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Reform in Tradition:
Bhaktivinoda's Apologetic for
the Bhagavata Purana

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This paper by Krsna Ksetra Dasa, looks at a landmark in the life of Bhaktivinoda Thakura - his acceptance of the Bhagavata Purana (Srimad-Bhagavatam) as a theistic work, equal to the philosophy of the West and important to mankind as a whole. Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838-1914) is recognised as a prominent acarya in the Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition. He lived during a crucial period in Indian history, a time when Indian culture began to rediscover itself and react to the British-Christian hegemony. Bhaktivinoda expressed his appreciation of Srimad-Bhagavatam in his pamphlet: The Bhagavata: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics, and Its Theology. Krsna Ksetra examines the theological points made by Bhaktivinoda in his pamphlet, giving specific attention to the time and circumstances in which they were voiced. He places the pamphlet in the historical context of Christian missionary fervour versus Hindu revivalism and notes Bhaktivinoda's efforts to bridge the gap between these two opposing factions.

Amid the manifold transformations constituting the 'Bengal Renaissance' of the nineteenth century, an important issue was how to deal with sacred texts. Throughout the nineteenth century, intellectuals in Bengal were particularly put to task to determine how indigenous sacred literature was to be valued, and how it was to be understood and applied in the context of social and religious reform - bywords of the emerging British-schooled indigenous intelligentsia. The official opening of India to Christian missionaries in 1813 by the British East India Company accelerated the proliferation of the Bible, (soon translated into several Indian vernacular languages (1) and distributed widely throughout India) along with strong claims of its superiority to the scriptures of the 'Hindoos.' At the same time, there was an awakening concern amongst educated Indians about the need to examine their own traditional scriptures, which were in turn receiving considerable attention by Western (initially German) scholars. (2)

Western attention to Indian scriptures grew out of mixed motives: genuine appreciation and fascination with the exotic, which predominated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, gave way in the late nineteenth century to a practical concern to comprehend them and an intention to demonstrate the supposed superiority of Christian scripture. The net effect of this attention by European scholars was to cause renewed consideration of classical writings in a new context.

The presence of scriptures in opposition to classical Hindu scriptures - the ancient *Vedas* and related Sanskrit works such as the *Upanisads* and *Puranas* - was not new to India. Jaina, Buddhist, and Islamic scriptural texts were a growing presence over the centuries. What *was* new was the printing press. Christian missionaries were quick to use the printing press to expand their influence through the publication of pamphlets and Bibles in Indian vernacular languages. It became imperative for Hindu intellectuals to ponder the implications of the claimed superiority of Christian scripture and the shortcomings of Hindu texts.

In this paper I will explore this reflection on scripture in India through the lens of one indigenous Indian scholar and religionist, Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda. Bhaktivinoda was an important leader and *acarya* of the Gaudiya Vaisnavas of Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (3)

As a family man employed in a variety of responsible civil service posts, Bhaktivinoda was professionally and educationally well acquainted with the intellectual currents swirling through India, and especially through Bengal. In later years Bhaktivinoda, a prolific writer, would expound extensively on Gaudiya Vaisnava theology and culture, basing his own work on earlier writings of the same school, centering on its late fifteenth and early sixteenth century founder, Sri Caitanya. But these writings came after a sea-change in his thinking, (4) marked by a public speech (in English) in 1869 later published as a pamphlet, *The Bhagavata: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics, and Its Theology*. Bhaktivinoda was thirty-one years old at the time and had recently secured a position as Deputy Magistrate in the Bengal district of Dinajpur, north of Calcutta.

The focus of this article will be on this particular work, for it marks the beginning of a new type of self-awareness among followers of the Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition, and because it highlights the contrast between Bhaktivinoda's early thinking and Hindu or neo-Hindu reformist responses to Western presence in India. As we shall see, Bhaktivinoda represents a return to Indian spiritual tradition, but he does not represent a reactionary rejection of progress. Rather, by helping his countrymen and women take a fresh look at one important traditional sacred text, the *Bhagavata Purana*, Bhaktivinoda calls attention to the tradition's built-in reformist element. As a Hindu reformer, Bhaktivinoda demonstrated tremendous creativity by recasting, in the light of contemporary concerns, an earlier reform movement - the Krsna-bhakti movement of Sri Caitanya, who based his teachings on the *Bhagavata Purana* (hereafter, *Bhagavatam*). Thus Bhaktivinoda drew a path of spirituality from the Vedic literature to what he identified as the apex of Vedic tradition, the *Bhagavatam*, as a viable means to spirituality in an India entering the modern world.

I make use of the typology of nineteenth century encounter between Christianity and Hinduism in Bengal offered by Ronald Neufeldt to locate Bhaktivinoda in relation to the variety of identifiable trends of the time. Like some Hindu reformers, Bhaktivinoda's response was thoroughly and unapologetically theistic; unlike others, he refused to subordinate *bhakti* - devotion to a divinity - to non-dual experience of advaitic leanings. Like both, he is aware of and participates in discourse on religious pluralism. Like all reformers, he responds to the challenges of the Christian missionaries and the attentions of the Western Indologists. As we shall see, his response is simple yet confident - that with the proper acceptance of the *Bhagavatam* as taught by and exemplified in the life of Sri Caitanya, the sixteenth century Bengali propounder of *bhakti*, nothing would be left wanting for seekers of ultimate knowledge and transcendental enlightenment.

