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BHAKTI RENAISSANCE

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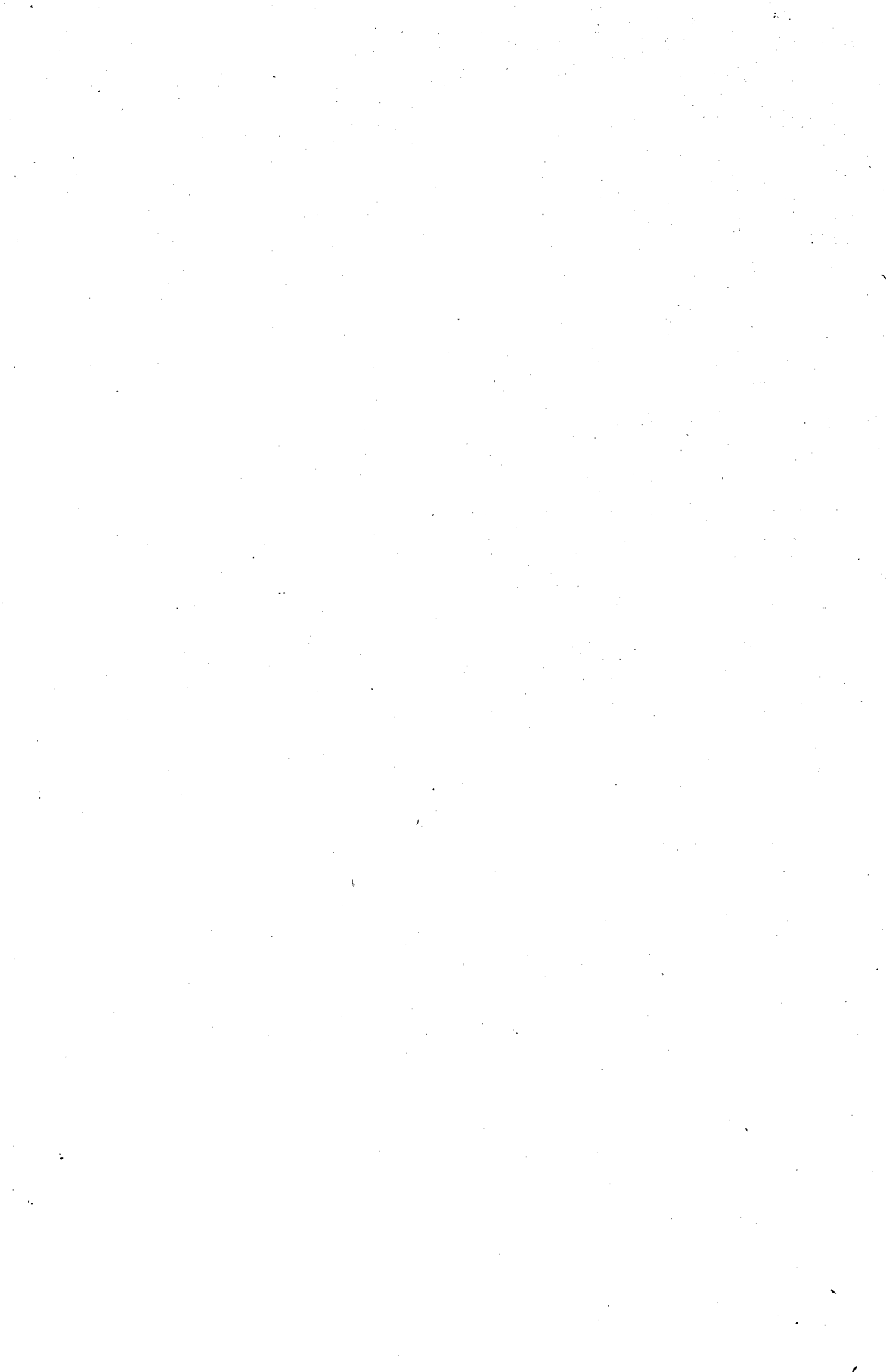
A. K. MAJUMDAR



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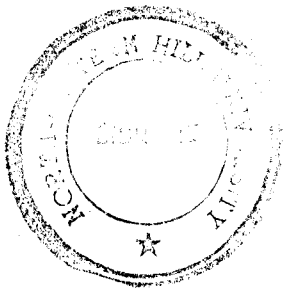
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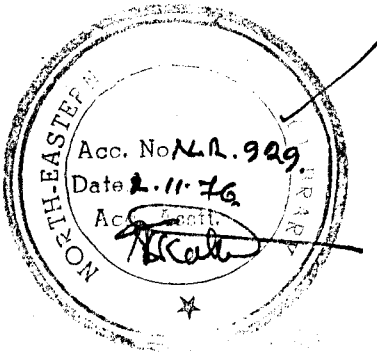
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PREFACE

