# BIPINCHANDRA'S THOUGHT ON HINDUISM, TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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While discussing Bipinchandra's views on tradition and modernity, it is appropriate to make some general observations about the complex relationship

between the two. It must be understood that in the West there was no unequivocal, uniform adoption of a modern view of life. The age that produced Marx, Darwin, and Freud also produced Cardinal Newman, Carl Jung. In the middle of this century, there are also reformist theologian who accepted spiritualism, who combined an outward pragmatic approach to the world problems with an inward mystical unworldliness. Also, there are people who have shown that modernity and tradition are by no means contradictory. One can even find that the so called outdated view of yesterday can become the 'modern' view of today. Given the complexity of interaction between modernity and tradition in the West, it is not surprised to assess Bipinchandra views, since in his case one additional factor compounds the problem: ambivalence towards the West in an era of rising nationalism.

He was born on 7th November, 1858 in the District of Syllet in the Eastern part of Bengal to a Vaisnava family of Kayastha caste, and did not receive a formal religious education. In *Memories of My Life and Times*, he relates that he was absorbed by the religious attitudes and practices of his family. Especially, respect for austerities was firmly implanted in him. Bipinchandra began to question the efficacy of rituals whose meaning no one had explained to him. He also developed resentment against the frequent occurrence of *pujās* and the elaborate rules meant to ensure ritual cleanliness. He continued to adhere to all caste strictures until he was approximately fifteen, when, under the influence of an unorthodox *Vaishnava* teacher and a visiting relative from Calcutta, he set aside dietary rules, especially those prohibiting the taking of food from Muslims.

After the death of his mother in June 1875, Bipinchandra reluctantly performed the required stringent funeral rites. By that time he had lost all faith in the value of ceremonies and discarded fear of possible retribution at the hands of the deities. In January 1875, he had entered Presidency College in Calcutta. With his removal from direct family supervision and in the free atmosphere of the metropolis, he soon shook off the last remnant of formal religious worship. Bipinchandra's abandonment of formal religion can be partly explained by the fact that he was a born rebel. It must be kept in mind that his father, Ramachandra, was not a complete orthodox. Bipinchandra repeatedly refers to his father's Islamic education and to his rationalistic tendency.

While adhering to caste rules, Ramachandra displayed a strong sense of independence that must have left an impression on his son. When Ramachandra concluded that a Brahmin had been unjustly expelled from his caste, he employed him as his family priest and willingly suffered sixteen years of social exclusion for defying society. Bipinchandra comments upon his father's determination to uphold what he considered justice. However, independence of mind, did not lead Ramachandra to question the intrinsic soundness of the caste system, and he did not sanction his son's violation of caste strictures, thus, eventually he disowned him.

Bipinchandra's opposition to external religious practices in no way implied that he had become totally irreligious. Whenever he had to face a crisis, he would offer prayers to *Durgā* or *Kāli*. At the same time, he retained a sense of wonderment and intuitive awareness of a realm beyond sense perception, distinctly separate from the material universe significantly, he continued, at least in theory, to have high regard for the ideal of attaining mastery over the senses. The college period for him was intellectually, although not academically, fruitful and he failed twice to pass the first examination in Arts, and in 1878, he withdrew from college without attaining a degree. By attending regular formal lectures, he read widely but unsystematically in a bookstore on College Street. It must have been at that time that he became acquainted with the works of Spencer, Hegel, Hume, and Parker to whom he refers frequently in his writings.

It is important to note that the writers in Bengal helped to shape Bipinchandra's views on religion and nationalism rather than the Western authours. It must be remembered that the marriage of religion and nationalism was just taking place in India. As a reaction to the racist attitude of the British, criticism of Hinduism by missionaries, and the reluctance of the British to grant political concessions, modern Western educated Indians were assuming a more critical view towards the West and turning to Hinduism as a source of political as well as religious inspiration. Bipinchandra relates that even before coming to Calcutta his patriotism had been aroused by Bankimchandra's *Durgeshnandini*. His nationalistic feelings were given an impetus by the writings of Hemchandra Bannerjee, Anandamohan Bose, and Surendranath Bannerjee. Another major influence on Bipinchandra was Rajanarayana Bose, whose *Hindu Dharmer Sresthata* proclaimed the superiority of Hinduism over

Christianity and Western civilization in general and claimed that the very things Indians admired in the West could be found in ancient Indian civilization.

