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“Discovery of Hinduism” in Religious Thought of the Bengal Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to represent “Discovery of Hinduism” as a specific phenomenon of religious thought in the Bengal Renaissance of modern India. The phenomenon is a part of “Discovery of India” (Jawaharlal Nehru’s term) by Indian intellectuals, who thought on their country, society, civilization, history, and its future. The term “Hinduism” borrowed from the British missionaries and orientalists became convenient for the Bengal Renaissance intellectuals to think and comprehend their own native religious tradition. Based on the works by the Bengal Renaissance thinkers, the paper presents their role in creating the notion “Hinduism” as the term for all group of Indian religions, as well as in interpretation of it as one whole religion. The discovery of Hinduism began from the works by Rammohun Roy, who presented its image—tracing its origins back to monotheistic ideal of the Vedas. The discovery of Hinduism process can be divided into two phases: (a) invention of “monotheistic” image by the Brahma Samaj, 1815–1857; (b) the perception and understanding of Hinduism at the second half of 19th century as “unity in diversity” and constructing of its concept by Neo-Hindu thinkers (Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, etc.). They created an image of Hinduism as a system of universal meanings and values and the core of social life and culture as well as the foundation cultural and political identity. The discovery of Hinduism by all Bengal intellectuals had many important consequences, one of which is positive and humanistic concept of Hinduism not only for their co-religionists and compatriots, but also for the outer world, primarily for the West. Discovery of Hinduism is an integral part of the history of thought, the kind of attempt “to gather India” in religious, social, and cultural spheres for public consciousness and mind.

Received 17 August 2022

Accepted 14 February 2023

Published online 10 April 2023

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KEYWORDS

Hinduism, Bengal Renaissance, Discovery of India, Discovery of Hinduism, Rammohun Roy, Brahma Samaj, Neo-Hindu thinkers, history of religious thought

Introduction: “Discovery of Hinduism” as a Phenomenon

In the early 19th century, religious life in India encountered three challenges: firstly, Christian missionaries’ activity and their criticism of Indian indigenous religious beliefs and practices; secondly, the fact that these beliefs and practices were designated by the term “Hinduism”; and, thirdly, attempts to study Indian religions by European theologians and orientalists. The first challenge was intended to question heathens’ beliefs and to convert them into true faith. The second was the challenge in religious consciousness and affiliation sphere, as in Indian Subcontinent there existed a multitude of heterogeneous religious traditions, beliefs, and cults with no integral doctrines and common practices, and, consequently, there was no general religious identity. The third challenge was that the scientific analysis of Indian religions’ origins was understood as “Vedic”, which did not correspond with contemporary religious practices of Indian natives.

In different regions of India among local elite strata two responses appeared in that period: orthodox Brahmanic and creative. Owing to British colonial rule the influence of Brahmins in society was restored after a serious decline in pre-colonial period, and the Brahmin elite proposed their own interpretation of Hindu society, law, and religion to British rulers (Bayly, 1988, pp. 156–158). The Brahmins’ response was orthodox in the sense of advancement of Brahmanism as exemplary religion and cultural system united by Brahmins in the whole. The Brahmanic interpretation of Indian religious traditions was accepted by British government as true and actual, and was used for social, administrative, and, later, political purposes. Essentially, such interpretation equated Hinduism and Brahmanism.

New stratum of educated intellectuals who were included into Indian-Western dialogue of cultures began to give their creative response to the West-generated religious challenge in slowly modernizing societies of three regions—Bengal, Maharashtra, and Tamilnadu. In the sphere of religious thought the intellectuals started answering the three aforesaid challenges in different forms. The earliest and very significant were the works by religious thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance in the 19th and early 20th century, who literally “discovered” Hinduism for their own co-religionists and created many-sided image of the native religious tradition.

The Bengal Renaissance was the epoch of national-cultural awakening in the most developed province of India—the region, which had become a meeting-space for Indian and Western dialogue of cultures (for more details see Dasgupta, 2007, 2011; Justyński, 1985). Began by Bengal intellectuals and reformers, the renaissance process embraced religious, social, political, and cultural spheres and was the attempt to understand India in juxtaposition with the West and to propose the ways of society’s integration in

modern world as well as cultural development. Subrata Dasgupta (2007) offers a cogent interpretation of the Bengal Renaissance as “a genuine *cognitive revolution*” by “small but remarkable community of individuals” (p. 2)—in creation of new cognitive identity, shaping the Indian mind in its own time and beyond (pp. 235–245). The significant part of that cognition—revolutionary in its own way—was the comprehension of native Indian religious tradition. For a more accurate description of the process and results of the one, a term “Discovery of Hinduism” can be proposed—by analogy with Jawaharlal Nehru’s famous term “Discovery of India”.

Discovery of Hinduism is conventional designation for the way how Bengal religious thinkers respond to spiritual and intellectual challenge in the face of their tradition. In a broad sense, for intellectuals the religious life as well as religious thought and studies were parts of aspect in their own self-understanding in dialogue with the West, its society and culture, in determination of their own cultural Self in interaction with the Other. The religious aspect of self-understanding was so important that the whole Bengal Renaissance epoch began from religious thought with social, cultural, and political spheres being included in the thought and practice a little bit later.

