctrine of 'jurisdiction' according to which only certain parts of those scriptures were binding on a Vedantic monotheist - the so-called "Brahmanistha Grihasthas"¹ of his conception.

This was of course a doctrine of expediency, even though it had been time-honoured practice of Hindu commentators to use the same device to reconcile the interminable inconsistencies amongst the interminable series of Hindu scriptures. It was left to Devendranath Tagore to discard the

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¹ The conception that brahma-jnana and moksha (final liberation) is within reach of householders (grihastha) and no monopoly of world-renouncing hermits.
notion of scriptural infallibility altogether. It will not however, be true to say that he advocated the thorough-going rationalist position of the pre-Darwinian era. He did not expound his beliefs as a 'necessity of reason', but sought their sanction in "a heart that was pure and that was irradiated by knowledge". This somewhat vague terminology was replaced in Keshub Chandra Sen's writings by the term 'Intuition'.

Keshub, writing in September, 1860, in the fourth number of his "Tracts for the Times" thus described, what according to him, was the "Basis of Brahmoism."

"Its basis is in the depths of human nature. Brahmoism is founded upon those principles of the mind which are above, anterior to and independent of reflection, which the variations of opinion cannot alter or affect. It stands upon intuitions."

He went on to explain the meaning of the term:

"Intuition denotes those cognitions which our nature immediately apprehends. To take (an) example, ........ How do you come to know the reality of the external world? Is it not true that logic can never give you this knowledge? The mark of intuition is immidiacy. Intuitive truth is directly cognizable; it is seen face to face."

In another place he wrote:

"Are their other religious truths besides the intuitive? Yēs : truths derived from experience."

He examined possible objections to the Doctrine of Intuitions and cited a host of philosophers who had spoken in favour of intuition. He dismissed the objections as

proceeding from "the convenient system of empiricism."

"(Some people) thoroughly ignore the intuitive or a priori element in human knowledge and regard it is as a capricious sentimentality or at least a derivative cognition. That these prejudices are generally the result of superficial views and indicate a tacit acquiescence in the convenient system of empiricism can hardly be disputed."

If we examine these extracts a bit closely, we notice that they certainly embody a species of rationalism, but it hardly corresponds to the predominant rationalist position of the 18th century philosophers in regard to the truth of religious beliefs. That position was largely inspired by the progress of science and sought some sort of empirical justification in support of religion. Keshub's Intuitionism was hardly in consonance with the empirical spirit of the age; and his somewhat derogatory reference to the "convenient system of empiricism" gave his position away. The real danger of Keshub's 'Doctrine of Intuition' lay in this: the so-called 'objective' intuition of the philosophers ran the hazard of becoming far more 'subjective' and arbitrary than book revelation when, in the wake of the controversy that followed the Cooch Behar marriage Keshub's intuitive apprehension of the Divine will was sought to be imposed upon his recalcitrant followers. The reader will remember that in Chapter one, when speaking of the craving for religious ecstasy which was the dominant note in the characters of Keshub Chandra Sen and Bijoy Krishna Goswami, we asserted

1. "Revelation is subjective, not objective.
Prem Sundar Bose: Life and Works of Brahmananda Keshub.
p.31."
that these two religious seekers virtually ignored the challenge of European Rationalism. The present discussion of Keshub's Intuitionism should be read in the light of that assertion. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Keshub's rationalistic professions of 1860 foreshadowed the emotional excesses of the New Dispensation - the one was a direct consequence of the other.

From Keshub to Bankim the chronological interval was small - both were born in the same year - but in the world of ideas they had very little resemblance. Bankim must have noted with care how the progress of Brabmoism towards the rationalist creed, first, by renouncing book revelation, then by appealing to the universal, objective intuition of the philosophers gradually sank into the quagmire of the subjective intuitions of Keshub's later career. What is certain is that, in his search for the 'basis of religion' he was careful to exclude any appeal to the sort of 'intuitionism' preached by philosophers, but devoted himself to a consideration of the viewpoint of science - the so-called 'convenient system of empiricism' mentioned by Keshub Chandra Sen. Extracts from Bankim's writings will make this clear.