'**Prejudices Gathered in Unripe Years**'

In a speech at Dinajpur (the one which later became the *Bhagavata* pamphlet), Bhaktivinoda gives an assessment of the learning he had gathered in earlier years, and the sense of distaste he had developed for the *Bhagavatam*, having recently rediscovered it:

> When we were in college, reading the philosophical works of the West and exchanging thoughts with the thinkers of the day, we had contracted a hatred towards the *Bhagavat*. That great work seemed like a repository of ideas, scarcely adapted to the nineteenth century, and we hated to hear any argument in its favour. To us then, a volume of Channing, Parker, Emerson or Newman had more weight than the whole lots of Vaishnav works. Greedily we poured over the various commentations of the Holy Bible and of the labours of the Tattwa-Bodhini Sabha, containing extracts from the Upanishads and the Vedanta,(5)

> but no work of the Vaishnavs had any favour with us .... (Rupavilasa Dasa, p. 88)

Bhaktivinoda outlines his early education in a short autobiographical work *Sva-Likhita Jivani* ('Autobiography', hereafter referenced as SLJ) which he wrote in 1896 for his son Lalita Prasad Datta. At age fourteen, Bhaktivinoda recalls having talked with English military men, and that he would visit Christian missionaries whenever they came to town. His maternal uncle was the recognised Bengali poet Kashi Prasad Ghosh, who would test his ability to read and write. He recalls having 'limitless faith' in Isvara Chandra Nandi, who taught him literature (both English and Indian) at the Hindu Charitable Institution. Isvara was 'truthful, controlled his senses, was religious, knowledgeable in all the *sastras* and was well spoken.' Having studied four years there, Bhaktivinoda was able to write in English for the *Hindu Intelligencer* and give lectures in English as well as to exercise debating talent at 'societies like the Free Debating Club'. (*SLJ,* para 101-120)

Bhaktivinoda's youthful enthusiasm and learning gave him considerable confidence, reflecting on which he would later write in his autobiography, 'On the strength of my little learning I thought that no one [but me] had any knowledge.' In Calcutta he studied several English books on philosophy, from the library of Kashi Prasad Ghosh. In the year 1856, at age eighteen, Bhaktivinoda entered Hindu School in Calcutta, where he had such schoolmates as Satyendranath Tagore (6) and Keshub Chandra Sen who was a year ahead of Bhaktivinoda. (7) Not able to enter the university (due to illness preventing him from taking the entrance examination), Bhaktivinoda resorted to self-education. Among authors he recalls having read were Edison, Carlisle, Haslett, Jeffrey, Macaulay, and Milton.' Every day I would go to Metcalf Hall and read books.' He often shared his gathered knowledge, giving 'lectures at many *sabhas*' (*SLJ,* para 131). Significantly, he also met and discussed with Charles H.A. Dall, the Unitarian minister who had arrived a year before in Calcutta (Kopf, 1979, p. 15). (8) In that same year Bhaktivinoda wrote *Poriade*, a two-part poetic 'epic' which was, he tells us, liked by Reverend Duff, (9) who urged him to write in the same fashion 'about the cruelty of the Zamindars,' a suggestion which Bhaktivinoda rejected. (*SLJ,* para 133)

After considerable exposure to Western ideas in the course of schooling, Bhaktivinoda would eventually enter into the midst of British-Indian interaction through the British governmental civil service. After serving in several positions in various towns in Bengal, he was posted as deputy magistrate in Dinajpur in March 1868 where, inspired by the presence of many Vaisnavas, he acquired a copy of the sixteenth century biography of Sri Caitanya, *Sri-Caitanya-caritamrta*, and a Bengali translation of the *Bhagavatam* (Rupavilasa Dasa, 82). This would mark a significant turning point in his life. Whereas his 'prejudices gathered in unripe years' may have included sympathies with the Brahmosamaj, in Dinajpur he declared himself definitely separate from it in 1869. (10) He noted in his autobiography (written in 1896):

> At this time there was a lot of fighting between the Hindus and the Brahmos in Dinajpur. (11) The schoolmasters were Brahmos but almost everyone else was Hindu. The Hindus were endeavoring to put the Brahmos out of their caste. At that time the Brahmos invited me to come to their assembly and I wrote to them saying that I was not a Brahmo, but was a servant of the many followers of Caitanya. When the Brahmos heard this they gave up hope of my [becoming a Brahmo]. The Hindus invited me to form a *sabha* [for Hindus] and the first meeting was held in the house of Khajanji Babu. I gave a

> lecture on the *Bhagavata* which was published as a book. A few *sahibs* heard the lecture and were impressed.

Bhaktivinoda's lecture made his position in relation to contending parties clear: What reformers were seeking to imbibe from Western culture could be had in full from the pages of the *Bhagavatam* for the careful and open-minded reader.