In 1877, Bipinchandra entered into the Brahmo Samaj and he had become acquainted with the Brahmo movement long before his arrival in Calcutta but had refused to join it. His strong sense of independence and unwillingness to conform to the rules of any organization had stood in his way. Moreover, he was repelled by the Brahmos' emphasis on sin and their puritanical condemnation of theater performances. Bipincandra was a passionate lover of the Bengali stage. At first he was attracted to the Brahmo Samaj through his literary interests. He was deeply impressed by the oratorical skill of Kesabchandra Sen. Long ago; he was drawn to the radical wing in the Brahmo movement, represented by Shivanath Shastri and Anandamohan Bose, who championed a more vigorous social reform programme. Consequently, when in 1878 the split in the *Brahmo Samaj* occurred, Bipinchandra joined the *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj*. While Bipinchandra's unorthodox behavior had earlier estranged him from his father, a complete break in their relations ensued upon his joining the Brahmo Samaj and lasted until his father's death in 1886.

While in association with the Brahmo Samaj during 1877-1886, Bipinchandra was primarily concerned with reforms. Deprived of financial support by his father, he has to face with difficulty, shifting between teaching, librarianship, and journalism. Eventually journalism became his chief means of gaining livelihood. A major portion of his energy was reserved for Brahmo work. He served as a preacher for the *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj* and in this capacity participated in the struggle against caste restrictions, idolatry, and *purdah*. He gave shelter to widows and promoted their remarriage. In 1881, he himself married a widow during a visit to Bombay. It was the first *Brahmo* marriage in Bombay. While championing social reforms, Bipinchandra became aware of the dangers of Hindu revivalism, and he warned against an indiscriminate rejection of all things foreign and backsliding into medievalism. Even the progressive Shivanath Shastri was retreating from rationalism. But Bipincandra's opposition to the revivalist movement was not unqualified. In part, he welcomed it as a spiritualizing force restoring meaningfulness to traditional Hinduism. Considering the fact that he had abandoned traditional rituals chiefly because of their apparent meaninglessness, it is not surprising to find a gradual shift

in Bipinchandra's attitude towards rituals. The death of his father in 1886 served as a catalyst for his religious transformation. It reminded him painfully of the insecurity of human existence and made him seek safety in the religion of his childhood.

There are two events that accelerated Bipinchandra's partial return to his ancestral religion. A) In 1887 he accepted a subeditorship with the *Tribune of Lahore* with the hope of securing his future financially. His unwillingness to share editorial duties evenly with his colleagues led to clashes with his coeditors, and in 1888 he resigned his position. He continued to live in Lahore, using up a substantial portion of the inheritance bequeathed by his father. B) In 1890, shortly after he moved from Lahore to Calcutta, his wife died in childbed. These two happenings for Bipinchandra are the convincing proof of man's utter inability to control his destiny." It did not occur to him that the two events were different in nature and that he, himself, had brought about the first. Searching for meaningfulness in the face of his personal loss, he found solace in the writings of Emerson and in the *Gitā*. He abandoned his previous dualistic view: "Matter is the Thought of God concretized; Man is the Spirit of God incarnated."[1] "God was the only doer in the universe and all events were divinely inspired and for man's ultimate good." He states that his spiritual realization compensated him for the loss of his wife. But apparently spiritual comfort by itself was insufficient, for the following year he remarried.

At the time of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, he wrote an essay in which he delineated the reasons for his partial return to a traditional Hindu view of life. The sinking of the Titanic symbolized the precariousness and limitations of Western science. There was no foundation for modern Western human's arrogant trust in his intellect and in material achievements. Even the best minds of the Western world could not have prevented this calamity. It proved to him unequivocally that human could not manipulate nature with impunity. In the same essay, he attacked the modern West for its permissiveness towards sense indulgence. As long as human considered it legitimate to give free restraint to his senses, he could not hope to victory over death. Life eternal could only be attained by following the ancient and timeless path

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[1] Bipincandra Pal, *Memories of my Life and Times* Calcutta, 1932, p. 103-5

of yogic renunciation. Once he had concluded that *Yoga* could provide the security modern science was unable to give, it was only logical that Bipinchandra would look for a *guru* to guide him in his *sādhanā.* In 1895, he received *dikṣā* from Vijayakrisna Goswami. Basically, he was a contemplative and a *bhakta* with a social reformist tendency. Through his social activism he had been drawn into Sen's *Brahmo Samaj*. Vijayakrisna emphasized *bhakti* to a degree that was unacceptable to the majority of the Samajists. When he accepted image worship, his resignation from the *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj* became inevitable.

The present age, according to Bipinchandra, calls for a synthesis of material science and the supernatural. There is, in reality, only one eternal religion manifests itself diversely in accordance with time and place. In the present age, the place factor has become irrelevant, since technical advances have annihilated distances, and the precepts of science have been disseminated over the whole globe. Consequently, Bipinchandra wanted modern human to realize that material achievements could not give lasting satisfaction, and that material science, operating within the world of sense perception, was incapable of answering ultimate questions. Modern human should combine a scientific and socially progressive outlook with the practice of *Bhakti Yoga*, as exemplified by Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Obviously, Vijayakrisna as well as Surendranath Bannerjee held an exaggerated view of Caitanya's role as a reformer.