Referring to the general run of Brahmans, Christian, Musalmans and Jews who subscribed to the doctrine of revelation and distinguishing from these a second class of thinkers amongst whom he counted himself, Bankim wrote:

"The second class of thinkers say that there is no adequate ground for the belief that any religion or any religious scripture is revealed. Such is the opinion, held, for example, by thinkers of the Schools of Buddhists, Comteans, Brahmos and New Hindu thinkers; they recognise no revealed scripture. But this denial of Revelation faces them with the onus of proving that religion has a natural, a physical basis. In default of that, religion loses all support, - on what then will it stand? Thus, physical basis of religion is not an imaginary insubstantial conception; even those thinkers who recognise some religion as revealed by God are not debarred from acknowledging such physical basis.

The present writer, like a great many latter day interpreters of Hinduism chooses to belong to this second class of thinkers. I do not recognise any religion as made or revealed by God. I hold that religion has some natural, some physical basis."

The importance of this extract derives from the fact that it is by far the clearest statement of the rationalist creed from the pen of a nineteenth century Bengal writer. Although Bankim is content to enlist himself in the class of religious thinkers who include, amongst others, the thinkers of the Brahmo School, the phrase 'physical basis of religion' sufficiently set him apart from those who subscribed to the 'Doctrine of Intuition'. Again this phrase was not to be interpreted as indicating a merely Deistic profession in the manner of eighteenth century rationalists. It did not exclude that, because in another place Bankim made much of the 'Argument from Design' but was careful to note that:

"According to (John Stuart Mill) the mechanism of creation points to a creator of the Universe. This is of course an old argument and is far from being an incontrovertible one. There were valid answers to this argument even before the publication of Darwin's theory. But, now
Darwin has shown that the design in creation occurs from itself."

This was written in 1875 (B.S.1282), that is to say, seven years before the controversy with Hastie. Bankim's rationalist position, at the start of his religious career, was thus the post-Darwinian position of scientific agnosticism. We know from some of his autobiographical references that it was in fact more than that. Actually he had passed through a long spell of atheism and when, at last, he began to have glimpses of the truth of religion, it was not though a sudden flash of divination of the 'supersensible,' or the electrifying touch of a divinely inspired Guru, but through a very rigorous, painstaking logical analysis of human existence, avoiding the futility of all species of logical analysis only by the touch of an insight - human again, and not mystical - developed by a life-long habit of seeing life deeply and 'seeing it whole'.

(B) The Humanistic Approach to Religion:

That which Bankim accepted as the 'natural', the 'physical' basis of his religion was not the existence of God or of a supernatural order as a 'necessity of reason,' but something else which marks him out as a thinker much before his time. He approached the religious question from the standpoint of Humanism. Humanism is an old doctrine, As an ethical system aimed at regulating men's lives so as

1. Ibid., p.273.
to secure them the highest happiness by rousing all their faculties to the fullest extent, it is as old as the Greeks. But neither the Greeks, with their system of anthropomorphic gods, nor any other people with their diverse religious faiths succeeded in erecting the doctrine of Humanism as a full-fledged substitute for religion. It is only in our own times — times in which faith in all creeds not amenable to the test of human experience has all but disappeared — that Humanism is fast coming to be recognised as a serious and perhaps the only (scientifically) admissible alternative to religion. Bankim was one of the first thinkers to recognise this. Certainly he was the first to show that a religion of love and devotion was not incompatible with the humanistic approach.