It is always a work of time for ideas which have been inwoven into the national life of a people to undergo complete expulsion, and for other ideas to be introduced in their room. Religious ideas are, of all ideas, the most tenacious and powerful; and, when once a set of values based on experience has taken possession of a nation, it will never relax its hold on the popular mind, until after a long conflict with ideas which are more cogent than itself; and, although, through exhaustion, it is compelled to give place to them, it will, as it expires, fight every inch of the way, and continue the contest even when reduced to absolute weakness as a dormant idea ready to germinate whenever conditions are favourable. Thus it took several centuries for Buddhism to expire in India but certain values established by Buddha never died, though no great *āchārya* did ever come forward to restate those values in terms of Buddhistic faith. The great religious leaders of the middle ages in India preferred to base their teachings on Vedānta and caught the popular imagination by emphasizing the importance of *bhakti* as a means of realization.

* * *

This work has been called the *Bhakti Renaissance*, in which the English word has been used in its etymological sense, that is, rebirth. We may regard the "renaissances", the carrying of religion or art from one society to another, as the equivalent of transmission of force. In fact, however, renaissance is almost always a new creation. Therefore, though it may appear from the following pages that an unbroken stream of *bhakti* has flown down the ages, there have been periods of high and low tide. Of the earlier periods we do not know the details, but the periods when the *Bhakti-sūtras*, or the *Bhāgavata* were written must have been in some manner comparable to the ages of Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha, or Chaitanya and in our age, of Rāmākrishṇa, when a powerful stream of mysterious faith was released. As these periodic movements are usually linked with a person, with whom *bhakti* may be said to be reborn, this work has been called the *Bhakti Renaissance*.

The first part of the work may serve as an introduction to a history of the *bhakti*-movement, but for various reasons I have not discussed the philosophy of the different schools of thought,

nor the Pāñcharātra doctrine. In support of my decision I may quote the well-known saying:

*vāg-vaikharī śabda-jharī śāstra-vyākhyāna kausālam
vaidushyam vidushām tad=vat bhuktaye na tu muktaye.*¹

It has been pointed out to me that the statement on p. 1., that all the *sādhakas* or devotees are at the same time *jñāna-yogins*, *bhakti-yogins*, and *rāja-yogins*, requires explanation. Now, explanation is difficult, for I have written here what I have observed. In my support, I can cite the writings of Svāmī Vivekānanda. Incidentally, this was one of the reasons for the long quotation from Svāmiji's work on p. 9. He is usually associated with *jñāna* and *karma*, and few would care to remember that he had so passionately upheld the most criticized part of the *Bhāgavata*. So I have inserted a long passage, for I cannot expect all the readers to be familiar with Svāmiji's works, and in any case, his forceful language illumines the subject in a manner which mine would have utterly failed to do.

In the present work, the views of the saints have been preferred to those of modern scholars, for the intention was to trace the perennial source of inspiration of the Hindus. Their beliefs and faiths may have no objective validity in themselves, but have to be accepted at their face value by an historian who wants to probe into the rationale of their activities, and analyze the impact on the country of those faiths, beliefs, and the mystique which have sustained the Hindus through centuries of cruel oppression. That they were not degraded intellectually and morally through sheer frustration is an index of the power of the faith that sustained them. This is the difference between India and China, two of the oldest world civilizations. Western contact destroyed China's faith in herself, and she had to accept Communism, at best a Western concept of life, to find her salvation. India on the other hand finds solace in her indigenous faith and philosophy.

Indian philosophy has been presented to the modern world by scholars mainly as epistemological or ontological studies with the help of Western terminology. Hence the insistence on a history of philosophy, in which an idea is studied in the process of its development, rather than as an idea-in-itself. The main import of Indian thought throughout the ages has been, however, that there is a world or a reality which may be penetrated by direct experience and an intuitive state developed which is absolutely indepen-

1. "The various methods of joining words, of speaking in beautiful language, and of explaining the scriptures are only meant for the disputation of the learned and (makes for) their enjoyment, and (are not conducive to) emancipation."

dent of theoretical and intellectual cognition. This is called mysticism, sometimes reverently, sometimes derisively, and sometimes quite stupidly the term is applied to jugglers' tricks by credulous people.