Generally, the discovery of Hinduism began from a philosopher, reformer, and “father of modern India” Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), who responded to all three challenges. First of all, he appropriated and assimilated from Europeans the comfortable and general term “Hinduism”. According to the research of Russian indologists Sergey V. Pakhomov and Matvey M. Fialko (2013), the term “Hinduism” was first used in a personal letter by Charles Grant, a Scotland missionary of Evangelical Church in 1787. Another missionary C. Buchanan used the term in his book *Christian Researches in Asia, With Notices of the Translation of the Scriptures Into the Oriental Language* (1811). In Serampore Baptist Mission the term was actively used by William Ward. It is interesting that W. Ward was happened to be in the group of missionaries interacted from 1815 with Rammohun Roy and, possibly, he appropriated the term “Hinduism” from them. He applied the term actively in his works, calling his own religion “Hinduism” (Roy, 1982, Vol. I, pp. 73, 90, 179; Vol. IV, pp. 901–904), “Hindu religion” (Vol. I, pp. 3, 4, 90, 179; Vol. IV, pp. 905–908), and “Hindu faith” (Vol. I, p. 74), and also introduced and used derivative terms, such as “Hindu theism”, “Hindu worship”, “Hindu mythology” (Vol. I, p. 66, 68), “Hindu theology, law, literature” (Vol. I, pp. 3, 36, 45, 89), “Hindu idolatry” (Vol. I, pp. 5, 66), “the Hindu sacred texts” (Vol. I, pp. 35, 90), and “Hindu community” (Vol. I, p. 21). Before Rammohun’s time the native religions in India had no terms for marking their faiths and beliefs as well as for naming their identity.

From Rammohun Roy and on, the term began to be applied to whole complex of Indian religions and to be filled by meanings and enriched in its content. Besides, it was Rammohun who initiated a dialogue and the controversy with Christian Baptist missionaries and developed the vindication of his religious tradition and having proposed the first interpretation of Hinduism—not only for missionaries, but for his co-religionists and British orientalist (as for H. H. Wilson, consulted with him on religious tradition) (Robertson, 1995, pp. 59–60). Also, Rammohun started the tradition of thinking on native religion and its interpretation for Indians, Westerners, and all Humankind.

Thus, discovery of Hinduism in Bengal religious thought could be divided into two phases: the first one embraces the creation of “monotheistic” image of Hinduism by Rammohun Roy and the Brahmo Samaj followers; during the second phase a many-sided and all-embracing image of Hinduism is developed by Neo-Hindu thinkers such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee), Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose.

Rammohun Roy and Monotheistic Image of Hinduism

The first phase began from religious thought and reformatory activity of Rammohun Roy. A genesis of his conception of Hinduism was determined by his idea of true religion as spiritual and ethical monotheism, presented firstly in his tract *A Gift for Monotheists* (1804), as well as by a number of religious influences—Islam, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and Christianity (Zaidi, 1999). A dialogue of religions in his personal consciousness along with an exegesis of Vedic texts allowed him to invent an “ideal” Hinduism, presented as “forgotten” and even rejected by his co-religionists—in comparison with popular religions and cults of many deities in India. R. Roy (1982) considered the latter declined and amoral form of faith burdened by ritual and social prescriptions and superstitions. He believed that such rites as *sati* (burning widows alive at funeral pyre of husbands), infanticide, and the like, are serious symptoms of Hindu community illness: the ones are social evils “under the cloak of religion” (Vol. II., p. 372).

Rammohun Roy’s approach to Hinduism based on strict distinction of a spirit (faith as inner life of a person) and outer forms and symbolism of practice in any religion. Consequently, he turned to sacred texts of Brahmanic traditions—the Vedas, especially the Upanishads, to discover monotheism as primordial and essential faith in Hinduism. Starting from primordial monotheism position, he believes that the monotheism is historically native in his religion: “the doctrines of the unity of God are real Hinduism, as that religion was practiced by our ancestors, and as it is well-known even at the present age to many learned Brahmins” (Roy, 1982, Vol. I, p. 90). Turning to the Vedas authority, Rammohun consciously contrasts “the spiritual part of the Vedas” (monotheistic faith and way to salvation) and “allegorical representations of the attributes of the Supreme Being” (Vol. I, pp. 36, 131)—“for the sake of those whose limited understandings rendered them incapable of comprehending and adoring the invisible Supreme Being” (Vol. I, p. 36). Thus, Hinduism had been discovered by Rammohun as religion of One God inculcated by the Vedas. According to his interpretation, the Upanishads describe Brahman as Supreme Ruler and Creator, but the genesis of monotheism can be traced to *sāṃhitās*, hymns of “the most ancient and sacred oracles of his faith, the inspired Vedas, which have been revered from generation to generation, for time immemorial” (Vol. I, p. 179). The spirit of the sacred texts dominated peripheral and utilitarian ideas on worship divine attributes and rituals in the Upanishads.