He started with the definition of religion: "That which makes for the highest development of man — a development that is at once physical, mental, and social — that constitutes religion."¹


cf. I yield to none in the firmness of my conviction in the existence of the Great Author of Nature and my trust in His Providence.... (But I am not one of who think that a belief in God or in a number of Gods or in a future existence or in anything else which does not admit of proof constitutes religion. But when such belief or any belief whatever, furnishes a basis for conduct — for the conduct of the individual towards himself as well as towards others, when by becoming a common faith and therefore furnishing a common basis of conduct, it becomes a bond of union between man and man, a standard by which human existence individual and aggregate, comes to be regulated, it is religion. : Letters on Hinduism: Bankim Rachanavali (Sahitya Samsad, vol. III, p. 237).
We shall see in the course of the next chapter how this definition of religion brought on its author the bitter animosity of the Brahmos, who promptly condemned the supposed atheism of Bankim. Actually, what galled them most, was not so much the secularity of Bankim's definition as the fact that Bankim in his definition totally ignored the controversy regarding the superiority of a certain form of worship, (in this case, the monotheistic worship advocated by Brahmos) as the crux of the problem of religion but put all the emphasis on conduct. The history of the Brahmo movement during the half-century that elapsed between the years 1828 and 1878, had shown that the questions of worship and social reform were the crucial issues behind all its schisms, and all its religious efforts. Bankim's emphasis on conduct seemed to render that controversy otiose by totally ignoring the question of worship. Actually, Bankim was not ignoring it, he was only relegating it to its proper place by recognising worship as part of conduct, but his humanistic approach left him no alternative but to start from the basis of conduct, the only possible secular foundation of religion to a mind that accepted the scientific objection to all species of the supersensible. Let us quote another extract to illustrate the secular orientation behind Bankim's search for the essence of religion:

"I do not profess to make any one religious by raising the bogey of future existence...... As far as possible, I am excluding the notion from my exposition of religion. I cannot hope to raise the edifice of religion on the foundation of something which does not subsist in your mind. Moreover, it seems to me that the exclusion.
of future existence does not necessarily leave religion without a foundation."

What was the foundation then? The answer was: the secular pursuit of happiness in which human conduct expressed itself. But an analysis of happiness showed that it was not a matter of uncultivated sensation as it was usually supposed but the result of applying certain faculties - bodily or mental, as the case may be, to the attainment of certain ends, the faculties themselves being refined by a certain process of culture. The highest happiness of man, therefore, required the fullest development of his faculties - physical, intellectual, active and aesthetic. Having reached this step of the argument it was but natural to pursue the notion of the fullest development of the faculties, and Bankim devoted all the preliminary chapters of his systematic exposition of religion to the clarification of that notion.

Obviously all this was nothing but pure Humanism, reminding us of Plato's educational theory explained in the Republic and summed up in the formula 'gymnasium for the body

1. Bankim Chandra: Dharmatattwa : Chapter VII.
2. Ibid. Chapter-II: what are the elements of happiness? First, the cultivation of mental and physical faculties and their development and refinement brought about by such cultivation. Second, the balance of the faculties with one another. Third, their satisfaction in that balanced state of development and refinement.
3. Ibid. Chapter-V.
and music for the soul.' More striking was the similarity of Bankim's Humanism to that of Aristotle. It all but approximated to the conception of the 'virtuous man' elaborated in Aristotle's "Nicomachaen Ethics." The parallelism was even more striking in Bankim's doctrine of 'balance' which was almost identical with Aristotle's doctrine of 'mean' and very closely resembles the general Greek notion of 'harmony.' Put in a nutshell, Bankim's conception of 'balance' was that of a controlling device for faculties like 'lust' and 'anger', lest they should negate such faculties as 'charity' and 'love for fellow-beings.' It is, however, to be noted that Bankim derived his doctrine from Hindu sources tracing his whole conception to the verse in the Gita.1

"Rāgadvesavimuktaiś Visāyanindriyaiścāraṇaḥ
Ātmavasyairvidheẏatma prasādamadhigacchati||"

"He who seeks pleasure by means of sense, that have been made free of lust and revulsion and rendered subject to his own direction - that man of self-control (Vidheẏatma) attains peace." This according to Bankim was the Hindu version of the Greek doctrine of 'harmony' just as the Hindu doctrine of 'regulating the senses' was the basis of his scheme for developing all the human faculties by a 'system of culture.' The question, however, was not how far this scheme was derivable from the scriptures of the Hindus, but how far it constituted a religion at all. Was it not a system of ethics essentially naturalistic and atheistical?