However, there has always been an attempt to reduce into verbal form the truth, or reality which was realized in the highest mystic state. But it was always recognized that the thought producing such verbal revelations stemmed from a super-rational entity or basis, and the seer was attempting to rationally account for the diversified expression of the absolute reality in the form of cosmic order. Thus Gorakshanāth says:—

Nāsti satya-vichare' smin notpattis=chānda-piṇḍayoḥ

Tathāpi loka-vṛittyārtham vakshyate sat-sampradāyataḥ.

(*Siddha Siddhānta Paddhati*, I.2)

The result, however, was that in the earlier periods attempts were made to codify them in the form of *sūtras*, possibly for purposes of quick grasp and meditation; while in the later periods attempts were made to explain them (including the *sūtras*) by means of commentaries.

To-day, there is considerable eye-brow-raising at the mention of a commentary, though few sophisticated Indians know that they are merely following the dictum of Emperor Bhoja (c.A.D. 1000-1047) who wrote:

durbodham yad=atīva taddhi jahāti
suspashṭam ity=uktibhiḥ,

spashṭārtheshv=ativistritim vidadhāti
vyārthaiḥ samāsādikaiḥ.

asthāne' nupayogabhis=cha bahubhir=jalpair
bhramam tanvate,

śrotriṇām iti vastu-viplavakṛitāḥ
sarve' pi ṭikākṛitāḥ.²

It is rash to differ from the great Paramāra polymath, but there are commentaries and commentaries. Actually, there are

2. "All the commentators gloss over the extremely difficult passages by stating that their meanings are clear, while they elaborately explain the easy passages with the help of useless compounds; at improper and unsuitable places they spin out various improbable theories, creating wrong notions with the result that the (minds of) the listeners are completely confused."

certain texts which it is dangerous to read without a commentary, keeping in view Śaṅkara's dictum:

"...*a-sampradāya-vit sarva-sāstra-vid=api murkhavad=eva*
...*upekshañyāḥ* (Gītā, XIII, 2.)³

This was another reason for giving extensive quotations from Svāmī Vivekānanda, whose speeches and writings are really commentaries on Hindu scriptures. It may be said that Svāmī Vivekānanda's teachings were sometimes not traditional, for he said many things which no one did before him; but that is exactly the function of a great commentator. Those who fail in this task usually fall into the category justly derided by the Paramāra Emperor.

I would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to Shri K. M. Munshi who went through the present work and gave me various valuable suggestions.

My thanks are also due to my esteemed colleague, Prof. Sankaranarayan who went through the manuscript with great care and gave me valuable suggestions for its improvement.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,

A. K. Majumdar.

Chowpatty Road,

Bombay-7.

December 4, 1964.

3. "... a person who does not belong to a (recognized) sect, should be ignored as a fool even if he knows all the scriptures."

CHAPTER I

DEFINITION

I

Religion in India is more a direct experience than a code of conduct and from an early age different systems or *mārgas* (paths) have been prescribed for attaining the goal, variously called liberation, bliss and heaven. However, the different *mārgas* were not contradictory and in some respects they supplemented each other; for example proficiency in *Jñāna-yoga*, *Rāja-yoga* and *Bhakti-yoga*, are demanded from the highest *sādhakās* (devotees). The effect on the masses was probably different. In the pre-Buddhist age, people were swayed by the *Karma-kāṇḍa* of the Vedas, while in the post-Buddhist period, which for our present purpose may be said to have started from the 9th century A.D. (the period of Śaṅkara and Kumārila) *jñāna* and *bhakti* caught the imagination of the masses. A permanent effect of Buddhism was to turn popular attention away from the Vedic sacrifices, and even Kumārila's genius could not re-establish their popularity. Śaṅkara and Kumārila, however, destroyed the lingering intellectual attachment to the decaying Buddhism, and within a few centuries, the unquestioned supremacy of the Vedas came to be accepted again. It was hardly possible for the generality of people, however, to reach the intellectual level necessary to understand Śaṅkara's non-dualism, and difficulty was created by his refusal to impart knowledge of Brahman to non-Brahmins. These demands were fulfilled by the *bhakti* doctrine preached by Rāmānuja, and thereafter *bhakti* based on Vedānta became, so to say, the dominating theme in India's religious life. *Bhakti*, however, was not a new doctrine in India nor was Rāmānuja its first preacher. The beginning of the medieval *bhakti* movement was more in the nature of a re-statement of value, than an innovation.