After practicing *dikṣā mantra* he stopped eating meat and eggs and began to practice *ahiṁsā*, and he refused to compete with other potential passengers for rides on Calcutta's crowded streetcars. Bipinchandra denies that he became a mystic and alleges that he remained a "stern rationalist". He refers to several personal mystical experiences and reports psychic feats of his *guru* without discounting their validity. Above all, Vijayakrisna was able to convince him once and for all of man's inherent divinity and consequent immortality. Thus, the problem of death that had troubled him was solved to his satisfaction.

In 1898, Bipinchandra had an opportunity to see the Western world, which he had so far known from books only. Through the British and Foreign Unitarian Association he received a scholarship to study theology at New Manchester College

at Oxford. During his stay in England he acquainted himself with the writings of contemporary European theologians. In England, as well as in the United States, he lectured on Indian culture and religion. In his talks on religion, he emphasized the fact that traditional Hindu teachings contained solutions to the problems of modern man. This was permanently impressed upon him by an American who told him, “You come from a great country, Sir. You are destined to be the teachers of the world. But you cannot fulfil this destiny until you are able to look the world horizontally into the face”.

His overall impression of the West was decidedly negative and reinforced his shift towards traditionalism. He noticed the class distinctions existing in England and even in the United States. And he became acutely aware of the American prejudice towards the Negroes. This in turn made him take a more favorable view of the Indian caste system. Most important, in England and especially in the United States, Bipinchandra encountered religious prejudice. Insulting remarks about Hinduism prompted him to declare, "I am prouder that I am not a Christian." He left the West disenchanted, and more than ever questioned the modern value system so intimately associated with the West. In numerous speeches on occasions such as *Durgā Pujā* and the *Vijayā* festivals, he combined a defense of Hindu tradition with appeal for social and educational reform. He argued that *pujā* binds social, ethical, artistic, and spiritual elements. Theoretically he opposed the slaughter of innocent animals during *Durgā Pujā*, but in practice he condoned it as conducive to a martial spirit.

As a result of his part in the anti-partition agitation, Bipinchandra was imprisoned, first in Presidency Jail and then in Buxar, for period of six months (September, 1907 to March, 1908). Aurobinda Ghose later alleged that Buxar meant for Bipinchandra what Alipore prison had meant for him. Since Bipinchandra’s stay in Buxar marks the completion of his religious evolution, a summary of his religious views during the last phase of his life is appropriate. Bipinchandra consistently opposed medievalism, which he identified to a great extent with the Vedantic teaching of Shankara and which he contrasted with “modern” Vaisnavism of Mahaprabhu Caitanya. In Bipinchandra’s opinion medievalism was characterized by as follows:

- extreme monism, which amounted to a denial of the reality of the material world
- monasticism, in particular celibacy
- over-ritualization of religion
- priestly domination of religion and
- religious inequality (application of caste distinctions to religious worship).

On the other hand, he alleges that Vaisnavism through Caitanya had rid itself of medievalism and that it embodied the highest concepts of Hinduism. It was consequently suited as a universal creed for all mankind in this modern age. To prove the superiority of Hinduism over Christianity and over the modern Western world view in general, Bipinchandra contends that modernity was a relative term and not dependent upon a particular time. Hinduism long ago had resolved problems plaguing modern Western man. Not only does he find it necessary to claim that ancient Hinduism contains answers for modern Western problems, but it for him to 'demonstrate' that traditional Hindu values are more scientific and rational than those of the West.

While discussing the Bhrugu and Varuṇa episode[2] in the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* Bipinchandra interprets that Bhrugu followed the process of rational, scientific inquiry and advanced from strict materialism to the awareness of an ultimate, spiritual reality. Bhrugu's initial materialistic explanation of the universe was comparable to the so called modern rationalistic, empirical view of the universe held in the West. In fact, modern scientific materialism was a regression in human's development. Since science has been used to conquer nature with a view to provide more comfort, modern Western human has fallen more deeply into the trap of sensual pleasure. In contrast, Hinduism always recognized that true control of nature is dependent on controlling human's inner nature, in particular, attainment of sense control. And the Hindu has devised the only technique leading to body and mind control: *Yoga*.

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[2] Bhrugu approached his *Guru* Varuṇa, who was the master of wisdom, and requested, "Instruct me in *Brahman*": *Adhīhi bhagāvo brahmeti, eva varuṇam pitaram upasasāra* (*Tattiriya Upaniṣad*, Chap-3). *"Tapasā brahma vijijñāsasva*: Know *Brahman* through *tapas."* He did not go into descriptions, narrations, quotations, or citations of scriptures. "Know *Brahman* by yourself through *tapas." Mano brahmeti vyajānāt. Ānando brahmeti vyajānāt*.

