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## KRISHNA MOHAN BANERJEA AND HIS APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY AND THE ANCIENT INDIC SCRIPTURES

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### Abstract:

The persona of Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813-1885) presents a unique intellectual endeavour regarding the interplay between religious ideology, colonialism and theology. In the various narratives and debates in relation to the changes which took place in the field of social-religious reforms and cultural transformation in colonial Bengal, the portrayal of Rev. Banerjea with regard to his preoccupation with questions on the literary and historic connections between Christianity and the Hindu faith has been a subject which has been very infrequently addressed. What has been mostly discussed is his association with a host of pioneering intellectual reformers centred on the literary coterie of the Eurasian poet Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, who were later collectively addressed in the local-Bengali journalistic milieu as 'Young Bengal'. Banerjea's role as the public face of this group was conspicuous and it was especially based on his ardent and persistent pleas for urgent reforms in the Hindu society.

**Key Words:** *Christianity; Colonialism; Indic religions; Native pastor; Western education.*

### 3.0: INTRODUCTION:

This paper is an attempt to situating the Christological works of Rev. Banerjea in which he addresses questions about the veracity of the prevalence of any kind of native Christian literary tradition, springing largely from the literary creations of the first or the second generation

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Indian converts, under the overarching aegis of the colonial presence.<sup>†</sup> It goes without saying that what is being questioned is whether a definite and specific ‘Christian literary tradition’ flourished and reached its apogee during the heyday of colonialism. Again, the question of the colonial connection is pivotal because the main protagonists addressed here drew their sources of intellectual, historical as well as ideological sustenance largely from the very historical fact of the colonial connection and the appurtenances of the colonial project.

Moreover, what is also examined is how Reverend Banerjea beheld his own role as a cultural mediator who could further the process of enabling people from educated backgrounds embrace the Christian creed, that is, the enunciation of his role as an indigenous pastor engaged in writing polemical tracts for the furtherance of his missionary role. But on the other hand, the historical and theological studies of Rev. Banerjee, and the very nature and diversity of the themes addressed in his corpus make it somewhat difficult to render all of his published works under a monolithic literary framework. Such a rich diversity of works also provides numerous opportunities to explore the alterations, transformations and subsequent refinements of his views and thus, also enables one to probe the literary outpourings of a native ecclesiastical personality on different themes, ranging from sermons preached by him in his capacity as a Bishop to historical works, commentaries on and translations of various Indic scriptures, journalistic articles, as well as works advocating social reforms.

The main questions that have been addressed in this chapter are as follows:

*Firstly*, it aims to examine Rev. K.M. Banerjea’s engagement with Christianity, both in the realm of literary culture and as a source of spiritual religiosity and see how Christianity could act as a beneficial force towards reformation of the Hindu society. In undertaking this, this article takes up for analysis those writings from his corpus that were specifically written as a pastor of the Church of England.

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<sup>†</sup> It ought to be made very clear that the use of the term ‘native Christian tradition’ does not here, in the present context, point to the existence of the miscellaneous peculiar customs of Christian peoples inhabiting the subcontinent prior to the establishment of British colonial regime, such as the indigenous Goanese under Portuguese rule. What is specifically alluded to here is whether Hindu converts to Christianity (in this instance, the case of Reverend K.M. Banerjea) had or were willing to envisage any intellectual engagement with Christianity after their conversions without completely abandoning the religious mores of the cultures which they had left and relinquished.



*Secondly*, this article will explore Rev. Banerjea's intellectual engagement with the ancient Indic scriptures, both in the form of writing commentaries on them and also in the realm of translations and philosophical dialogues, coupled with historical and theological studies. Here, we will also analyze his endeavours towards the enunciation of a viable and variable intellectual and spiritual *modus vivendi* that would basically bridge the hurdles which potential converts from Hindu society faced.

The invocation of Christianity in colonial Bengal obviously brings in its train the ever-present actuality of colonial political and economic domination. Here, Rev. Banerjea tries to take a nuanced middle path whereby the colonial presence could be accommodated at least on the theological grounds because of the favourable platform that it presents for Indians to seek recourse to the Christian faith without any kind of coercion and gratuitous persuasions 'from above.'

### **3.1: SERMONS AS NARRATIVES**

In his role as a Christian missionary, Reverend Banerjea was very acutely aware of the vagaries and obstacles that the missionaries had to face in preaching the words of the Gospel to the indigenous population in the context of colonialism. The position of an indigenous convert, who also gets involved in missionary activities, begins to get ambiguous because often his ecclesiastical duties come into conflict with those wielding political authority, both in India and Britain. Also, Rev. Banerjea had to navigate his way with abundant caution in respect to his European superiors in the ecclesiastical realm whose understanding of the needs and mentality of potential converts seemed to vary with those of Reverend Banerjea. His case is quite unique because he came into the fold of Christianity from the intellectual realm of rational thought and action.