Bhaktivinoda's *The Bhagavata*

The Bhagavata is essentially an apologetic work addressed to educated Hindus, but also to sympathisers of Brahmoism as well as to European Christians who might have sympathies for Hindu reform movements. Originally a public speech, it contains eloquent and sometimes charming rhetoric, appealing to members of his audience to approach the *Bhagavatam* as a 'true critic' defined as 'a generous judge, void of prejudices and party spirit,' who is 'of the same disposition of mind as that of the author whose merits he is required to judge.' Such a thoughtful reader or true critic 'advises us to preserve what we have already obtained, and to adjust our race from that point where we have arrived in the heat of our progress.' He is not a destroyer of bad ideas, but rather one able to improve bad or old ideas for present purposes:

> One thought is a road leading to another. Thus the reader will find that one thought which is the object today will be the means of a further object tomorrow. Thoughts will necessarily continue to be an endless series of means and objects in the progress of humanity. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 3)

Opposed to the 'true critic' is the 'foolish critic', or the 'shallow reader', a person who continually urges to 'begin anew ... because the old masonry does not answer at present' and who thinks, 'Let the old author be buried because his time is gone' (*The Bhagavata*, p. 2). (12) It is the foolish critics and superficial readers who fail to bridge the chasms between the various religious persuasions and perpetuate misunderstanding among them. Thus a foolish critic may be either Hindu or Christian and either progressive or orthodox:

> One who is trained up in the thoughts of the Unitarian Society or of the Vedanta of the Benares school will scarcely find piety in the faith of Vaisnavas. An ignorant Vaisnava, on the other hand, whose business it is to beg from door to door in the name of Nityananda, will find no piety in the Christians. This is because the Vaisnava does not think in the way in which the Christian thinks of his own religion. It may be that both the Christian and the Vaisnava will utter the same sentiment, but they will never stop their fight with each other only because they have arrived at their common conclusion by different ways of thought.

Although for Bhaktivinoda all parties are guilty of sectarianism, he most keenly felt the unjustified critique of Christians against the Vaisnava tradition: 'Thus it is that a great deal of ungenerousness enters into the arguments of the pious Christians when they pass their imperfect opinion on the religion of the Vaisnavas' (*The Bhagavata*, p. 7).

As Ronald Neufeldt points out, Christian missionary presence in India, as much as the Hindu Renaissance response to it, was not a monolithic entity but a fluid situation with a variety of approaches to their conceived task of conversion. That said, it is also clear that an attitude prevailed among the missionaries that there was nothing to be learned from the Hindus nor from their texts; rather, the exclusive way of salvation through Jesus was to be demonstrated by showing the inerrancy of Christian scripture, and Hindu

scripture was to be - if attended to at all - shown for its folly (Neufeldt, pp. 29-30). Whatever attention was paid to the textual traditions was, Neufeldt notes, 'to show that the observed corruption [of Hindu society] has a basis in the historical and textual traditions of India' (Neufeldt, p. 31).

As Hindu reform manifested in response to Christian preaching, Christian missionaries made a shift in strategy. Instead of aiming to seek converts directly from followers of 'popular Hinduism' the missions put their preaching energies into challenging reformed Hinduism or 'Vedantism.' Hindu orthodoxy as represented by village priests was more or less impervious to direct criticism by Christians, for amongst other reasons, there were linguistic barriers (see Kopf, 1979, pp. 160-61). It would have to be approached, so it was thought, through the liberal Hindu intelligentsia - especially that which made up the growing Brahmosamaj (the Vedantists, as they were known in the 1830s) and which, like Christian missionaries, was dedicated to reform. After flirtations with the Bible, Rammohun Roy and his followers had found scriptural value in the *Upanisads* and *Vedanta* as revealed sources of truth, as proof of Indian monotheism, as a basis of doctrinal guidance and inspiration, and as anchorage against both Christian missionaries and Hindu orthodox superstition. Whereas early Christian polemic was directed against the 'idolatry' perpetuated by Hindu orthodox priests, the new polemic would be directed against 'the God of the *Vedant*,' following the example of Kailas Chandra Mukherji, a convert of the influential Scottish preacher, Alexander Duff. Bannerji wrote in 1833:

> The God of the *Vedant* ... is an infinite something but that something is neither a Creator nor a Moral Benefactor. He is not a moral Being at all and cannot, therefore, be regarded with moral feeling. We may wonder at his immensity, and omnipotence and eternity, and invincibility, but we cannot thank, or love, or reverence him, because there is nothing in his nature, or in his acts that is fitted to excite these feelings. (Kopf, p. 161)

Such a critique would have found resonance with Bhaktivinoda. Thus in *The Bhagavata* the only directly named recipient of Bhaktivinoda's criticism is Rammohun Roy for his failure to read the *Bhagavatam* and thus neglect the theistic Hindu tradition it represents. Not directly condemned as a 'foolish critic,' Roy is rather the victim of 'useless readers' from whom he had imbibed prejudice, passing up the *Bhagavatam* in his 'quest of truth and philosophy'. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 4)