In Rammohun’s interpretation, Vedanta is the theology of Hinduism; it declares the unity of God, spiritual worship without number of ceremonies. Sages Manu, Yajnavalkya, and others, as well as philosophers (especially Shankara) affirm, substantiate, and develop the spiritual doctrines of Hinduism (Roy, 1982, Vol. I, pp. 96, 99, 110–117).

Moreover, Vedanta is in the core of Rammohun's image of Hinduism: it grounds unity and universalism of the Brahman (Supreme Being) (Vol 1. pp. 182–183), highest moral principles, and love for human in a society. Especially he proved ethical spirit of Hinduism, which deals with all difficulties of peoples' moral life: "the Vedanta does not confine the reward or punishment of good or evil works to the state after death, much less to a particular day of judgment; but it reveals positively, that a man suffers or enjoys, according to his evil or good deeds, frequently even in this world" (p. 185). Deduced from the Vedas and the Vedanta, the Hinduism without rituals and caste norms is some "ideal type" (Max Weber) by Rammohun; but it is simultaneously a pattern for a juxtaposition of modern condition of his own religion. He had historically described its evolution as a primordial monotheism's degradation to polytheism.

According to Rammohun, ancient Vedic doctrines had disappeared under a number of religious rites, ceremonies, customs connected with image-worship to a multitude of deities ("idolatry", in Rammohun's term). The condition generated a multiplicity of superstitions, prejudices, inhuman practices, and moral self-destruction of the majority of Hindu people. The polytheistic decline of Hinduism Rammohun interprets as a result of societal need to prevent "persons of feeble intellect unable to comprehend God as not subject to the senses and without form, should either pass their life without any religious duties whatsoever or should engage in evil work" (p. 161). The representation of God in human forms as well as other living creatures firstly appeared in Puranas and Tantras; then the polytheism developed to threatening scale with direct help of Brahmins who created the modern religious system for their own comfort and power in community. Rammohun states that in India of early 19th century Hindus "are, with a few exceptions, immersed into gross idolatry, and in belief of the most extravagant description respecting futurity, antiquity, and the miracles of their deities and saints, as handed down to them and recorded in their ancient book" (Vol. III, p. 559). But Rammohun rejected the Christian missionaries' allegations of polytheism against Hindus, because each Hindu "confesses the unity of the Godhead" and "only advance a plausible excuse for their polytheism" (Vol. III, pp. 582–583).

Thus, Rammohun laid a certain foundation for perception of Hinduism as whole system based on three components: faith in God (Brahman of the Upanishads and the Vedanta), the Vedas' authority, and philosophical/theological knowledge in the Vedanta. He added to ones the ethics to substantiate Hinduism's resemblance with other world religions—Islam and Christianity. In many facets of the native religion Rammohun saw a result of degradation of tradition, but "ideal Hinduism" of the reformer is a challenge for understanding of bright and multicolour real Hinduism. Rammohun refused to accept the condition of Hinduism as normal, that is why he connected Hinduism's future perspectives with the recovery of true spiritual faith and rejection of polytheism and faith in rituals—"for comfort and happiness of Hindus" (Roy, 1982, Vol. I., p. 116). For this goal he founded the religious society "the Brahmo Samaj" ("The Society of [worship to] Brahman") in 1828, with intention to "the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe but not under or by any other name designation or title peculiarly used for and applied to

any particular Being or Beings” (Roy, 1982, Vol. I, p. 216). Rammohun’s interpretation of Hinduism was laid down in creed of brahmoists.

After Rammohun Roy’s death reflections on “discovered” Hinduism were continued by the young leader of the Brahma Samaj Devendranath Tagore (1817–1905) along with the group of Calcutta’s intellectuals. He came to the Brahmoism after his religious experience and spiritual crisis in searching for knowledge of true god and rejection of ritualism and idolatry in Hinduism. In his reflections on his own religion, Devendranath paid a special attention to evolution of Hinduism from Vedic period to present condition. His personal religious experience had begun from discovery of “the knowledge of Brahma and a system of His worship in the Upanishads” (Tagore, 1909, p. 40), and he was firmly convinced, that it is true essence of Hinduism. Therefore, Devendranath wished to preach the Brahma religion as based on Vedanta for “all India would have one religion, all dissensions would come to an end, all would be united in a common brotherhood, her former valour and power would be revived” (p. 40). He saw in reality of religious life that the Vedas are “the sealed book to us”, in Bengal its texts are “virtually extinct”, but *Smriti-shastras* “studied in every *to!*” and Pundits totally ignore the Vedas and well-versed in these shastras. Brahmins “did not even know the meaning of their daily prayers” (pp. 40–41). The next years Devendranath studied and juxtaposed the tradition and multiplicity of real religious practices in India. On the one hand, he scrupulously read the sacred texts and religious doctrines, on the other hand, the thinker observed different practices of popular Hinduism, taking journeys to Northern and Eastern India.