II

The beginnings of *bhakti* may be traced in the hymns of the *Rigveda* where (Ṛg. I. 62.11) "longing prayers are said to touch Indra who is longing just as a wife with desires gets her husband." This idea is amplified in another hymn (Ṛg. X. 43.1) which says: "All my hymns in unison praise Indra: as wives embrace their husbands so do my thoughts embrace Indra the divine bestower of gifts. For the sake of a favour they cling to the liberal God (Indra) as wives do their lords, (or as a woman) does her handsome lover." In another hymn (Ṛg. VI. 45.26), Indra is addressed as a friend and it is said

CHAPTER II

GĪTĀ AND THE BHĀGAVATA

The two scriptures, the *Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavata-purāṇa* are the basis of the *bhakti* philosophy of the middle ages.¹ The *Gītā* as is well-known is a part of the *Mahābhārata*, while the *Bhāgavata* is an independent work. Keen controversy has raged around these two works hence it is necessary to discuss their importance.

Many modern scholars do not believe that the *Gītā* is a part of the *Mahābhārata* at all. It seems that they always proceed on the assumption, which indeed is a basic postulate to their approach to all problems relating to India, that all Indian traditions are wrong and later inventions, and that the opposite is the truth. There may be, and there are good reasons to reject certain traditions, just as there are good reasons to reject some contemporary documentary evidence as well as historical writings. There are however certain traditions which have been hallowed by centuries of fervent devotion and cherished by men of the highest intellect and faith. For example it can be clearly established that the *Gītā* has been accepted by all Indian sages from Śaṅkara to Vivekānanda and Aurobindo as a part of the *Mahābhārata* delivered by Śrī-Kṛiṣṇa to Arjuna on the battle-field of Kurukshetra. Śaṅkara stated that the *Gītā* consisted of only 700 verses, and his "edition" of the *Gītā* has been followed since his time. About thirty years ago, the Kashmir recension was discovered, which contains about 750 verses. It is clear therefore, that Śaṅkara and others did not accept a tradition uncritically.

Śaṅkara states that he wrote the commentary on the *Gītā* in order to dispel the mistaken views propagated by some other commentators. It is clear therefore that the *Gītā* had its commentators before Śaṅkara, but the *Bhāgavata*, which is not mentioned by Rāmānuja had no commentator before Madhva. This late recognition coupled with certain other facts, such as the mention of the Āḷvārs in one verse, have induced modern scholars to assign it a late date, about the 8th century A.D., and Southern origin.

This view is impossible to reconcile with the statement in the *Bhāgavata* that it was composed by Śuka, the son of Vyāsa, the author of the *Mahābhārata*.

1. There are two other important sources, namely the Nārāyaṇīya Section (Chapters 322-339 of the Śāntiparva, critical edition) of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Vishṇupurāṇa*. But for our present purpose it is not necessary to consider these works.

CHAPTER III

THE FOUNDERS

Śaṅkara

It has been stated above that the doctrine of *bhakti* is ancient, but we have no information as to how far it was effective as a movement nor as to its hold on the masses as a doctrine. Anyway, it can be assumed that with the spread of Buddhism and Jainism, not only the Vedic religion but also the *bhakti* cult, such as *Pāñcharātra*, received a severe setback, and they did not recover their lost grounds till the decline of Buddhism, which introduced the cult of the worship of a personal deity. The lingering influence of Buddhism in this respect was evidenced till recently in the worship of "Dharma" in many Bengal villages, the sole relic of the 'three jewels' of Buddhism.

Regarding the effect of the decaying Buddhism, Vivekānanda has said:

"Thus, in spite of the preaching of mercy to animals, in spite of the sublime ethical religion, in spite of the hairsplitting discussions about the existence or non-existence of a permanent soul, the whole building of Buddhism tumbled down piecemeal; and the ruin was simply hideous. I have neither the time nor the inclination to describe to you the hideousness that came in the wake of Buddhism. The most hideous ceremonies, the most horrible, the most obscene books that human hands ever wrote or the human brain ever conceived, the most bestial forms that ever passed under the name of religion, have all been the creation of degraded Buddhism."¹

It was against this debased religion that Śaṅkarāchārya preached and successfully established the supremacy of the Vedānta, that is the Upanishads, the *Brahma-sūtra* and the *Gītā*. Subsequent teachers severely assailed him for his doctrine of *Māyā*, but none differed from him as to the supremacy of the *Prasthāna-trayas*, that is the texts mentioned above. The main charge against Śaṅkara was that he was a disguised Buddhist. But as Śrī Aurobindo has said: "When the reaction to Buddhism arrived, it took up not the the old Sankhya notion, but the Vedantic form popularised by Śaṅkara who replaced the Buddhistic impermanence by the cognate Vedantic idea of illusion *Maya*, and the Buddhistic idea of Non-Being, indefinable Nirvana, a negative Absolute, by the opposite and yet cognate Vedantic idea of the indefinable Being, Brahman, an in-

1. Swāmī Vivekānanda: Sages of India, *Complete Works*, Birth Centenary edition, III, pp. 264-65.

N.R. 929.