> Not to say of other people, the great genius of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the sect of Brahmoism, did not think it worth his while to study this ornament of the religious library. He crossed the gate of the *Vedanta* as set up by the *Mayavada* construction of the designing Shankaracharya, the chosen enemy of the Jains, and chalked his way out to the unitarian form of the Christian faith, converted into an Indian appearance. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 4)

Bhaktivinoda felt that although Roy's search for truth was commendable, and although he was not incorrect in ascertaining that universal truth could be imbibed from the 'Western Saviour' (Jesus Christ), he established the Brahmosamaj 'independently of what was in his own country in the Beautiful *Bhagavat,*' thus denying himself the benefits of the text most valued by the 'Eastern Saviour,' Sri Caitanya of Nadia (*The Bhagavata*, pp. 4-6). Bhaktivinoda contrasts himself with Roy in that, although similarly seeking truth and finding inspiration 'in a manner Unitarian' in belief, he found writings about the 'Mighty Genius of Nadia,' perhaps in answer to prayer 'as Jesus prayed in the Garden', from which he was led to discover the *Bhagavatam* (*The Bhagavata*, p. 6). Through the teachings of Sri Caitanya it would be possible to access the theistic indigenous tradition

which was yet situated in lofty philosophy, not in superstitious idolatry - a tradition which itself was one of reform.

Neufeldt notes that reform was not new to Indian religion, but that the nineteenth century brought a new focus on Hinduism.

> If one analyses the usual figures associated with the Hindu Renaissance, one is immediately struck by an overarching concern, that is, the concern to reform, refine and define Hinduism. The concern for reform is, of course, not new, but runs through Indian history as far back as the *Upanisads*. What is new is the focus on Hinduism. This is largely a concept forced onto India from the outside, at least in its use to define religion. And, once it became current, the spokespersons for the Renaissance began to argue and think in terms of Hinduism. (Neufeldt, p. 37)

Where the nineteenth century reformers were anxious to find a formula to define a pluralistic Hinduism they could be satisfied to identify with, Bhaktivinoda unapologetically offers Vaisnavism as universal religion, comprehending spirituality even beyond the borders of India and resorting neither to Christian writings nor to the apparently non-theistic texts of the *Vedas* and *Upanisads*. Indeed, even most of the various Hindu *Puranas* and related texts of India were, Bhaktivinoda claimed, quite expendable:

> If the whole stock of Hindu theological works which preceded the *Bhagavata* were burnt like the Alexandrian Library and the sacred *Bhagavata* preserved as it is, not a part of the philosophy of the Hindus except that of the atheistic sects, would be lost. The *Bhagavata*, therefore, may be styled both a religious work and a compendium of all Hindu history and philosophy. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 23)

Bhaktivinoda was concerned to single out atheism as the expendable element in India's scripture. Bhaktivinoda, as much as he would seek a universalism in his writings, would disavow any attempts to incorporate atheistic or monistic thinking into such universalism. The *Bhagavatam*, he argued, represented the superior theistic purport of Vedic literature which, having been taught by the 'Genius of Nadia,' Sri Caitanya, could therefore act to resolve the ongoing wranglings carried on among *panditas* in their attempts to establish one or another theory of *Vedanta*, just as Caitanya had done in Benares 450 years previously.

Obstacles to Proper Appreciation of the *Bhagavatam*

Bhaktivinoda was convinced that the *Bhagavatam* was a wellspring of higher spirituality which had great promise as the ideal universal scripture. But the *Bhagavatam* resists easy access and ready appreciation. In his Dinajpur speech Bhaktivinoda addressed these issues. First, Bhaktivinoda acknowledges the book's *incomprehensibility*. Bhaktivinoda writes:

> The *Bhagavata* is undoubtedly a difficult work, and where it does not relate to a picturesque description of traditional and poetical life, its literature is stiff and its branches are covered in the garb of an unusual form of Sanskrit poetry. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 30)

In defense of the *Bhagavatam*, Bhaktivinoda reminds his audience that such is to be expected of a philosophical work, and therefore one must be prepared to take the help of learned commentators to properly understand it: 'The best commentator is Shreedhar Swami and the truest interpreter is our great and noble Caitanyadeva. God bless the spirit of our noble guides' (*The Bhagavata*, p. 30).

The *Bhagavatam* is not a work for common or 'thoughtless' persons. Throughout his talk, Bhaktivinoda urges his Hindu listeners and possible Brahmo sympathisers (13) to rise above mediocrity: the spirit of reform requires first the effort of individuals to comprehend the transcendent nature of reality, and this spirit demands conscious effort:

> 'No exertion is necessary to teach the precepts of true religion.' This is a deceptive idea. It may be true of ethics and the alphabet of religion, but not of the highest form of faith which requires an exalted soul to understand. It certainly requires previous training of the soul in the elements of religion, just as the student of the fractions must have a previous attainment in the elemental numbers and figures in Arithmetic and Geometry. 'Truth is good' is an elemental truth which is easily grasped by the common people. But if you tell a common patient that God is infinitely intelligent and powerful in his spiritual nature, he will conceive a different idea from what you entertain of the expression. All higher Truths, although intuitive, require previous education in the simpler ones. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 27)