Firstly, Devendranath did not follow Rammohun’s pra-monotheistic representation of the Vedas and discovered in *sāṃhitās* polytheistic content of primordial religion, though he remarked that “it was not the actual moon, sun, wind, and fire alone that the sages of old worshipped. It was that one Great God whom they worshipped under the forms of Agni, Vayu, and many others” (Tagore, 1909, p. 76). He stressed the “idolatry” in Vedic age and the great role of rituals: “Agni, Vayu, Indra, and Surya are worshipped as gods in the Vedas. Kali, Durga, Rama, Krishna, are all modern divinities of the Tantras and Puranas. Agni, Vayu, Indra, and Surya, these are the ancient Vedic gods, and the pomp and circumstance of sacrifice concern them alone” (p. 60). Later only sages of ancient India gave up sacrificial ceremonies of worshiping material gods and, being desirous for salvation and Brahman, they became forest sannyasis. And the Upanishads appeared where the knowledge of Brahman was proclaimed as the highest in opposite to inferior branches of knowledge (*sāṃhitās*). Then Puranic and Tantric, Vaishnava and Shaiva gods and texts appeared and the knowledge of one God-Brahman was forgotten, the common Hindu people “believe that the worship of Kali and Durga is inculcated in the Vedas” (p. 68). Moreover, Devendranath discovered the evolution of Hinduism in its history and its need in revival—in the Brahma Samaj’s form.

Secondly, observing in Varanasi the quarrels of Brahmins on the Vedas reciting, and in the matter of sacrifice (*yājna*), bloody sacrifices, and religious *melas* (festivals), parasitic lifestyle of temple’s *pandas*, Devendranath perceives the condition of Hindus’ spiritual life as decline and stagnation (Tagore, 1909, pp. 54–57).

Generally, based on the discovery of traditional texts, in which the spiritual revelation of monotheism is presented (Brahman as Absolute, Creator of the universe and human beings), the Brahma Samaj's image of Hinduism describes it as originated from the Vedas and historically existed religion with its own ups and downs. The Vedic tradition was considered and presented as uniting foundation for all Hindus, but its "ideal image" was opposed to real present condition of Hinduism with its multitude of beliefs, *sampradayas* (faith-teaching traditions), and cults.

Neo-Hindu Discovery of Native Religion

The second phase in discovery of Hinduism by Bengal intellectuals of 19th century in the period of so-called cultural nationalism is characterized by the holistic perception and understanding of all-embracing native religious "unity in diversity". Traditional Bengal saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa (born Gadadhar Chatterjee, 1836–1886) can be called the forerunner of the holistic interpretation of Hinduism.

Ramakrishna's Model Understanding of Hinduism

Ramakrishna was a poor Brahmin of goddess Kali temple in Dakshineshvar near Calcutta with deep and many-sided religious experience of God-vision in *samādhi* (mystic ecstasy). He had a number of contemplation of goddess Kali, gods Krishna, Shiva, and so on as well as number of religious practices (*sādhanas*) of Tantra, *bhakti*, Advaita-vedanta, etc. Moreover, he experienced the meanings and spirit of other religions—Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. The peak of his religious searching became the ability to see God in all that exists in the world. The unique religious experience by Ramakrishna was combined with heterodox thinking and intuition along with rejection of caste differentiation. From 1870, his preaching attracted the broad circle of listeners and admirers; among them, there were prominent intellectuals of Calcutta. From 1879, a group of talented disciples was formed around Ramakrishna; afterwards Narendranath Dutta became the head of one in future known as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902).

Ramakrishna's influence on the perception and understanding of Hinduism could be estimated as genuine, because he rediscovered Hinduism for his intellectual audience and explained its opposite parts and ways as components of whole native religion. The image of Hinduism appears from teachings and parables by Ramakrishna as all-embracing and harmonic religion, which unites all paths of God and all worship forms. He said: "It's enough to have faith in either aspect. You believe in God without form; that is quite all right. But never for a moment think that this alone is true and all else is false. Remember that God with form is just as true as God without form" (Bhuteshananda, 2006–2007, Vol. I, p. 55). The saint taught his disciples to follow their own native religion which is one of different ways to the same object—God: "All doctrines are all so many paths, but a path is by no means God Himself" (Vol. II, p. 308). Hence, all beliefs and faith, worships and cults in Hinduism are united by general aspiration to God.