1. Srimatbhagat Gita, 2/64.
It was indeed a version of a godless glorification of man—an overweening presumption of Man's fragile humanity to shine forth as the 'measure of all things.'

The answer to this question, as furnished by Bankim, was a very simple one, transforming (as in a flash) his tract on Humanism into a work of deep and all-absorbing piety. In essence his answer was that the balanced development of the faculties was unattainable except by turning them all towards God, or, to put the matter in more naturalistic terms—except by making all the faculties subservient to the faculty of Bhakti (reverential love). In his own words:

"The condition in which a person's intellectual faculties get directed towards God, the active faculties are dedicated to Him, the aesthetic faculties flourish in the enjoyment of His beauty and the physical faculties apply themselves to His work— I call that condition Bhakti."¹

Again "the true harmony of all the faculties is in their subservience to Bhakti."²

It is obvious that with this idea, wonderful as it is, Bankim goes beyond the limits of strict humanism and introduces a certain non-human element into his religion. He introduces God as a supremely perfect Personal Being who pervades the whole universe³ and acts as a rallying point⁴ of all human faculties, which thereby get harmonised and become the perfect instruments for the noblest type of

¹. Dharmatattwa: Chapter-XI.
². Ibid.
³. Dharmatattwa: Chapter XXI. See the comparison between the conception of Hindu God and Christian God.
⁴. See the discussion in Chapter-V on August Comte's influence on Bankim. The expression 'rallying point' occurs in Comte's naturalistic definition of religion. See also Appendix-B, Dharmatattwa.
human action imaginable. It should not be thought for a moment that with the introduction of God, Bankim abandons 'humanism', but with this introduction follows an exposition of a naturalistic ethics which is as profound in its simplicity as it is magnificent in its comprehensiveness.

Briefly, it is this. Bhakti, though directed towards a non-human personal Being, is nevertheless the quintessence of all human activities seeking expression in action that is purely human because the Divinity is in essence "a Being pervading the whole universe and work aimed at Him is work aimed at the world." According to Bankim, such work constitutes the best worship, popular worship, idolatrous or otherwise, being essentially secondary and aiming at the worshipper's own purification of heart. Bhakti is therefore humanistic worship par excellence, and this doctrine must be regarded as Bankim's answer to the main point of all Brahmo and Christian criticisms of Hinduism (the criticism that Hindu worship was aimed at stocks and stones).

But is there any 'natural basis' for 'work aimed at the world?' Bankim could have said that it required no further natural basis, for 'work aimed at the world' being humanistic work, its natural basis was self-evident. But Bankim further seeks a natural basis in the human faculty of love. Bankim seeks the 'natural basis' in the human faculty of love (Priti) and examines the sort of development

1. Dharmatattwa: Chapter-XX.
2. Ibid.
this faculty has undergone in history—especially in the history of Europe. He notices the first phase of this development in the family in relation to a man's kindred in blood. But "the development of the faculty in the family induces it to expand beyond the confines of that institution ... (and) gradually embraces the circle of acquaintances made by matrimony, one's own friends, one's dependents, one's clan or tribe." Further culture makes "it extend upto the frontier's of one's native land." Such according to Bankim is the origin of patriotism—a stage of expansion in the faculty of love, which, in his view, is so potent a factor behind the greatness of European nations.

But "patriotism is not the ultimate stage in the development of the faculty of love. There is one stage behind it, a stage in which love embraces the whole world, and such love makes for true religion."

Thus we are again led to the humanistic conception of religion and Bankim's notion of God as the "soul of the world" makes this expansion of love a religious duty.