Whereas the thoughtless manage to degrade great ideas of reformers into something they were never meant to be, (14) the great reformers, such as the 'Saviour of Jerusalem' or the 'Saviour of Nadia' are not to be scandalised 'for these subsequent evils'. Bhaktivinoda concludes his point with a reference to the European Christian reformer: 'Luthers, instead of critics, are what we want for the correction of those evils by the true interpretation of the original precepts' (*The Bhagavata*, p. 28). (15) A second obstacle was the presence of apparent *elements of non-rationality*: Readers of the *Bhagavatam* schooled in the modern mode of rational thinking might become dismayed by the presence of apparently irrational descriptions therein. Graphic descriptions of heavens and hells meant to 'check the evil deeds of ignorant people who are not able to understand the conclusions of philosophy' are found both in 'commonplace books of the Hindu religion' as well as in the *Bhagavatam*. However, Bhaktivinoda warns his readers elsewhere in the work 'not to accept them as real facts, but as inventions to overawe the wicked and improve the simple and ignorant.' He assures his audience that the philosophical principle behind these descriptions holds true - that reward and punishment in the future follow present deeds, and that otherwise

> all poetic inventions besides this spiritual fact have been described as statements borrowed from other works in the way of preservation of old traditions in the book which superseded them and put an end to the necessity of their storage. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 23)

Such a distinction is not without controversial implications, even (or especially) for present-day Vaisnavas. (16) Suffice to say here that Bhaktivinoda recognised a potential difficulty for his educated contemporaries to appreciate the *Bhagavatam* and attempted to resolve it while acknowledging a place for both modern rational thought and traditional culture. For the young Bhaktivinoda of 1869, rationality, following standard Enlightenment thinking, seems to be the gateway to true liberty; but such liberty is not to be had without grappling with the truths of revealed scripture, albeit as an open, not a closed canon:

> Our *Shastras* [revealed scriptures], or in other words, books of thought, do not contain all that we could get from the infinite Father. No book is without its errors ... . New revelations, therefore, are continually necessary in order to keep truth in its original purity. ... (*The Bhagavata*, 28). We must think for ourselves and try to get further truths which are still

> undiscovered. In the *Bhagavata* we have been advised to take the spirit of the *Shastras* and not the words. The *Bhagavata* is therefore a religion of liberty, unmixed truth, and absolute love. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 29)

Bhaktivinoda's example for such a spirit of truth-seeking is the sage Vyasa, whom he compares to Plato, Jesus and Caitanya. Having gone 'up to the fountainhead of truth, where no pilgrim meets with disappointment of any kind', Vyasa descended as a transcendental conqueror over the old order. Bhaktivinoda invokes martial imagery to strengthen his point:

> Like the great Napoleon in the political world, he knocked down empires and kingdoms of old, as well as bygone philosophies, by the mighty stroke of his transcendental thoughts! This is real power. Atheists, Sankhya philosophers, the followers of Charvak, the Jains, and the Buddhists shuddered with fear at the approach of the spiritual sentiments and creations of the *Bhagavat* philosopher! (*The Bhagavata*, p. 30).

Thus while there may seem to be elements of non-rationality in the *Bhagavatam*, the salient feature of the work is the towering theistic message common to all genuine divine revelation.

A third obstacle to be encountered in the *Bhagavatam* is a further result of improper reading, by 'shallow critics'. Bhaktivinoda is defending the *Bhagavatam* against the criticism that it is a *justification for lascivious lifestyles*, as exhibited by various groups claiming to be followers of Sri Caitanya. Bhaktivinoda refutes this misconception vehemently, concluding that,

> Vyasa, who could teach us repeatedly in the whole of the *Bhagavata* that sensual pleasures are momentary like the pleasures of rubbing the itching hand, and that man's highest duty is to have spiritual Love with God, could never have prescribed the worship of sensual pleasures. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 26)

By reading with the proper understanding, Bhaktivinoda promises, a transformation of heart will quickly take place to dispel such misconceptions:

> With this advice, dear critic, go through the *Bhagavata* and I doubt not you will, in three months, weep and repent to God for despising this Revelation through the heart and brain of the great Badarayana. (*The Bhagavata*, p. 26)

Indeed, this was Bhaktivinoda's experience not long before delivering this speech. Having thought on first reading in *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta* that Caitanya recommends the worship of 'the improper character of Krsna,' Bhaktivinoda recalls that he prayed, 'O God! please give me the understanding by which I may know the secret of this matter.' Shortly thereafter his prayer was answered: 'The mercy of God is without limit. Seeing my eagerness and humility He showed mercy to me within a few days, and I received the intelligence by which I could understand' (*SVJ*, para 245). (17)

Thus Bhaktivinoda does not deny the existence of obstacles in approaching the *Bhagavatam*, but they are not insurmountable obstacles, and the reward for the effort is such as to secure for its reader the possibility of becoming a *saragrahi*, a 'seizer of the essence.' To do so requires a process of selective thought:

> That fruit of the tree of thought is a composition, as a matter of course, of the sweet and the opposite principles. O men of piety! Like the bee taking honey from the flower, drink the sweet principle and reject that which is not so (*The Bhagavata*, p. 30).