Ramakrishna's *Samadhi* of Advaita-vedanta allowed him to assert that One God is worshipped in Hinduism in Impersonal (Brahman) and Personal (Íśwara) image. Eternal and Infinite God was worshipped by ancient sages—"the rishis of olden times renounced

everything and then contemplated Satchidānanda, the Indivisible Brahman” (Vol. I, p. 254). But it is the highest phase of God-contemplation; according to Ramakrishna, for a vast majority of believers, God appears in different forms and ways, “the universe is his glory” (Vol. I, p. 464; Vol. II, p. 27). That is why, “God Himself has provided different forms of worship. He, who is the Lord of the Universe, has arranged all these forms to suit different stages of knowledge” (Vol. I, p. 65). Therefore, people move their spiritual path from a simple phase of knowledge of God to higher ones, from image-worship to Personal Lord worship and then can become *brahmojnāni*—to know the identity of their own souls’ (*jīva*) identity with Brahman (“I am He”, “I am the Self”). In his teaching, Ramakrishna reconciled all opposites and variants of ceremonies, as well as traditional spiritual practices and ways. Ramakrishna called to choose ways of *bhakti* (love and devotion), *jnāna* (intellectual study) or *karma* (work without care of result) suitable for a personal character of each man. *Bhakti* is the best way for himself as well as for general majority of believers who worship divine avatars and gods—Krishna, Rama, Kali, Shiva, etc. “The bliss of worship and communion with God is the true wine, the wine of ecstatic love. The goal of human life is to love God. Bhakti is the one essential thing. To know God through *jnāna* and reasoning is extremely difficult”, he said (Vol. II, p. 21). Bhakti is the most natural way of faith, with rich and bright emotions; *jnāna* is difficult, but the “middle path” is karma—follow dharma (religious duty) in worldly life for God’s glory. The latest path is available even for agnostics and atheists. Karma for Ramakrishna first of all is the social service and making good to fellows.

As for the sacred scriptures, Ramakrishna was not an orthodox scholar of Brahmanic knowledge, and was even skeptic to its authority, preferring the spirit of religion. “Do you know my attitude? Books, scriptures, and things like that only point out the way to reach God. After finding the way, what more need is there of books and scriptures? Then comes the time for the action”, he said to his disciples (Bhuteshananda, 2006–2007, Vol. I, p. 392). He criticized both orthodox Brahmins, whose mind fixed on “woman and gold”, “on creature comforts and money” (p. 394), and modern *pandits* who tried to revive ancient rituals and scripture teachings. Lex Hixon (2011) presents his position on revivalism: “O Pandit, if you really insist on re-creating the sacred ceremonies of past ages—as if complexity or ancientness were somehow more pleasing to God—than at least do not require this exercise from everyone. Offer a direct, simple, powerful path for those who a sincere in their longing to reach the goal of human evolution in this very lifetime” (p. 197).

Ramakrishna outlined some model for understanding and interpretation of Hinduism by intellectuals: to embrace the diversity of its gods, cults and religious forms and to see their general high meanings, first of all mystical-spiritual one. Ramakrishna’s image of Hinduism was created owing to his universalistic approach to bringing together really differentiated practices of indigenous religions by general goal (God) and spirit of mystic relations with Divine Reality. The rightness of all various Hindu practices in meanings does not exclude their limitedness and even dangers, according to him. Moreover, Ramakrishna taught not to revive ancient/historical forms and not to create rationalist religious faith (as the Brahmo Samaj or Swami Dayananda in Northern India did), but he rather inspired to study real Hinduism.

Neo-Hindu Intellectuals' Discovery

Consideration and study of real Hinduism began in the last two decades of 19th century by so-called Neo-Hindu intellectuals; first of them were a writer and social thinker Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee, 1838–1894), social scientist and a writer Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay (1827–1894), and Ramakrishna's favourite disciple Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902).

It is necessary to note the circumstances of their work. The first was that a wave of cultural nationalism rose, the movement against imitation of the Western culture and for taking care of Indian cultural forms and way of life. The second circumstance was that the Theosophical Society preached the superiority of the "Aryan" ("Hindu") civilization to all civilizations and the third one was Hindu Revivalism (Raychaudhuri, 1988, pp. 31–34; Sen, 1993). Revivalism was presented by orthodox pandit Shashadhar Tarkachudamani (1851–1928), "Hindu missionary" Krishnaprasanna Sen (1849–1902), and some others, who tried to use Western methods of substantiation for Hindu religions and traditions. Three forenamed thinkers presented their vision of Hinduism in critical polemics with orthodox revivalist and life positions; their "discovery of Hinduism" included conservative aspects of vindication and defense of native religions along with their conscious of necessity to transform actual religious practices according to the new times.

The most conservative of them was Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, who talked about Hinduism as a great and superior religion: "I shall never say that Hinduism is in a fallen state. In truth, if the Himalayan Mountains were to fall, you could not bolster them up with reeds" (as cited in Raychaudhuri, 1988, p. 35). The thinker was strong defender of Brahmanic culture and values in the core and ground of Hinduism. Bhudeb connects the origin of native religion with ancient Aryans; the latest and modern Hindus are their inheritors. Created by great rishis, the religion of Hinduism "has saved ... from the contamination of sins for thousands of years, preserved in every Hindu throughout this vast land of India some sense of national unity by actions as steps towards firm social cohesion, introduced the happy and pure family system of the Hindus, achieved in effect the knowledge of God, the ultimate end of all spiritual quest and rendered the Hindus more selfless God-fearing and convinced of a live hereafter" (p. 36).