(C) Monotheism and Pantheism:

Bankim makes much of the fact that the love that embraces the whole world is a logical corollary of the Hindu conception of God as the "soul of the world." Humanitarianism is thus of the very essence of the Hindu's religion. Since God pervades all humanity—and indeed all creation, Bhakti towards God of necessity includes love for everything that exists. Bankim contrasts this pantheistic conception of God with the monotheism of Christianity and Brahmoism. Without anywhere mentioning the Brahmos by name, he obviously intends to make this point as a serious criticism of their doctrine. As he puts it:
The God of the Christian is beyond the world. No doubt He is its lord, but just as the king of Germany or Russia is a person essentially different from the mass of his German or Russian subjects, so is God of the Christian. To love Him one has to make (an attempt at a) special expansion of one's faculty of love as in the act of loving a temporal king.

Not so the God of the Hindu. He pervades all creation .... He is in me. When I love myself, I love Him. If I do not love Him I do not love myself either ...... If I do not love all humanity, I would not be loving Him, I would not be loving myself ...... Thus love of the world is in the very foundations of Hinduism." 1

This is not to suggest that he intends to depreciate the humanitarian work done by either Christians or Brahmos. Indeed, in the next section we shall see that it was Bankim's contention that the doctrine of humanitarianism had remained virtually a dead letter amongst the Hindus for ages past and that the revival of that doctrine was one of the chief aims of the New Hindu Movement. But the criticism implicit in the contrast of the humanitarianism of the Pantheist with that of the Monotheist was doubtless a way of winning over converts to Brahmoism to the Hindu fold.

But there is an implication of this criticism which is of greater importance from the standpoint of Bankim's rationalism. We have just seen that the basic point of his criticism of Christian - (we should say Judaeo-Christian) - monotheism is this: Such monotheism presupposes an External God, a God "who is beyond the world". The notion of such a deity is of course foreign to the spirit of science, which would have nothing of an entity that lies essentially outside the domain of experience. Not only that, His distance from humanity renders it difficult for love towards Him to flow spontaneously. Neither of these defects are operative

1. Dharmatattwa : Chapter-XXI.
in the case of the sort of Personal Pantheism professed by Hindus. The God that pervades the whole creation is of course not an External God. It is nearly related to the conception of God in Nature "to which alone science is inclined to pay much respect," but avoids being a mere philosophical abstraction by combining itself with the notion of a Personal Being who is the rallying point of all human faculties and the supreme medium through which they are harmonised. Thus Bankim's conception of God, though a non-human element in his Humanism, is the nearest that can be imagined to satisfy the naturalist conscience for serving as a 'natural', a physical basis' of religion. This is not to suggest that such a concept of God admits of scientific experience any more than the Deity conceived by Christians. But in the sense in which the 18th century Deist claimed his conception of God to be 'a necessity of Reason', Bankim's conception was a necessity of Humanism.

In making this rapid survey of Bankim's exposition of religion we have lumped together the special results of that exposition with its general, rationalistic structure. A separation of the two will help us in locating the two issues in their proper perspective.

1. Letters on Hinduism (Bankim Rachanavali, Samsad, p.267). He explains the conception in these words: "Granted, there is a First cause, but why should we seek it beyond Nature? Is it impossible that the cause of the universe should be in itself? God, it says, is in Nature; and all phenomena His manifestations. This is Pantheism."
First, as to the rationalistic structure, Bankim attempted to find some natural, some physical basis of religion in consonance with the spirit of the post-Darwinian rationalism of 19th century Europe. His natural basis consisted of the following steps:

1) He started from the universal natural urge to happiness and showed that happiness was not a matter of uncultivated sensation but presupposed a stage of development in certain faculties aiming at certain ends.

2) This led him to the doctrine of the fullest development of the faculties.

3) As the faculties themselves clashed among themselves, he was led to the doctrine of balance.

4) The balance could not be attained except by directing the faculties to some rallying point, a non-human Personal Being, who allowed them the fullest development by curbing some and letting the others run their full course.

5) Such a Personal Being was God in the Hindu conception, that is, a Being who pervaded all creation.