From such statements it might seem that Bhaktivinoda is proposing a new, modern way of reading scripture. Whereas the traditional prescription has always been to read (or, more often, to hear) scripture in an attitude of unquestioning submission, such an attitude does not preclude the necessity to read critically while taking guidance from previous commentators to the work. For such critical reflection Bhaktivinoda presents Vyasa as the prime example. His mature realisation consists of the *Bhagavatam*, composed after distancing himself from works he had himself previously compiled. Hence, for Bhaktivinoda, Vyasa is proof that the modern way of reading *sastra* is in fact not new at all, and the fact that Sri Caitanya, the 'Eastern Saviour,' exemplified and taught that the *Bhagavatam* is proof that Indians need not resort to scriptures from outside India as sources of revealed knowledge.

The Bhagavata in Context

Response to Bhaktivinoda's 1869 speech in Dinajpur was positive, if mild. Bhaktivinoda notes simply, 'A few sahibs heard the lecture and were impressed' (*SVJ,* para. 247). In contrast, when in 1819 Ram Mohan Roy published his pamphlet *The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness*, there was strong negative reaction both from Christians and Hindus. Roy's conciliatory intent between Christianity and Hinduism was met with accusations from both sides (Klostermaier, 389). Bhaktivinoda's intent, fifty years later, was similarly conciliatory but arguably rooted more firmly in his own tradition. Perhaps the time factor, but perhaps also the method of approach, brought the milder reaction.

Clearly Bhaktivinoda was intent on calling attention to the *Bhagavatam* as theistic revelatory scripture in answer both to Christian claims that Indian scripture was not monotheistic, and to Brahmo preoccupations with its own version of *Vedanta*. Less explicitly, but nevertheless significantly, there exists in Bhaktivinoda's *Bhagavatam* eulogy a response to the Western Indologist fascination with Indian sacred texts. Since the writings of Max Mueller, there had prevailed the notion that true Indian culture was to be found in the ancient literature - especially the *Rg Veda* and the *Upanisads* - as well as in the writings on *Vedanta* and Sankhya. The *Puranas*, so it was thought, represented accretions which reflected and perpetuated the practices and beliefs of *popular* Hinduism - the body of religious institutions most distant from progressive human thinking and most unresponsive to the removal of social ills. Bhaktivinoda resisted this simple formula by acknowledging the value of the *Bhagavatam*, one of the eighteen *Mahapuranas*, or principle *Puranas*. At the same time, like the Indologists, Bhaktivinoda put a premium on philosophy over narrative and particulars of belief. However, by comparing 'foreigners' to the proverbial blind men seeking to comprehend an elephant, Bhaktivinoda was in all probability alluding to the Western scholars who, because of their general prejudice against the *Puranas*, would be expected to miss the philosophical profundity of the *Bhagavatam*. Unlike the majority of Hindu reformers, Bhaktivinoda showed little inclination to grant the term 'Hinduism' the status being imposed by Europeans**,** for whom the term provided a handy suggestion of an essential common denominator amid the multiplicity of religious texts, beliefs, and practices of the Indian subcontinent. Whereas the Indian (especially Bengali) reformers were concerned to recover 'Hinduism' from its reputation for religious backwardness, Bhaktivinoda offered a different typology by universalising the term 'Vaisnava,' as the *saragrahi*, and placing persons of all religious or non-religious

temperaments on a sliding scale of greater or lesser proximity to the standard of a spiritually perfected Vaisnava. In this way he turned the table on what Neufeldt terms the minority, more sympathetic 'fulfillment' attitude among Christians such as J.N. Farquhar:

> J.N. Farquhar ... argued that in the figure of the historical Jesus we have a purely spiritual and ethical religion, an object of worship surpassing anything that might be found in *Vedanta*. Scriptures were to be put on a continuum, and the argument was not to be about the inerrancy of scripture but about the adequacy of scriptures in fulfilling human needs. (Neufeldt, p. 32)

Bhaktivinoda similarly wanted to move away from the argument of inerrancy when he observed that 'Our *Shastras*, or in other words, books of thought, do not contain all that we could get from the infinite Father. No book is without its errors.' He wanted to offer Sri Caitanya, 'our Eastern Saviour,' as an equal contender to Jesus, the 'Western Saviour', as a fulfiller of human needs, together with the *Bhagavatam's* traditionally accepted author Vyasa, the 'principal of the College of Theology at Badrikashrama'. Somewhat like Farquhar, Bhaktivinoda seems to place Indian sacred literature on a continuum of spiritual value measured on the ideal of the *Bhagavatam*, such that other texts found spiritually wanting deserve recognition as necessary supporters of inferior *naimittika-dharma*, or regulated and motivated religion. (18)

Through the force of secularism generated by Enlightenment thinking, theological reflection in the West was undergoing radical changes even as missionary efforts in India roused indigenous thinkers to formulate their own clear and systematic religious concepts with scriptural grounding. Such reflection had been pursued for centuries within a relatively insular scriptural field, but with European presence and its accompanying print culture, Indian intelligentsia (which emerged largely in response to that same print culture) felt compelled to respond to this presence - either by rejecting it altogether or in some way accommodating it. The overconfidence of many (mainly Protestant) Christian missionaries to win India to Christianity and modern civilisation veiled perhaps a deeper uncertainty about the validity of their scripture in the face of modernism as it was taking shape in nineteenth century Europe. Bhaktivinoda's 1869 speech on 'The Bhagavata, Its Philosophy, Its Ethics and Its Theology' shows the beginnings of an increasing confidence in Indian religious scripture, wherein one can sense his awareness of Western uncertainty through his intellectual encounters in his student days.