Bhudeb's Hinduism was first and foremost Brahmanism which included both high knowledge of God and high faith and "popular practices"; it was Brahmanism that united all Indian peoples by its social institution and traditions. The thinker rationally explained all traditional norms, institutions, and practices suitable for Indians in their civilization—from child marriage and joint family to caste system (for the analysis of Bhudeb's works see Raychaudhuri, 1988, Ch. 2). Ideal "conservative" and "Brahmanic" image of Hinduism by Bhudeb emphasized the role of Brahmin's culture in integration of variety in people's religious practices and made an impression of their unity under aegis of one authority—sacred and high. Being a Brahmin, Bhudeb continued efforts of his own social stratum to represent "Brahmanic" image of Hinduism.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay: Tree of Hinduism

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay discovered Hinduism in its entirety in his latest creative period, after long period of "secular" social activity as a civil officer, editor, publicist,

author of many novels and social-philosophical works. He began to write intensively on Hinduism in 1880s, indubitable under the influence of meeting with Ramakrishna (Hixon, 2011, pp. 70–79; Sen, 2011, pp. 211–216) along with Western influences of utilitarianism and positivism (Flora, 1993). Bankimchandra presented the concept of Hinduism as all-embracing religion of dharma, which develops in history.

Like Rammohun Roy before him, Bankimchandra reckoned Hinduism based on universal monotheism: “The root of religion, in particular of Hindu religion, is one God. God is in all things; therefore, it is our *dharma* to seek the welfare of all things” (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 191).

In his *Letters on Hinduism*, Bankimchandra answers the question “What is Hinduism?” revealing a number of stereotypes and controversies hidden by words “Hinduism” and “Hindu”. These terms have foreign origin, because the religion of natives in India “had no name”, and for them the “whole life was religion”. “To the Hindu, his relations to God and his relations to man, his spiritual life and his temporal life are incapable of being ... distinguished. They form one compact and harmonious whole, to separate which into its component parts is to break the entire fabric” (Sen, 2011, p. 299)¹. Along with manifold errors, the name “Hinduism” has “a good deal of truth”, as “all the various religions to which the name is appeared have at least two general features—firstly, they are all sprung from a common source, and therefore hold many doctrines in common; secondly, they are all supported by sacred scriptures in Sanskrit” (Sen, 2011, p. 301). Intending to reject or correct the erroneous interpretations of Hinduism, Bankimchandra creates his own image of it.

Hinduism for him is natural and historical religion, that developed from primitive elementary forms to its perfect form. Bankimchandra uses the tree metaphor to describe the origin of Hinduism and its development stages. They are the seed and root of the tree in early primitive society, in Vedic age, when people worshipped gods “symbolized one of the other natural elements like the sky, the sun, fire, or the river” (Sen, 2011, p. 64). Origin of Hinduism was connected with a faith of ancient Aryans, who had conquered non-Aryan races of India; the later embraced the religion of conquerors. Being the product of nature, with no founder, religion “sprang out of the necessities of primitive life and grew with the growth of culture” (p. 313). The tree of Hinduism grows from Vedic religion, where the source of eternal dharma has been formed. The writer says, “Vedic Hinduism lies at the root of Hinduism but it is not the tree. The tree is a separate entity by itself. This tree has crisscrossing branches, rich foliage, flowers, and fruits, none of which may be bound in the roots. However, so long as we lack familiarity with the roots, a proper understanding of the tree may elude us” (p. 63).

The tree metaphor aids to represent historical evolution of Hinduism; Bankimchandra speaks about five stages. The four of them belong to Vedic Hinduism; firstly, primitive man formed his first religious beliefs; secondly, a will and consciousness was ascribed to material objects; thirdly, early human communities began to worship natural elements (sun, moon, wind, storm, etc.), and then “the Vedic Hindus were quick to arrive at a true knowledge of God ... Later Vedic religion was fairly advanced, with

¹ Soon after, in 1896, Swami Vivekananda would repeat the same affirmations: “In India religion is the one and only occupation of life” (1998–2002, Vol. III, p. 107. See also pp. 146, 152, 177, 220).

the adoration of one Supreme God as its central principle” (Sen, 2011, pp. 71–72). It was Upanishadic Brahman. That monotheism is a result of evolution of natural religion; and later, at the fifth stage, Puranic Hinduism with religious history appeared and arrived to perfect state. Discovered by ancient Hindus, Impersonal God could not be an ideal for human, because “worship of him ... is fruitless; worship of him whom I call the Personal God is fruitful” (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 165). He connected the state of perfection in Hinduism with knowledge of Absolute’s essence and pious devotion to a personal god. Heroes of Mahabharata and Ramayana (Janaka, Vasishtha, Yudhishtira, Krishna), as well as Puranic gods, became the ideals of a virtuous man or a god in human form (pp. 166–167). This perfect Hinduism for Bankimchandra is the best of world religion and national religion. Comparing Hinduism to other religions, before all Christianity and Islam, Bankimchandra concluded, that the former in many aspects was “superior to other religion” and “the best religion in the world” (p. 176). He believed Hinduism united all high values and best aspects of religion as such.