6) The direction of the faculties to God implied their balance in their fullest development. It implied the resolution of the conflict of self-regarding impulses with other-regarding ones. It implied the resolution of the conflict between self-love and love of humanity. It caused the fullest development of the active faculties by being aimed at God who was in all creation; and of the intellectual

1. Dharmatattwa: Chapter-XIV.
faculties by requiring knowledge of the most comprehensive kind to get a proper understanding of God, because knowledge of God involved knowledge of all creation, of the nature of the God-seeking soul and of God's relation to both. 1

The same was true as regards the faculty of love. The direction of the faculties to God necessitated the fullest development of the faculty of love so that it could embrace all creation.

7) Thus the humanistic pursuit of happiness, on analysis, led to the three ultimate aims of Humanism: Bhakti to God, love to humanity and peace in heart. These, in their totality constituted the 'whole virtue of man' in his humanness. These alone made for lasting happiness. 2

Such was the rationalistic structure of Bankim's 'Natural Religion'. The special results were:

First, the new doctrine of Hindu worship which in its best form consisted in self-less action that aimed at the service of humanity. The controversy as to the idolatrous or non-idolatrous worship was resolved by relegating them both to a secondary position. 3 It is only necessary to add that such self-less action was preached in the Gita.

Thus Bankim's rationalism led him to the doctrine of Nishkam Karma.

Secondly, Humanitarianism was seen to be of the essence of Hinduism - which partly distinguishes Hinduism from Christianity or Brahmoism.

1. Ibid. Chapter-XV.
2. Ibid. Chapter-XI.
Thirdly, the comparison of Judaeo-Christian monotheism with the Personal Pantheism of the Hindus pointed to the superiority of the latter from the standpoint of Reason as well as that of Bhakti.

(D) The Activism of the Gita:

In emphasising the 'natural basis' of religion and its rationalistic structure as constructed by Bankim, we have refrained from giving a proper summary of his religious views in their totality. In particular, we have said nothing as to their political implications. In 'Dharmatattwa', Bankim incorporated certain doctrines about political action as direct corollaries of his conception of "action aimed at God". These were of the highest significance in providing the ideological framework of what has been called Religious Nationalism. We shall discuss them in their proper place when we come to explain the nature of that nationalism. We discuss here his doctrine of action, the so-called Activism of the Gita, which is an important aspect of New Hindu doctrines. It was a doctrine of the profoundest significance, forming as it were, the essence of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, Lokamanya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi. It will be hardly an exaggeration to say that with the introduction of this doctrine the whole conception of Hinduism has undergone a permanent change. The religion that was concerned with 'personal salvation' alone throughout its past history and in its social aspect included a mass of obsolete and obstructive social customs was shown capable of a social significance which its past adherents.
had done nothing to exploit and little to understand.

This social significance was attributed to the doctrine of 'action' as explained in the Gita. But before explaining this doctrine let us listen to Bankim's own words regarding the traditional, theological interpretation of that doctrine and how the decline of the Hindus was sought in such an interpretation of their religion.

Referring to Verse 2/47 of the Gita, where action is praised and perfect indifference to the fruits of the action is impressed upon the religious seeker, Bankim says:

"Some of the commentators of Hindu scriptures have confused the meaning of this verse (by an interpretation which is absolutely unwarranted). Thanks to them, we have been led to believe that karma (action) in this and similar contexts means sacrifices prescribed in the Vedas. According to this view, the verse prescribes Vedic sacrifices but speaks against desire for heaven which is the end of such sacrifices." 1

Elsewhere Bankim discusses the influence of such interpretation on Hindu history:

"The greatest men in India had, in their religion, taken to the 'path of knowledge'. They had decided that action was not for people who followed the path of knowledge, and, in that belief they held action in great contempt. Their example was followed by the whole of India, rendering her lost to all desire for a life of action. The result of all this was a vast over-crowding of never-do-wells in the land leading to its present state of decline." 2