In later years, Bhaktivinoda made at least two gestures of assistance to the West by offering something of the teachings of the East. In 1880 he sent a copy of his Sanskrit work *Sri Krsna-samhita* to Ralph Waldo Emerson (perhaps assuming that he could read Sanskrit, like any learned gentleman!), (19) and in 1896 he sent a copy of *Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu: His Life and Precepts* to the library of McGill University in Canada.

But these gestures were just that - humble signals of a single person working on his own, without any structured organisational entity to back him up. There was no 'pivotal social unit' (Malinowski) (Kopf, EE 35) to propel Bhaktivinoda's vision particularly far in India, what to speak of the West. But whereas history has thus far seemed to sidestep the work and writings of Bhaktivinoda, this may not be the enduring case. Gerald Larson has noted that the 'solution of synthesis' which has been considered by some writers the 'successful response'(20) to the coming of modernity in India, has over time proved to be the solution of a tiny percentage of the Indian populace.

In Bhaktivinoda's time, in the height of British hegemony in India, he saw in the tra-dition of Caitanya not a sectarian 'Hindu' solution to modernity, but a tradition of reform which could be built upon to match the challenge of the West with a theologically sound, if misunderstood and neglected, text from the Indian scriptural corpus of revelatory truth. Bhaktivinoda sought to revive and continue that tradition of enlightened reform exemplified by Caitanya, whose message of *bhakti* to Krsna challenged caste barriers and brought the *Bhagavatam* forward as the 'ripened fruit of the tree of Vedic knowledge'.(21)

Notes

(1) William Carey pioneered Christian scriptural translation at the Serampore Mission. By 1809 he arranged (with help of *panditas*) for a translation of the New Testament in five Indian vernacular languages as well as Sanskrit. Indeed, after 1800 Serampore became known as the 'cradle of modern missions,' particularly due to the presence of an active printing press, which was considered by the missionaries as 'a wonderful engine toward weakening the spirit of eastern superstition.'

(2) Max Mueller's *Rg Veda* translation first appeared in 1849, the last printing in 1874. Whereas many orthodox Hindus scorned the work for being translated by a *mleccha* [a person outside the caste system, especially due to foreign birth], reformists, especially the Brahmosamaj, applauded it.

(3) Present Gaudiya Vaisnavas who are followers of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura consider Bhaktivinoda to be the twenty-ninth disciplic teacher in the line of teachers identified as preservers and propagators of Vaisnavism associated particularly with the teachings of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533).

(4) Viewing Bhaktivinoda as a Vaisnava *acarya* of high calibre prevents the faithful follower of the tradition from seeing such an apparent change as a conversion; this is elaborately explained by Rupavilasa Dasa in his biography of Bhaktivinoda. Yet to see such changes as developmental progress amidst worldly circumstances affords the practitioner inspiration for the development of his or her own spirituality within the world, by seeing how such a *nitya-mukta*, or eternally liberated soul, interacts with the world and faces challenges of the day.

(5) Kopf notes that the Tattvabodhini Sabha published books (especially textbooks) in Bengali to complement the work of the Tattvabodhini School, established in 1840, which was specifically organised to combat the missionaries. 'A Tattvabodhini Press was established, which had as its earliest main task the reprinting of all Rammohun's works. Then in 1843 a newspaper was started called the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, which had the task of combating missionary propaganda and the function of educating fellow Bengalis' (163).

(6) Of Debendranath's sons, Satyendranath was the most westernised and the most directly influenced by Keshub Chandra Sen. See Kopf: 255.

(7) 1856 was probably the most critical year for Keshub, for three reasons given. He was a 'hard reader' of unitarian theology. Keshub started his first religious society at this time, the Goodwill Fraternity. Kopf : 254 (Both Keshub and Debendranath were confirmed theists: Kopf p. 255).

(8) Dall was to become very close to Keshub Chandra Sen, he came to believe him to be Rammohun's true successor, Rammohan being actually a Unitarian Christian. Dall was also an active social reformer.

(9) Alexander Duff, the famous Scottish preacher and educator.