The humiliations and social obstacles which he had suffered in his youth, having left Hindu College in 1829 as a student, and then as a teacher (in Pataldanga High School), under the supervision of David Hare, made Banerjea intimately aware of the sheer rigidity on the question of caste and its alleged loss and the consequent social ostracism which any misdemeanour might lead to in Hindu society, especially acting contrary to the dictates of caste-prescribed duties and regulations. His consumption of beef and his friends' misbehaviour in throwing bones into a neighbouring house in 1831 was deemed an especially heinous offence for a Kulin Brahman and he was expelled from his home. After Derozio died in 1831,



he came into contact with Rev. Alexander Duff who made a profound impression on the young Banerjea, then still in his formative years, which led him to the study of Christianity and its doctrines, thereby finally leading to his baptism on October 17, 1832 and he joined the Anglican Church in 1833. He worked in the Church Missionary Society's School at Amherst Street, as Superintendent from 1833 to 1840, where he was followed by Rev. James Long. He was ordained as Deacon in 1836, and on 27 September 1839 he was appointed Minister of the Christ Church, the first Church to be placed under the charge of an Indian first generation converted clergyman.

This kind of experience gave Rev. Banerjea a firm grip of the problems which western-educated young men faced, that is, relapse into the grips of irreligion and rampant atheism, which consequently made them scoff at all religious traditions, irrespective of their merits and demerits. His approach was two fold; to offer a spiritual cure for their atheism which they had acquired as a result of their education and also to convince such educated young men to accept Christianity by means of polemical discourses which harped upon and touched the various aspects of indigenous Indic religions and interestingly, Islam also (Banerjea. K.M. 1866:20-1)). Thus, by providing a proper path in which the best of the ethical principles of both indigenous religions and Christianity could be combined, Rev. Banerjea largely aimed to establish Christianity on a firmer intellectual basis while also severing the stigma of its foreign origins, which often acted as a hindrance to those who sought conversion and spiritual dialogue.

In a lecture delivered on Friday, October 27, 1865, titled *The Peculiar Responsibility of Educated Natives – and Their Duty Thoughtfully to Enquire into the Christian Scheme of Salvation*, Rev. Banerjea addressed 'educated young men' from the Hindu community. Thus it delved upon Rev. Banerjee, to deliver the very first lecture from the series, where he delineated about the nature of Christianity and the reasons for which educated Indians should devote themselves to its study (Banerjea, 1866).

The entire series of lectures were to be delivered by the different members of the Anglican Clergy in Calcutta, Archdeacon Pratt ('The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Unity', November 3, 1865), Rev. J. Vaughn ('Redemption', November 10, 1865), Rev. J. Welland ('Holiness', November 17, 1865), Rev. T. Skelton ('Prayer', November 24, 1865), Rev. S. Dyson ('The Resurrection of the Body'), along with Rev. Banerjea himself. What is important to note is that none of the speakers, apart from Rev. Banerjea, lay any special emphasis



regarding why non-Christians should direct their attention and conscience towards Christianity but rather primarily dwelt on different aspects of Christian theology and their importance.

The importance of Krishna Mohan Banerjea's sermon lies in many of its different aspects. For instance, Banerjea clearly tries to conjoin what he terms as 'western education' with the Christian faith. Of course, there might be anomalies involved but Banerjea's approach is primarily to contrast and lay bare what he calls the very pitiful state of pre-colonial learning with the varied advantages of western education.

He delves into the lack of historical exactitude in the major works of Sanskrit literature and how arcane and age-old prejudices had largely made pre-colonial indigenous systems of learning (both Indic and Islamic) sterile and incapable of attaining any degree of rigorous scientific precision. He feels these systems cannot free themselves from the deleterious consequences of the sheer moral turpitude of the authors and practitioners of that learning, in which absurdities were accepted unthinkingly and without critical inquiry as facts, and implicitly believed with rigid stolidity and blind adherence (Banerjea, 1866: 5-6). He states that by the very virtue of having received a western education, it becomes incumbent upon every recipient of that education to inquire into the Christian faith, that is, to make a study of the Christian faith and then compare it to his own indigenous religious beliefs and customs. The education itself can act as a catalyst in weeding out primeval and atavistic superstitions.