1. Srimatbhagat Gita: Vide Bankim's Commentary on verse 2/47.

"Yad yadacari Sreśthastattadevetars janah!
Sa yat pramāṇam Kurute lokastadanuvartate!
(For whatsoever a great man does, that very thing other men also do, whatever standard be set up, the generality of men follow the same.)"
This historical view of the traditional doctrine of action led Bankim to press the doctrine in its secular sense; in his view, this was the sense in which the Gita had preached it. He pointed out with great force that the Verse 3/5 and 3/8, where the Gita was asserting how it was impossible to exist even for a moment without some sort of action could hardly be interpreted by taking action to mean Vedic sacrifice but obviously intended it as a Law of Life. Bankim elaborated this theme of Action as a Law of Life, and connecting it with his humanistic treatment of religion, showed that the Gita had been preaching the sort of action that was aimed at God, who was not a Being outside the world but one who pervaded all creation. In other words, (as we pointed out earlier) the action preached by the Gita was aimed primarily at the service of all creation and only secondarily at ritualistic worship.

1. Srimatbhagbat Gita: Bankim’s Commentary on verse 2/47. Also Dharmatattwa, Chapter-XIV.

2. Dharmatattwa: Chapter-XX: Teacher: I advise you to dedicate yourself to work for the sake of God. Disciple: But is that not puja or homa or some sort of sacrifice. Teacher: Ho, that is an error. These are not work for the sake of God. They aim at the seeker’s own benefit. Even if you perform them for the increase of Bhakti (and not for any concrete benefit that may accrue to you), even then they aim at your own benefit. But as God pervades the whole world, .... that which aims at it the benefit of the world properly constitutes the sort of work which Krishna (i.e. God) calls my work."

It may be noted in this connection that just as Bankim humanised the Gita doctrine of action by delivering it from the traditional Ritualistic interpretation put to it by the long line of commentators from Sankaracharya to Sridhar Goswami, in the same manner he recovered the Hindu notion of
We have only to compare Bankim’s Commentary on the ‘Doctrine of Action’ with that of Mahatma Gandhi to understand the revolution in Hindu thought brought about by Bankim’s interpretation of that doctrine. Regarding the same doctrine the Mahatma says:

“I look upon Chapter 3 of the Gita as the key to its meaning; and what I regard as the essence of that chapter is this: Life is for service, not for pleasure.”¹

Again, “the usually accepted notion of a Bhakta is that of an indolent man who counts his beads .... He will lift his hand from his beads only to take his food. He won’t do so to work a machine or to do some service to the poor. (But) the Gita explicitly says: “Success (in religion) is not to be had without action.”²

Charity from the same narrow ritualism serving the interest of a selfish class of priests. Referring to the Gita verse 17/20, on charity which commended the sort of charity of which the receiver was to be one from whom no return was to be expected and which satisfied the criteria of being meant for the right sort of receiver and for the right sort of occasion or place, Bankim pointed out how so self-explanatory an injunction was interpreted by traditional commentators to indicate something quite different from the obvious humanitarian intent of the verse. ‘Right sort of receiver’ was interpreted by both Sankar and Sridhar to mean ‘Brahmans of high Scholarship’; ‘right occasion’ was interpreted as some auspicious day of the lunar calendar; and ‘right place’ was interpreted as a place of pilgrimage. Bankim asserted that as the verse contained nothing to suggest so fantastic a notion of charity, but obviously enjoined it for the needy sweeper as much as for the needy Brahmin. We have to guard against orthodox commentators who often transformed the lofty religion of the Hindus into a narrow, dogmatic pseudo-religion of the priests.

We see in these extracts a perfect identity with Bankim's view. It is true the Mahatma is referring to the traditional notion of a Bankim, whereas Bankim's objection was to the traditional notion of 'a man of knowledge', but the two views only add up to the fact that 'men of religion' in India were 'men of inaction.' This identity of views inevitably leads us to the question: From which source did the Mahatma derive his interpretation of the Gita's doctrine of action?