CHAPTER IV

LITERATURE

It is not possible to deal here with the extensive literature on *bhakti* in Sanskrit. The most important *bhakti* texts are the *Gītā* and the Nārayanīya section (ch. 322-339) of the Śāntiparva of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the *Bhakti-sūtras* of Śaṅḍilya, and Nā.ada, the *Ahīrbudhnyā-saṁhitā*, the *Purāṇas* and the innumerable hymns, or *stōtras* of which some of the best were composed by Śaṅkara himself. It is clear however, that though the learned followers of *bhakti* like the Gosvāmins of Vṛindāvana, successfully attempted to provide a metaphysical basis for their doctrine, their writings had other purposes in view than popularizing their cult, for which the media was to be the regional languages. Indeed with the exception of the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata*—the Lord's words and His biography—an ordinary Vaiṣṇava hardly knows the name of any other Sanskrit text though he is quite familiar with the devotional songs of his region. Actually, the *bhaktas* have a contempt for book learning, and a charming Bāṅl song of Bengal castigates the learned men comparing them to jewellers who attempt to fix the value of a lotus by trying to find out the gold content of its petals.

The non-Sanskritic literature on *bhakti* is so vast that we cannot attempt to describe all of it even briefly. This literature is, however, extremely important for the history of the development of modern Indian languages. Just as Sanskrit begins with the Vedas, so all modern Indian literature begin with devotional literature of exceptional literary value. Many poets expressed themselves in songs which are popular even now. The earliest literature of this type comes from the South, the region in which *bhakti* is said to have been born.

From about the 6th century, the religious life of South India was influenced by the Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs and the Śaiva Nāyanārs or the Nāyanmārs. With them begins the line of poet-saints which later became a distinguishing feature of India life.

It is difficult to trace the origin either of the Ālvārs or the Nāyanārs, but it is apparent that they were anti-Buddhist and anti-Jain, and were attempting to reconcile their preachings with the Vedas, and they held that the praise of their deity (Kṛṣṇa or Śiva) was the essence of the Vedas.

CHAPTER V

EFFECT OF BHAKTI ON MODERN INDIAN LANGUAGES

Buddha and Mahāvira had preached in the language of the masses which was one of the main reasons of the success of Buddhism and Jainism. Later on Buddhism and Jainism constructed elaborate structures of metaphysics in support of doctrines, mainly in Sanskrit to defend themselves against the Brāhmin intellectuals. The neo-Brāhmanical movement, which began with Śaṅkara, first challenged the non-Vedic philosophy of Buddha and Mahāvira, and then reached the masses through the local languages. This includes even monism, which as we have seen, was preached by Jñāna-deva and Lāllā Ded or Lalleśwari.

Most of the modern languages of India begin from the 11th century, which coincides roughly with the beginning of the medieval *bhakti* movement, and as we shall see, most of the vernaculars were inspired either by the epics or some other religious texts.

Assamese:

The earliest Assamese poet seems to have been Hema Sarasvati of the 13th century. His famous work, the *Prahlāda-charitra* is based on the *Vishṇu-purāṇa*. He was followed by Harihara Bipra (early 14th century) who wrote the *Lava-Kusar-Yuddha* and *Babrubāhanar-Yudha* based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* respectively. Harihara Bipra's contemporary Kaviratna Sarasvatī wrote the *Jayadrath-bādha* describing the well-known episode from the *Mahābhārata*. But the greatest Assamese poet of the 14th century was Kavirāja Mādhava Kandali, who wrote an Assamese version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the narrative poem *Devajit*, on *Kṛishṇā* as the supreme divinity. The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was retold in the 15th century in songs in the *Gīta-Rāmāyaṇa* of Durgāvara. But the greatest period of Assamese literature began with Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568), the great poet-saint. So long the worship of Śakti predominated in Assam but Śaṅkaradeva largely replaced it with Vaishṇavism. He preached absolute faith in a God of Love, Vishṇu or his incarnation *Kṛishṇa*, and his doctrine was known as the *Eka-śaraṇa-dharma* or the "religion of seeking refuge in one", and, as he based his teachings on the *Bhāgavata*, it is also known as the *Bhāgavata-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva preached his doctrine through songs and organized *nām-ghars*, or communal prayer-halls in every Vaishṇava village in Assam where people gathered in the evenings for praying and singing hymns.