But where does the point of convergence lie between western education and the kind of salvation promised in the Christian faith? How can the Christian creed and a largely secular mode of education be inter-related, so much so, that no less than a native ecclesiastical personage endeavours to exhort his audience to consider such a line of thinking in favourable terms?<sup>‡</sup> Also, he extols the alleged virtues associated with the doctrinal tenets of Christianity as being open to critical historical enquiry and asserts that it is absolutely free of any kind of imposed dogmatism. Moreover, as he further narrates, the main prophets and apostles' activities and their missionary labours can be verified historically (from the New Testament). He describes the advantages that a western-educated Indian possesses over his traditional indigenously educated counterpart in the following terms:

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<sup>‡</sup> It might seem that Banerjea preferred Christianity over other religions because of its western affiliations. Yet, after all, every religion contains a set of dogmas which has to be believed implicitly and which are not always subjected to rational enquiry.



*An educated Hindu then means one who has been instructed in the literature, science, and history of Europe. Mark now his peculiar advantages – advantages not possessed by the rest of his countrymen. The most learned of his forefathers and predecessors knew no country in the world but their own home, nor of any other period of time but that in which they themselves lived. Their geography was but the topography of the towns and villages which they had occasion to frequent, and their history consisted of certain legends of India, in which their poets had tried their skill in versification, and which hireling and mendicant bards recited in the courts of their princes. Their knowledge of science was lower than is exhibited in the smallest schools of our day. Their literary recreations consisted in solution of different grammatical problems, and in the jingle of words without ideas. Not that they were wholly devoid of the active exercises of the imagination, and many a poet was a host in himself. Nor were their conceptions of moral good to be set at nought. Brilliant ideas, lofty views, elevated sentiments are interspersed in their writings, but there is neither harmony nor philosophical consistency in their thoughts. With the same breath they would give utterance to ideas which the most enlightened Christian would be ashamed to adopt, and disgrace themselves with expressions which the most besotted buffoon of our day would scorn to use (Banerjea, 1866:4).*

Explaining with acuity the shortcomings of the generations preceding colonialism and their lamentable state of intellectual and moral stature and development, Rev. Banerjea expostulates about the benefits that western education has conferred upon its recipients. He states that knowledge gained from the study of History, geography and the Sciences at once elevates educated men from their unlettered counterparts, elevation in the sense of an expansion of the conception of the world and a broadening of the mind with the imbibing of a catholicity of attitude towards any object and subject of enquiry and investigation, which Rev. Banerjea alleges were completely absent in the time of their forefathers.

The study of the rational sciences has dispelled from their minds the viability of any supernatural entities and superstitions and thereby a moral vacuum has been created, which if not filled by Christianity, would be largely subsumed by atheism. And it was precisely at this



point at which the entire effort of Rev. Banerjea was predicated: To direct the minds of his audience to seek Christianity and accept its precepts, in which lay their spiritual salvation.

The rational refutation of indigenous religious traditions does not necessarily imply that Christianity also becomes immune to any kind of critical enquiry or that it is above any rational critique. But rather, Christianity is something which can be made compatible with a rational mind due to the historical verifiability of its protagonists, the Apostles, the Church fathers and the various Ecumenical Councils whose names, dates and places were well documented and which thus flourished in the realm of the real world unlike the ethereal and mythological characters in Indic religious traditions bearing no relation to historical time and period.

Rev. Banerjea is also cautious about another aspect of the inculcation of religion on the part of the educated young men. By means of their education, they might be expected to purge from their ancestral creeds those elements that were incompatible with reason and ethics and thereby enunciate some kind of reform within their own religions instead of adhering to Christianity. He identified the doctrines of 'Brahmoism' as belonging to such a category and therefore admonishes his audience about the pitfalls associated with that creed:

*I may here be told that educated Hindus have not been neglectful of the concerns of their souls – that, though forced out of the strongholds of idolatry by the disclosures of physical science, they have found a resting place in Brahmoism – that there is nothing in the education they have received which can make this new position untenable – and that until Brahmoism can be disproved, they are not called upon to investigate the claims of Christianity except as a matter of philosophical curiosity. Brahmoism is a vague term and the system indicated by it is equally undefined. It would be childish to quarrel with a name, although even a name may often be deceptive both to those who assume it and to the community at large.*

*And the system indicated by it is clearly undefined. As to its positive doctrines regarding the existence of a Supreme Being, the immortality of the soul, the duty of devotion and of personal piety, the Brahmos can hold nothing more than we ourselves hold. But as Christianity is a fact in authentic history, we maintain that their system requires to be supplemented by what will appear to*



*be important additional truths on calm enquiry into the Christian scheme of salvation. As to the negative part of their system, denying the possibility of Revelation or maintaining the all sufficiency of intuition, I must hope that they do not seriously countenance such a doctrine. In the denial of the possibility of revelation is involved an idea which I hope the Brahmos detest no less than ourselves – an idea which sets limits to God’s power and denies his omnipotence. Why should the prerogative of the Supreme Being be thus curtailed? (Banerjea, 1865:18)*