Bankimchandra understood Hinduism as “protean in its form”: there are monotheistic and polytheistic, pantheistic, dualistic, and even atheistic (Buddhism) Hinduism, as well as ritualistic and non-ritualistic, ascetic, and sensual, human one of Vaishnavas and cruel and blood-thirsty of Shaivas and Saktas, liberal and illiberal one, etc. The entire Hinduism integrates all its forms of them on some basis—“certain fundamental principles which all accept, and which ... alone is Hindu religion” (Sen, 2011, pp. 307–308). These principles are dharma (its essence Bankimchandra defines as culture), philosophical essence (*tattwajñāna* – knowledge of Supreme God and human soul), devotion to God, and moral life. Based on the fundamentals, every form of worship is accepted in Hinduism because God “can accept worship offered in every form” (p. 197). The morals of Hinduism were explained first of all in Bhagavadgita by Krishna: therefore, Bankimchandra described the essence of religion as *chittashuddhi*—moral purification of human soul through control of the senses, charity, good will, and adoration of God (pp. 176–178). Thus, Hinduism was postulated as ethical religion, comparable in this aspect with Christianity.

The image of Hinduism by Bankimchandra presents the native religion as a historically constituted religion with common base and grounds, all-embracing and all-encompassing spiritual wholeness with strong ethical and monotheistic vectors in the core and colourful variety at its periphery with peaceful co-existence and “all-happiness producing” for native peoples and even tribes (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 170).

Swami Vivekananda: Discovery of Vedantic Hinduism

Similar way of interpretation was continued by Swami Vivekananda with some peculiarities; to him the essence of Hinduism was the Vedanta. But it was his conception of Hinduism that gained the broad world resonance and meaning for its perception and interpretation, because the thinker addressed to both Indians and foreign audience, including scientists. For Western public (in Europe and the USA) Vivekananda created a “presentational” image with strong vindication component of religion and culture tradition, whereas for Indians the philosopher delivered critics of real Hindu inhuman and restricting practices along with the stress on highest truths of native religion.

Like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Vivekananda calls the term “Hinduism” “fashionable” but loan word, it does not express the essence of native religion. Therefore, he offers another term “Vaidikas” or, the better “Vedantists”, because this one marks the essence of religion in the Vedas, delivered in the Upanishads (Vivekananda, 1998–2002, Vol. III, p. 120)—eternal relations between man and God. Vivekananda says, “We want to use the word ‘Vedantist’ instead of ‘Hindu’ ” (Vol. III, pp. 118–121, 173), but he himself continues to use terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” in speeches and writings. Vivekananda also calls Hinduism “religion of a book” like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—“the oldest are the Vedas of the Hindus” (p. 118). First of all, Hinduism has general ground—the essential principles: faith in Brahman (God); the law of *Karma* which is understood as human responsibility for all causes and own fate to reach freedom and God; and the possibility of knowing the Highest through the human soul (pp. 123–126). The goal of Hinduism is to attain freedom (*mukti*), to overcome death and suffering, and attain eternal bliss. Moreover, Hinduism understands and accepts in itself different ways to God, if all and everyone acknowledges the Upanishad of Vedas (p. 120), its eternal spiritual principles. In the same manner as Bankimchandra, Vivekananda speaks about Impersonal and Personal God, and connects the first one with ethics (“it makes human strong”), and second one with love (*bhakti*) (p. 130). Impersonal God is very difficult for common believers, that is why ancient *rishis* revealed to all Indian people the way to worship as great personages as Incarnations, or incarnation of Personal God. From this follows the worship to Krishna, Rama, Sita as well as philosophers Shankara, Ramanuja, etc. (pp. 251, 257, 263–264, 267).

Consequently, all multiplicity of traditions, cults, and sects—from Brahmanic and Puranic faiths to a number of local cults (“folk Hinduism”) are united by Vivekananda in great “Vedantic” Hinduism. He said about all-pervaded influence of the Vedanta and urged Hindus to “think the Vedanta, ... live in the Vedanta, ... breath the Vedanta and ... die in the Vedanta” (p. 323),—even unconsciously and even quarreling each other. He compared Hinduism with “mighty *banyan*” (the tree metaphor!), growing from the Upanishads:

Whatever system in India does not obey the Upanishads cannot be called orthodox, and even the systems of the Jains and the Buddhists have been rejected from the soil of India only because they did not bear allegiance to the Upanishads. Thus the Vedanta, whether we know it or not, has penetrated all the sects in India, and what we call Hinduism ... has been throughout interpenetrated by the influence of the Vedanta. (p. 323)

In comparison with eternal and unchangeable principles of Vedanta, various religious practices, customs, institutions, and even the texts (Smritis, Puranas, Tantras, etc.) changed and must be changed from time to time and—if contradict with the Vedanta authority—must be rejected (Vivekananda, 1998–2002, Vol. III, pp. 120–121). Also Vivekananda repeatedly says that Hinduism is based on the eternal principle and has no person as a founder. But there are a multitude “startling, gigantic, impressive, world-moving persons”, “almost innumerable”, who again and again open eternal truth of the Vedas and appear in the world to save good, to destroy immorality and evil. These are *rishis* and modern sages, as well as so-called incarnations of God (pp. 248, 249); they

define the specificity of “living religion”. These were persons who developed Hinduism as religion of love, renunciation, rejection of egotism, “work against evil”, and serving for all creatures in the world (pp. 133–134, 142–143).