It is not wholly impossible that he got it direct from Bankim. The Mahatma's commentary had its origin in the studies he had undertaken during his years of imprisonment in connection with the Non-cooperation Movement. It is, however, unlikely that he had gone through Bankim's commentary for that commentary does not seem to have been translated into Gujarati (or English). But among the books the Mahatma went through in prison there is an explicit mention of a Gujarati version of Bankim's "Krishnacharita".¹ In that book occurs the specific statement:

"The doctrine of action had been current even before Krishna's time. But according to the accepted view of that doctrine 'Karma' meant vedic sacrifice. In the religion that was current (before Krishna's time) the word 'Karma' was not employed to mean the totality of acts which the Westerners designate by the title 'Duty', and which a man is required to

¹. Gandhi Rachanasambhar: vol.3. Gandhi Centenary Samiti (West Bengal), Chapter XI (My Study).
do during the course of his life. It is only in the Gita that we see the word 'Karma' to have shed its accepted meaning and to have taken up (the extended sense). But did the Mahatma derive his interpretation from a study of this passage? It is certainly possible that he did, but there is no positive evidence to suggest that this was in fact the case. It is far more likely that he got the hint from his study of Tilak's commentary. From which source then did Tilak get the idea?

It is well known that there was a traffic in ideas from Bengal to Maharashtra right from the days when Keshub Chandra Sen founded the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay (1867). It is also well known that the vague for the Gita in Bengal amongst her English-educated public started with Bankim's commentary. The Maharastrian fervour for the Gita and its doctrine of action could well be the result of a transmission of ideas to Maharashtra from Bengal.

2. Ramendra Sundar Trivedi writing twelve years after Bankim's death (i.e. 1906) says: "The Gita was not widely read by the English-educated people when Bankim Chandra started his commentary on it. But when Bankim is at the root of anything it gets wide publicity." Charitkatha.
3. Nabin Chandra Sen in his autobiography says in regard to the enthusiasm for the Gita in Calcutta during the eighties: "It was Bankim's genius that produced a craze for the Gita in Calcutta." 'Amar Jiban.'
It is a distinct possibility that Tilak was one amongst the many who were in the receiving end of that process of transmission. But again the evidence is not conclusive. For all we know Tilak may have hit upon his interpretation of the 'doctrine of action' in the same manner as Bankim did — by some original impulse of his mind. There was of course an element common to both: the temper of the time was decidedly against a ritualistic interpretation of the scriptures.

But whatever the influence exercised by Bankim's commentary on the Gita on the long line of commentators including such distinguished names as Tilak, Aurabindo and Mahatma Gandhi, it is clear that Bankim was the first in the line to propound the doctrine of action in its currently accepted sense. He was also the first Hindu to break the tradition of sectarian interpretation of such ideas as 'Svadharma' (one's caste duty) by giving to that expression the rendering of 'duty assumed by oneself voluntarily.' This — if nothing else — places Bankim securely in the front rank of the religious thinkers of Modern India.

(E) The New Conception of Bhakti:

It must also be mentioned that the new humanistic conception of Bhakti as the balancing faculty of all other faculties, which is to be considered Bankim's most original contribution to religious thought of Bengal at the time had its origin in some verses of the Gita. Bankim mentions in
particular the Verse (Gita 3/30) in which Krishna urges Arjuna to dedicate all his actions to God. The Gita does not speak of such actions as are accepted by all to be otherworldly - but all sorts of action including the soldier's action in the battlefield. Also in another place Krishna urges Arjuna to dedicate not only his actions, but all his human efforts from the taking of food to the giving of alms. It is from such hints as these that Bankim reaches his own conception of Bhakti. It was from this new conception that the idea of serving one's country as an act of worship ultimately derived. This idea exercised a great influence on our national struggle. In the Swadeshi Movement this idea was given practical shape, though in that movement it was perverted enough to produce in some young minds the conviction that even the killing of Englishmen if undertaken without any thought of personal gain, could be considered an act of worship. We shall discuss the causes of this perversion in its proper place. But here we must mention that the same idea was propagated in a purer form during Mahatma Gandhi's movement. Here again, Bankim must be looked upon as a pioneer.