What results from this kind of approach, refuting any religious doctrine that rivals Christianity, is that the latter is held to be at the zenith of divine truth while the former may be seen to still be in the formative stages. In other words, Christianity to Rev. Banerjea, is a creed which is capable of satisfying the dilemmas and scruples of an educated Indian whose mind has been exposed to the rational and scientific thought emanating from Europe as a consequence of the colonial connection. What makes Rev. Banerjea’s ecclesiastical outreach even more impressive is his exhortation to the adherents of Islam in the concluding section of the address. His declamation to Muslims to accept the revelatory mission of Jesus Christ, when he declaims on the rejection of the New Testament on the part of the Muslims, whose scriptures enjoin that the New Testament revered by the Christians is some kind of falsification of the true revealed scripture of Prophet Jesus (or Injil) (Banerjea, 1865:20-1). Also he vehemently protests the rejection by Muslims of Jesus Christ being the ‘son of God’ and of their admitting unto him the stature of a prophet who did not die at the cross but was rather whistled away to safety at the moment of his being crucified. As he exclaims to his audience,

*I say then to educated Mahometans, let the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ and of the New Testament by your prophet be duly pondered in your minds. You cannot entertain the puerile idea of the New Testament being a forged Injil. If then you follow out the principles on which your prophet, certainly praised as a great reformer of his day, - addressed your predecessors, while Pagans, at Mecca or Medina, you cannot with the light you have received from History halt where he halted, or continue in the evidently inconsistent position of acknowledging the Injil, and yet denying its peculiar dogmas. Mahomet could not deny the past revelations of God, but the gross polytheism by which he was*



*surrounded led him to deny the most important doctrines of the revelations. You may under better auspices press forward and supply his deficiencies. You may complete the great work of religious revival by restoring those doctrines, and contend for the real teaching of Hazrat Isa without detracting from his majesty and glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth, as the Injil saith. (Banerjea, 1865:18)*

By this means of making overtures to different non-Christian adherents of other religions, Rev. Banerjea pleads for an inclusive approach to other religions by which what is meant is that apart from the issues of idolatry, other religions (in this instance, Brahmanical faith and Islam) do possess their own intrinsic values peculiar unto themselves, which Christians can and ought to admire and cherish but only through the adherence to Christianity can the adherents of these other religious traditions seek their salvation because only Christianity complements those religious traditions to their ultimate fruition.

Rev. Banerjea asserts that adherence to Christianity does not necessarily mean abandonment of their indigenous ties but rather the contrary. He states:

*I call upon all educated Hindoos to seriously consider the claims of Christianity. I do not ask them to leave their homes or their relatives. I know Christianity itself demands no such sacrifices. We do not want proselytes – we do not ask any one to change his residence and come to our premises – but we desire conversions – we wish that men should rely on Christ for their salvation and adopt the means of grace he has recommended. There is nothing in these acts which are contradictory to the ordinary social rules of Hinduism. (Banerjea, 1865:19)*

This extraordinary statement on the part of Rev. Banerjea brings forth the fundamental dichotomy that he enunciated between proselytes (or proselytization) and conversion. He makes it very clear that he is not interested in seeking random and wayward converts who fall in for Christianity just out of its novelty or for any other kind of mercenary motives and therefore resulting in any formal baptism for anyone from the Hindu society who intends to become a Christian with non-religious motives but rather what is expected of any neo-Christian is a change of heart and firm belief in the effulgent mercy of God and the salvation promised to all men through his intercessor, Jesus Christ. Herein lay a kind of subtle flexibility



especially concerning the loosening of rigid restrictions which would encourage even more educated Indians to seek the scheme of salvation proffered through the Christian faith.

Rev. Banerjea also dwells upon the question of the structuring of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Anglican Church, especially in India, where constant inter-faith dialogues with the non-Christian religious groups becomes even more necessary so as to gain adherents for the Christian faith. In a sermon entitled “A Sermon Preached at St. John’s cathedral, Calcutta at an Ordination Holden on Ascension Day, preached on May 13, 1847, Rev. Banerjea underlines an approach towards the proper steps which an ideal pastor should resort to for evangelising and preaching in a continent like ‘India’ where Indic and Islamic religions held sway over the minds of the people. The chief question here is three fold that is, *firstly*, concerning the issue of the ordination of pastors, ministers, presbyters and other ecclesiastical hierarchs of the Church. The reasons are not only for greater facilitation of the spreading of the tenets of the gospels and preaching but also so that there be a constant endeavour towards exhorting the faithful towards adhering to the path and the principles and precepts enunciated by Christ (Banerjea, 1847:2-3). At one point, Banerjea stresses the disadvantages of preaching sermons in the English language because of the disadvantages it poses to the laity under his care as pastor.