CHAPTER VI

MODERN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The Vaishṇava *bhakti* movement, which started with Rāmānuja may be said to have exhausted its possibilities as a philosophical system by the time Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa wrote his commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra* from the standpoint of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas that is Chaitanya's sect. Baladeva's date is not known with certainty, but one of his works is dated 1764, so that it may be presumed that his commentary, was written about the same time, that is about 10 to 15 years before the birth of Rāmmohan Roy. In a sense Baladeva brings to a close the intellectual age that began with Śaṅkara, for his was the last commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*. With Rāmmohan begins a new age.

The established religious orders like those of Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva, Vallabha and Chaitanya and others continued, but they had practically exhausted their vitality and some of them degenerated to the level of later day Buddhism. Protest was bound to come and it came in the shape of a rational approach to religion subduing the *bhakti* element in it as much as possible. This is most evident in the religious movement started by Rāmmohan and Dayānanda. It should be noted, however, that *bhakti* movement had not lost all its momentum, and not only it claimed a large following (as indeed it does today) but new sects were started, like that of the Swāmī Nārāyaṇa.

Both Rāmmohan and Dayānanda wanted to restore Hinduism to its former glory by establishing it firmly on a Vedic foundation. We shall presently examine Rāmmohan's position in this regard, but Dayānanda repudiated the entire *bhakti* movement (as well as Śaṅkara), and based his doctrine on his own interpretation of the Vedic Samhitās. An examination of his doctrine, therefore, is beyond the scope of the present work.

Swāmī Nārāyaṇa was born in a Brahmin family in 1781 in Chappaiya, a village about ten miles from Ayodhya, and was named Ghanaśyāma. In his ninth year his parents died and about two years later he left home. For seven years he wandered till in 1800 he came to Loj, a small place in Saurāshṭra and became a disciple of one Swāmī Rāmānanda and came to be known as Saha-jānanda. In 1801 Rāmānanda nominated Swāmī Nārāyaṇa as his successor even though he was his youngest disciple and soon after Rāmānanda died.

CHAPTER VII

BHAKTI IN POLITICS

Rāmmohan not only attempted to reform Hinduism but also laid the basis of political thought and liberal movement in India. He did not, however, allow his religious thinking to fashion his political thoughts; for, in religious matters he could appeal to the Upanishads, while in political matters he would only find a void if he had to rely on ancient India. The Hindus had practically no record of their history; they lived in a timeless present, cherishing the memory of a mythical *Rāma-rājya* and in the joyous anticipation of a glorious future in the other world. History as a triumph of memory over the corrupting influence of time was never a part of Hindu outlook, and as a result political thinking failed to develop amongst them. The Hindu intellect longed for intuitive insight not for empirical facts.

The result of this deficiency was lack of systematic political thinking, and Rammohan had to look to the West for his politics and accepted the doctrine of Liberalism as it came to him through 'the glittering phraseology of the Enlightenment, at its face value,' without pausing to examine it or understanding the limitations of the British political institutions, when it involved the question of their empire. However, he set the pattern for the future Indian Liberals, namely, that redress could be obtained by petitioning the British Parliament, a belief to which the Liberals or 'the Moderates', as they come to be called at the beginning of the century, clung to the end and their resolutions passed at the annual sessions of the Congress were—possibly unconscious—imitations of Rammohan's famous petitions.

Another plank of the Moderates was also inherited from Rammohan: their loyalty to the British Government. In his autobiographical sketch, Rammohan says that in his younger days he had an aversion towards the British, but he changed his views later. Though he does not assign any reason for this change of attitude in his autobiographical sketch, we get a glimpse of this part of his mental attitude from his petition to the King in Council in which he begins as follows: "The greater part of Hindustan having been for several centuries subject to Mohammedan Rule, the civil and religious rights of its original inhabitants were constantly trampled upon...from the habitual oppression of the conqueror...their religion insulted and their blood wantonly shed. Divine Providence at last, in its abundant mercy, stirred up the English nation to break the yoke of these tyrants, and to receive the oppressed Natives

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