Bipinchandra's reference to the science of *Yoga* is similar to the statements by Kesabachandra Sen and Swami Vivekananda.

To show Hinduism's superiority over Christianity, Bipinchandra tries to compare Krishna with Christ, with the help of the arguments in Bankimchandra's *Krishnacharitra*. While Christ is only the Son of God, Krishna is self God the Father. Krishna possesses the highest attributes of Christ: "His is a message of Love, interpreted in its highest and divine sense; Love conquers the world and makes sacrifices sacramental." Krishna did not turn the other cheek and preach nonresistance to evil. Nor did Lord Krishna preach: "My kingdom is not of this world." He vigorously and efficiently ruled this world.

While discussing Hinduism's superiority and its rationality, Bipinchandra undertakes a rehabilitation of those aspects of Hinduism which he had previously condemned. He argues that the elaborate and stringent rituals and disciplines of traditional Hinduism had "a distinct ethical value." And he contrasts superior 'constructive' Hindu ethics with inferior 'instructive' Christian ethics. In the West, he contends, man is instructed to be good, to act ethically, and personally responsible for his acts. In Hinduism, on the other hand, human is aware of the fact that human frequently acts on impulse and that lack of mind and sense control keeps him from acting rightly even when he wishes to do so. For this reason, Hindus are more understanding of human defenselessness. With the help of Yogic techniques, control over mind, senses, and feelings is attainable and ethical behavior enforceable. Mastery over the senses ought to include sexual restraint and control over the palate. While Bipinchandra labels celibacy 'medieval,' he advocates a restrained sex life for married couples and condemns the more liberal Western attitude toward marital sex as 'prostitution in marriage.' Similarly, he opposes unrestricted indulgence in food and agrees with the traditional Hindu classification of food into *sātvic, rājasic,* and *tāmasic*. On hygienic grounds he even sees some justification for restricting inter-dining. After all, the lower castes disregarded the fact that some foods were more spiritual than others. He argues that modern medical findings regarding communicable diseases bear out ancient Hindu wisdom and he lashes out against that most unhygienic modern custom.

By supporting inter-dining restrictions to some extent, Bipinchandra also modifies his view regarding caste restrictions in general. He insists that he still believes in human brotherhood, but that brotherhood is utopian as it presupposes a level of spirituality attained by only a few. And he claims that elimination of caste restrictions leads to indiscriminate indulgence in sex as initially held by Mahatma Gandhi. Caste was being replaced by the Western class system, which catered to individualism, competitiveness, and arrogance. Pride had not been a feature of the Hindu caste system. He refers to the supreme equalizer, the *Chaturashrama pratha* a happy solution of this universal social problem. According to Bipinchandra, all are equal in the *bramacharya* stage. Inequality exists only in the *grāhastha* stage, and only because of the fulfillment of different social functions. In the last two stages equality was restored. He thus conveniently ignores the fact that by no means all Hindus followed the *āśrama* path and that the untouchables were excluded from it altogether.

Bipinchandra clearly differentiates between the totemism and animism of primitive peoples, contending that there was no image veneration during the Vedic civilization but that it came into being during the subsequent, higher, Purāṇic stage. Statues of the deities serve as a means of bridging the gulf between the *draṣta* and the *adraṣta*, the finite and the infinite, leading the worshiper from the world of sense experience to the super-sensuous realm. Images constitute a material approximation of the spiritual vision attained by a *Yogi* in the state of *samādhi*. It was not a question of idolatry but, rather, of 'idealatry,' comparable with image veneration among the Catholics. His reference to Catholicism is significant. Earlier Hindu reformers had chiefly looked to Protestantism for inspiration. Raja Rammohun Roy in particular had condemned Catholic image veneration. Also, while Rammohun had opposed the trinitarian doctrine, Bipinchandra defends it and compares it to the *Vaiṣnava* trinity of *Brahman, Paramātman* and *Bhagavāna*.

Under the influence of nationalism, his personal experiences in the West, and the religious renaissance and as a result of his inclination towards a mystic view of life Bipinchandra reaffirmed his faith in traditional Hinduism. According to him, 'there cannot be anything that changes unless there is back of it something that changes not'. Once one accepts the notion of an ultimate unchanging reality, the

dichotomy of modernity and tradition recedes into the background. At the same time Bipinchandra tried to defend his identification with tradition by labeling it rational and scientific. In his eagerness to prove the superiority of Hinduism over modern Western values, he employed arguments which were illogical, inconsistent, and even specious. His commitment to tradition, however, was not unqualified. He continued to favor political, social, and educational reforms. He obviously wanted to find a balance between tradition and modernity. That he leaned more towards tradition is understandable, considering his conclusion that science, the idol of modern man, had definite limitations, and his aversion for skepticism and materialism, which he associated with modern civilization.

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