*Secondly*, the qualities of an ideal pastor are emphasised. The significance of the sermon lies in its definition of what constitutes a Christian pastor. Is his duty incongruent with the active cares and chores of life? Is it synonymous with mere passive contemplation? Here, Rev. Banerjea’s answer is that the duty of a pastor cannot be separated from the actuality surrounding his person and that of the proselytes under his ecclesiastical jurisdiction. He asserts vehemently:

*A Christian minister is, by his very profession, an ambassador, and a sworn vassal of Christ. The enemies of the cross, ever ready to attack religion through the weak side of its professors, will eagerly ascribe his personal mistakes and failings to the truth with which he is entrusted. He must, therefore, live and die for his Master. (Banerjea, 1847:5)*

The duty of spreading the word of the Gospels, to him, should never be made to fade or get sidelined into abeyance because it is the sacred duty of the pastor to rescue the souls of the



heathen from spiritual damnation but without resorting to any kind of vain and profane adumbrations which would serve to offend the sensibilities of the heathen rather than incline them to the faith of Christ. The ideal pastor, he stressed, must always be earnest towards instructing the heathen into the doctrines enunciated in the Gospels. Moreover, his demeanour and conduct must be in no way venal and due to the sacerdotal character of his office, there ought not to be any minutest farthing of blemish in both his private and public conduct. At one point, Rev. Banerjea also delves upon the necessity of maintaining an egalitarian and impartial plenitude regarding preaching. (Banerjea, 1847:7)

*Thirdly*, and crucially, he delineates his approach towards the work of evangelisation among his own countrymen, who he says are mired in the recessive abyss of vain and vague idolatry and other pernicious religious practices from the Christian point of view. He states the nature of the ideal countenance and mentality of the pastor in this regard:

*Here we are surrounded by millions who know not the gospel and acknowledge not our ministerial authority. It would betray an equal departure from the spirit of Christianity, were we either to reflect without emotion on the spiritual desolation around us, or allow ourselves to be betrayed into intemperate language and supercilious conduct towards the nation we desire to convert. The example of St. Paul during his stay at Athens should be our model.*<sup>§</sup>

Moreover, the pastor, he held, should not get swayed over to idolatry due to the often refined literatures which often gets intertwined into its baggage enjoining devotion to the idols to votaries of heathenism. Here, one can envisage an apparent tension brewing within the conscience of the native pastor regarding the affirmation or repudiation of his own ancestral religious and cultural heritage. Banerjee's allusion to Socrates, Euripides and Phidias can also be obliquely reduced to his own subsequent approach to the various Indic/Hindu scriptures which he drew upon. At this stage, such a kind of ambivalence does not arise and Banerjee grandiloquently proclaims that the basic Christian doctrines cannot ever be superseded in favour of the literary and artistic creations of the pre-Christians period of classical antiquity and also the existing idolatry around. Moreover, in no way should the pastor express or

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<sup>§</sup> Banerjea, 1847: 9. Indeed, to further highlight the kind of conduct which Rev. Banerjea expects of his fellow pastors is to remain completely unaffected by rampant heathenish idolatry and always strive to bring the idolaters unto the path of Christ and preaching the gospels unto them at every opportune moment, as St. Paul did when he admonished the Athenians about the worship of 'the unknown God', which greatly had scandalised St. Paul.



display any iconoclastic fury or misdirected zeal and thereby offend his would-be proselytes but rather strive to work patiently and strive to inculcate the teachings of the gospels into the bosoms of the unconverted because, after all, the primary and foremost task of the pastor is to convert the unconverted and guide them to strive towards the path of Christianity (Banerjea, 1847:10-11).

### 3.2: HINDU – CHRISTIAN DIALOGUES AND ASSIMILATION:

When the question naturally arose about how Rev. Banerjea sought to create a unique path for fruitful dialogue between the adherents of Hinduism and Christianity, it ought to be understood that his approach had two different aspects. First was to gauge the entire process through ‘practical-rationalist’ means, and the second one was to apply a combination of political, historical and theological dialogues so as to steer clear of any kind of inconsistencies. Both the aspects were interspersed with polemical elements which acted as means of refutation and then assimilation of the rival creed’s (in these instances, the Hindu) religious doctrine. Along with the second approach, Rev. Banerjea’s own approach to the ancient Indic past too gets highlighted and because of his preoccupation with the pre-colonial and pre-Islamic period of South Asian history. Within this category also fall those writings of Rev. Banerjea, which dealt with the social questions of his day. Such kinds of depictions of the Indic past can be found manifold times in Rev. Banerjea’s corpus.