(10) Further research might reveal some autobiographical element in Bhaktivinoda's later book *Prema Pradipa* (1886), in which he describes two young followers of Brahmosamaj, Naren Babu and Anand Babu, coming to Navadvipa from Calcutta in hopes of converting the local Vaisnavas to Brahmoism (*Prema Pradipa*, 11). In the course of the story (primarily in the form of dialogues, as in his book *Jaiva Dharma,* 1893), the Brahmos become converted to Vaisnavism, having become attracted to the character of the Vaisnavas as well as their philosophy. Bhaktivinoda seems to suggest that he had leanings toward Brahmoism prior to his arrival in Dinajpur and his subsequent association with the Vaisnava community there. 'In Dinajpur the Vaisnava religion was fairly strong due to Raya Kamalochan Sahib. There were many Vairagis and Gosais coming and going there. A number of rich people supported many *brahmana-pandita* assemblies. Some respectable gentlemen would regularly come to me and discuss Vaisnava *dharma*. I had a desire to know the genuine Vaisnava *dharma*' (*SLJ,* para. 244).

(11) It is not clear from Bhaktivinoda's comments here which faction of the recently split Brahmosamaj was represented at Dinajpur. It may be that it consisted of the more conservative group headed by Debendranath, not that led by Keshub Chandra Sen (Kopf, 1979, 132-36).

(12) This sounds as if he is thinking of his acquaintance Keshub Chandra Sen who wrote, 'To me, the state of being on fire is the state of salvation ... and to keep the condition of heat I have always run after what is new, always wished for new achievements, new ideas. What is new is warm, what is old is cold.' (Kopf, 1979, 254; from K.C. Sen, *Jiban Veda* p 16-17).

(13) While mainly addressing a relatively educated Hindu audience that may have included some Brahmo sympathisers, there were also apparently some British 'sahibs' present. Bhaktivinoda may have had them in mind, possibly alluding here to Christian missionary polemic on the superiority of the Bible due to its accessibility to all classes of men.

(14) Bhaktivinoda here displays a considerable degree of pessimism regarding the possibility of raising everyone to a higher perception of truth: 'But dear critic! Study the history of ages and countries! Where have you found the philosopher and the reformer fully understood by the people? The popular religion is fear of God and not the pure spiritual love which Plato, Vyasa, Jesus and Caitanya taught to their respective peoples! Whether you give the absolute religion in figures or simple expressions, or teach them by means of books or oral speeches, the ignorant and the thoughtless must degrade it ...' (*The Bhagavata*, 26-27).

(15) Although here the allusion to Western progressive thinking is favourable, Bhaktivinoda also holds the European unable to appreciate the *Bhagavatam*: 'The Great *Bhagavata* ever remains unknown to the foreigners, like the elephant of the six blind men who caught hold of the several parts of the body of the beast' (*Bhagavata*, 11).

(16)See Shukavak Dasa's article in JVS, 'Bhaktivinoda and the Problem of Modernity,' and an opposing view by Sadaputa Dasa in BTG, 'Rational "Mythology": Can a rational person accept the stories of the *Puranas* as literally true?' In his broader theology, which is only hinted at in this brief work (elaborated upon in several other works, especially *Jaiva Dharma*), Bhaktivinoda emphasises the distinction between *nitya-dharma* and *naimittika-dharma*. 'The search for the absolute transcendental reality is the living entity's only eternal religion (*nitya-dharma*), all other religions are *naimittika,* regulated and motivated' (JD). The *Bhagavatam* is, he would argue, grounded in and aiming at *nitya-dharma*, but it is also acknowledging the necessity for *naimittika-dharma* for those unable or unwilling to aspire for the higher goal.

(17) Indeed, *The Bhagavata* marks the beginning of an extended campaign by Bhaktivinoda to rescue Vaisnavism from the bad reputation it had received at the hands of unscrupulous persons. Careful reading of the *Bhagavatam* by intellectually astute readers would be the means of recovering respectability for the Vaisnava faith. Such careful reading would distance one from what must have been perceived as excessive emotionalism demonstrated by groups seen by Bhaktivinoda as deviants from true Vaisnavism. A similar effort to distance reform religion from emotionalism can be seen in the effort of Bhaktivinoda's early conversation partner Reverend Dall (in 1873) to convince the emotionally intense Keshub Chandra Sen to establish a theological school in order to give 'durable structure' to the faith of the Brahmosamaj, enabling it 'to survive the vicissitudes of emotional religiosity' (Kopf, in Sharma, 117).

(18) See footnote 16 for an explanation of *naimittika-dharma*.

(19) This gesture was not without an element of irony, considering T.B. Macauley's determination to replace Sanskrit and Urdu with English in India.

(20) A 'solution of synthesis' has been proposed as India's 'successful response' to the coming of modernity by Percival Spear: '[The] attempt to synthesise traditional Indian thought ... with modern Western thought ... as represented primarily in the work of Rammohun Roy ... is the 'ideological secret of modern India.' (Larson, 122). Other responses included an early 'military response' (among some of the regional polities), a 'reactionary response' (the North Indian rebellion, 1857-58), an 'acceptance' r esponse (radical westernisers), and an 'orthodox-renewal response' (religious reform and retrenchment). All of these latter, according to Spear, failed, and it was the 'solution of synthesis' that won the day, becoming the 'ideological secret of modern India.' ... Such, however, was hardly the 'ideological secret of modern India,' as the decades since independence have revealed ... [it was] the 'ideological secret' of only a tiny percentage of the population of modern India ...'(Larson, p 120).

(21) *Bhagavatam* 1.1.2

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