The image of Hinduism created by Vivekananda is built around some key ideas:

- The Vedanta has theoretically taken the place of Brahmanism (or “the Great tradition”) in Hinduism, and priority of its spiritual meanings allows to integrate any of possible religious ways and forms.

- Hinduism as based on the Vedanta is true religion, because “it teaches that God alone is true, that this world is false and fleeting” and “it teaches renunciation and stands up with the wisdom of ages” (p. 180). Verity of religion along with its eternity and universality allow to represent Hinduism as one of the world religions, as well as religion of love: its adepts demonstrated to all peoples that “love alone is the fittest thing to survive and not hatred, that it is gentleness that has the strength to live on and to fructify, and not mere brutality and physical force” (Vivekananda, 1998–2002, Vol. III, p. 188).

- In opposition to the traits of other religions—with theirs proselytism and missionary—Hinduism is outlined by the philosopher as tolerant and peaceful religion of peoples who never aspired to conquer other countries and political greatness, but show sympathy for different religions and “have built and are still building churches for Christians and mosques for Mohammedans” (pp. 114–115, 186–187, 274).

Vivekananda’s interpretation of Hinduism is theoretical and “ideal” one, but he also was a strong and impartial critic of real traditional Hindu religion, especially in its social aspects—caste system, customs, superstitions, and prejudices, such as untouchability, ritual pureness, gender inequality, etc. However, his interpretation integrates in general terms all diversity of modern Hinduism and presents practical and formal differences as tolerable and acceptable for the unity of Indian peoples.

At the same time, other Bengal intellectuals thought and researched different aspects of Indian civilization in connection with Hindu traditions. For example, Surendranath Banerjee, who delivered a lecture *The Study of Indian History*, substantiated that “Hindu has a most glorious past” (Banerjee, 1970, p. 235). His friend and colleague Rameshchandra Dutt wrote a lot of books on Indian ancient history, where he tried to represent historical development of Hinduism. And that was his special contributions to Bengal discovery of Hinduism and creation of its image as a system of universal meanings and values, the core of social life and culture as well as the foundation of religious and cultural identity.

Conclusion

The results of discovery of Hinduism by Bengal intellectuals could be summed up as follows.

The first result is an intellectual “gathering” of native religion under the name “Hinduism” around high and deep faith in both Impersonal and Personal God and along with sacred knowledge of ancient Vedas. Different traditions were gathered together in the general spirit of aspiration to Highest reality and are thought as the unity in diversity.

The second result is the representation of knowledge of Hinduism by its different followers from chiefly heterodox positions (those of reformers, Neo-Hindu, Neo-Vedantic, etc.). The knowledge includes the Vedas and other scriptures as source and origin of religion, the interpretation of its historical evolution and diversity of faiths as well as the description of philosophy and religious ways and practices. Moreover, the knowledge is the systematization of Indian religions under the idea of general spiritual tradition (Vedic, Brahmanic, Vedantic, etc.).

The third result is creating of image of Hinduism—well-balanced, all-embracing, tolerant, accepting all faiths and beliefs in a sort of original harmony. The image greatly affected the Hindu community; for Western researchers it became one of the approaches to study the religions of India.

The fourth result is generated by the created image of Hinduism; in consciousness and thought certain specific “imaginary community” (Benedict Anderson) has been constructed—the religious “Hindu community”, notwithstanding real—local and regional, practical and theoretical, elitist and popular—differentiation of religion in the Subcontinent. “Imaginary Hindu community” had the potential to be affiliated and identified as “Hindu” for vast number of people in India, and also to be distinguished from another large community of Indian Muslims.

Discovery of Hinduism in Bengal thought represents the history of thought which tries “to gather” India in religious, social, and cultural spheres for public consciousness and mind. There are a lot of consequences of the discovery. First, it was a presentation—chiefly positive and vindicating—of Hinduism for compatriots and the outer world, especially for the West. Secondly, the image became an artificial base for religious and cultural identity as “Hindu” for individuals, groups, communities of India. Thirdly, the “Bengal image” of Hinduism became influential in philosophical (in Neo-Vedantism by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Surendranath Dasgupta) and religious (Aurobindo Ghose, M. K. Gandhi) thought, addressing to its high meanings. Fourthly, it is possible to trace the influence of the conception on the idea of “Hindu nation” and the later development of religious nationalism in India. Fifthly, the positive perception and impression of Hinduism as a tolerant, harmonic, and all-embracing religion is largely the merit of Bengal religious thinkers from Rammohun Roy to Swami Vivekananda, who from the inside have discovered, gathered, and explained their native religion to Indians themselves and to the rest of the world.

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