The rationalist-practical mode of discourse led Banerjea to write his play, *The Persecuted*, published in 1831, with a unique kind of dedication whereby it was recognised that the primary thrust of the work was mainly regarding unravelling the social ills ravaging Hindu society in then contemporaneous Bengal (Banerjea, 1831).<sup>\*\*</sup> This was Banerjea’s maiden endeavour towards authorship and contains the main thrust of his fervent crusading zeal enunciating urgently needed social reforms. The preface contained the following:

*The author’s purpose has been to compute its excellence by measuring the effects it will produce upon the minds of the rising generation. The inconsistencies and blackness of the influential members of the Hindoo community have been depicted before their eyes.*

<sup>\*\*</sup> The work is dedicated to ‘Hindoo Youths with “sentiments of affection, and strong hopes of their appreciating those virtues and mental energies which elevate man in the estimation of a philosopher”.



*They will now clearly perceive the wiles and tricks of the Brahmins and thereby be able to guard themselves against them* (Banerjea, Preface).

There is a strong autobiographical element in the play, especially in the character of the protagonist, Banylal, whose character represents the epitome of rebellious youth who had drunk deep from western philosophy and whose disdain for their forebear's Hindu customs matched that of their fervent acceptance of western ways of living, thinking and eating. Eating forbidden food was considered to be the highest point of breaking their bonds from Hindu caste orthodoxy and thus a means of liberation. Also, the prospective audience for which Banerjea wrote this play needs to be borne in mind. Again, as he states in the *Preface*,

*“The author cannot help acknowledging the great encouragement he has received from the English community... several gentlemen having each subscribed for, from two to six copies* (Banerjea, Preface).”

This implies that Banerjea wrote for a European/British audience, from whom he wished that his enlightened sentiments of putting an end to the social evils that plagued Hindu society, would be reciprocated.

The character ‘Banylal’ exactly matches its author’s character especially with regard to his fervent zeal in breaking and violating all the taboos held sacred in Hindu society. Despite the virtual absence of any mention of Christianity throughout the play (whether as a force of progress or regression), what is repeatedly emphasised is the need for ‘western education’ which is considered to be a better option for releasing one’s mind from the clutches of atavistic Hindu customs which hinder the mind from delving into any socially progressive thought. The emphasis is on sharp edged application of rationality as means of judging any kind of socio-religious custom or mores before its avowal or rejection.

The play was written at a time when Banerjea had not yet delved deep into the Gospels and hence still considered Christianity at par with any other religion and hence not special. Though Banerjea was to convert within a span of a few years due to a host of unfortunate circumstances, yet the play stands forth as beacon of light and progress and severely castigates the conservative tendencies (especially caste restriction on social fraternisation and on food) in Hinduism which Banerjea fondly hoped to expose and thus dispel.

After his conversion to Christianity, in 1832, Banerjea went on to envisage an intellectual connection between the ancient Brahmanical faith (which he strongly contrasted with the Hindu religious customs of his day) and Christianity so as to ensure a smooth path



which would enable his educated countrymen to seek a mental connection with the Christian faith. Of course, the colonial connection was never overlooked in such endeavours but rather used as a metaphor of approbation because, as Rev. Banerjea stated, it was the apparent security provided by the colonial regime which ensured the peaceful preaching and propagation of Christianity among the non-Christian inhabitants of India. For instance, in his work ‘The relation between Christianity and Hinduism’, he began his efforts towards seeking a common ground of convergence for both the faiths wherein he tried to show that Christianity can be said to be the logical and inevitable culmination to the ancient Brahmanical faith. He presents two propositions to elucidate his point.

The two propositions are:

1. That the fundamental principles of Christian doctrine in relation to the salvation of the world find a remarkable counterpart in the Vedic principles of primitive Hinduism in relation to the destruction of sin, and the redemption of the sinner by the efficacy of Sacrifice, itself a figure of Prajapati, The Lord and Saviour of the Creation, who had given himself up as an offering for that purpose.
2. That the meaning of Prajapati, an appellative, variously described as a *Purusha* begotten in the beginning, as *Viswakarma* the creator of all, singularly coincides with the meaning of the name and offices of the historical reality Jesus Christ, and that no other person than Jesus of Nazareth has ever appeared in the world claiming the character and position of the self-sacrificing *Prajapati*, at the same time both mortal and immortal.” (Banerjea, 1881: 594-5)

This connection between the commonality of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and Prajapati acts as a benchmark to bridge the gap that separates the two creeds. Herein, Rev. Banerjea’s perception of the distant Indic past gets underlined when he remarks about the abuses which crept in the ‘Caste system’ and which contributed to the decay and putrefaction of the ancient Brahmanical social order. He states:

*On one point, however, all Hindus are agreed. They all refer to the ancient Vedas as the sacred oracles of their religion. In justice to all parties, therefore,*



*we must, for the purpose of this discourse, define Hinduism as the religion of the Vedas- the more so, since its records inevitably lead us to the conclusion that both caste and idolatry are later accretions on the simpler system taught in the Vedas. The Mahabharat itself refers expressly to a time when there was no distinction of caste. And as to the idolatrous worship of the popular gods which now prevails, there is not even an inkling of it to be found in the primitive Vedas. And the Veda, when it does in one place refer to the four orders, speaks of them as the creatures of the circumstances. The Brahmins were no other than priests necessary for the celebration of sacrificial rites, and the Vaisyas, the third order, were the laity of Hinduism, the term itself having the same signification. Whereas the second and four orders are expressly declared to have been created afterwards for the defence and menial service of the Commonwealth respectively. To do justice to Hinduism, therefore, we must look at its original form as disclosed in the Vedas both in doctrine and in ritual; the doctrine as laid down dogmatically, and the ritual as perpetuated practically in the illustration of the doctrine. In this respect it must be admitted that inconsistencies will often be discovered; we shall meet with conflicting doctrines and self-contradictory precepts. But we shall endeavour to present as fair a view as truth and justice can allow. We shall eschew pessimism and avoid undue optimism. (Banerjea, 1881:597)*

The task which Rev. Banerjea has undertaken upon himself, here, is twofold. Firstly, to dissociate any trace of idolatry from the pristine Vedas and secondly, find points of even superficial resemblance between the variances of terms so as to render any doctrinal clash between the two religious systems untenable. In retrospect, this endeavour largely attempts to prove, through philological and historical evidences, that Christianity and ‘original and ‘pristine’ Vedic faith had many features in common, especially in terms of sacrificial divine personages, and that there need not necessarily be any kind of antagonism between the adherents of the two creeds because Christianity largely complements and completes and renders into fruition the message of salvation preached in the Vedas.

He explains the very nature of the sacrifice (or rather, self-sacrifice) which Prajapati undertook for expiating and preventing from wrecking the divine order of the demigods, to which *he himself belonged*. As Rev. Banerjea states:



*This idea of the sacrifice of a Divine Person is not found merely in a single isolated passage, in which case it might have been explained away; but in various passages in the different Vedas it finds expression in different ways, sometimes clearly, sometimes obscurely; and, taken as a whole, it appears a prominent doctrine, which gives signification to the frequent exhortations to the performance of sacrificial rites and ceremonies. The same idea throws light on the texts which declare the celebration of sacrifice to be the only way of attaining heaven, after the examples of those quondam mortals, the Devas; and the only goal vessel for getting over the waves of sin, which would otherwise overwhelm mankind. Both the Rig and the Yajur tells us that “when the Devas celebrated the sacrifice, and bound Purusha as the victim, they immolated Him, the sacrifice, on the grass, even him, the Purusha begotten in the beginning. (Banerjea: 1881:600)*

He exclaims to his congregation not to mistake his endeavours as merely another ploy to convert them to Christianity through sly means. But rather, as he writes:

*That the fundamental principles of Christian doctrine in relation to the salvation of the world, find a remarkable counterpart in the Vedic principles of primitive Hinduism relation to the destruction of sin and the redemption of the sinner by the efficacy of sacrifice, itself a figure of Prajapati, The lord and Saviour of the Creation, who had offered himself a sacrifice for that purpose. All that has just been shown appertaining to the self-sacrifice of Prajapati curiously resemble the Biblical description of Christ as God and man, our very Emmanuel, mortal and immortal, who “hath given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour, who by His sacrifice or death hath vanquished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. The Vedic ideal of Prajapati, as we have seen singularly approximately to the above description of our Lord, and therefore remarkably confirms the saving mysteries of Christianity. Christian evangelists when they draw our attention to the claims of Gospel truth do not utter things which can be called strange to Indian ears. Salvation from sin by the death of a saviour,*



*who was God and man himself, was a conception, which had administered consolation to our ancient Rishis, and may yet, in a higher form, and to a greater degree, do the same to all India. I proceed now to discuss the second proposition: "That the meaning of Prajapati, - an appellative, variously described as a Purusha begotten in the beginning, as Viswakarma the Creator of all, - coincides with the meaning of the name and office of historical reality Jesus Christ; and that no other person than Jesus of Nazareth has ever appeared in the world claiming the character and position of the self-sacrificing Prajapati, half mortal and half immortal." The name Prajapati not only means 'the Lord of Creatures' but also 'the supporter, feeder, and deliverer of his creatures. (Banerjea, 1881:600)*

Having established such a framework of rapprochement, Rev. Banerjea goes on to explain the intricacies associated with the term and the principle of 'sacrifice', which acts as a point of convergence between the Prajapati and Jesus Christ but also that the appellation of 'Prajapti' can also be bestowed upon the latter (Jesus Christ) because of the greater efficacy of his sacrifice. The former, in his narrative, only sacrificed himself for the divine order while the latter (Jesus Christ) sacrificed himself for expiating the sins of all mankind, which thereby raises his stature as the figure of moral redemption and a saviour from sins who bestows his grace and benediction upon all irrespective of caste, creed or colour. Rev. Banerjea held out the comparison in these terms:

*Not a single character in the Hindu pantheon, or in the pantheon of any other nation, has claimed the position of one who offered himself as a sacrifice for the benefit of humanity. There is, as all educated persons must know, only one historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, whose name and position correspond to that of the vedic ideal - one mortal and immortal, who sacrificed himself for mankind. By the process of exhaustion you may conclude that Jesus is the true Prajapati, the true Saviour of the world, "the only Name given among men whereby we must be saved". No other character, no other historical personage can satisfy the lineaments of that Vedic ideal. None else has even come forward to claim that identity. I am now in a position to say that the previous truth we have been investigating, though lost in India, is lost to the world. It was in fact a fragment of a great scheme of salvation which was at first*



*practically revealed and has since appeared in its integrity in the person of Jesus Christ – the true Prajapati of the world and in His church – the true Ark of salvation, by which we may escape from the waves of this sinful world.*  
(Banerjea, 1881:604-5)

Rev. Banerjea endeavours to lay the basis for his point regarding the question of reverence for Jesus Christ saying it differs in no way from reverence to Prajapati. Accepting Christianity would in no way cut off educated Hindus from their own indigenous spiritual roots but rather bolster them up by means of a renewed and even more sanctified association of holiness, mercy and grace as revealed through Christ. Educated Hindus would thereby gain manifold by adhering to Christ instead of proffering their adhesion to vain idolatry, which itself find no support in the Vedas:

*As this view of the case is calculated to expand the Christian's regard for Hindus, so it is equally calculated to enhance the responsibility of Hindus in the sight of God. My countrymen, if I have spoken to any purpose at all, I hope, I have shown that your primitive fathers had an insight, doubtless from traditions of some primitive Revelation, into the great mystery of Godliness, which was scarcely less than that of the Jewish seers themselves. The records of that insight had long been locked up, as under a seal, in musty manuscripts, which within the last half of a century, have seen the light under the auspicious patronage of England's crown. You could not have been so responsible while the candle was under a bushel. But since the publication of the Vedas, and since your attention has been called to your responsibility has been enhanced beyond measure. You are responsible before God, who caused to be given, and before the spirits of your primitive fathers, who received and transmitted, those rudiments of truth, which directly or indirectly, lead you to Christ, the Author and finisher of man's faith, and man's salvation, to whom Prajapati of the Vedas unmistakably refers. (Banerjea, 1881:607-8)*



Lest the European readership got scandalised, by such declamations stressing the points of similarities between the Bible and non-Christian scriptures, Rev. Banerjea also hastens to add:

*I have known good Christian people stand aghast at all these ideas. I do not wonder at it. Even in apostolic times, Peter was impeached for consorting with 'men uncircumcised', and evidence had to be adduced before the brethren could hold their peace and glorify God, saying, 'then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance into life.' So long have Hindus been classed with inveterate idolaters and Gentiles, that some may well be amazed at finding germs of Christian mysteries in the heathen Vedas. (Banerjea, 1881:608)*

This approach sought to ease the path for educated Hindus to seek and enquire about Christianity by means of enunciating historical linkages and similarities. Rev. Banerjea further broadened his point of view, in his lecture, 'Claims of Christianity in British India', where there is a three fold approach to exhort educated Hindus to adopt a more flexible and favourable attitude towards Christianity because of the historical verifiability of its main protagonists, apostles, martyrs and all others whose collective contributions led to the making of the Christian creed (Banerjea, 1982:162-3).<sup>††</sup> Again he makes a case for Christianity's similarity with Brahminism by saying:

*A great deal more may be similarly exhibited from the sacred records of the Brahmins in which singular confirmations are found of Christian truth. Many of its essential principles you find imbedded in the ancient Brahminical mind, proving to us, and indeed to the whole world, that the modern objections against Christianity, against the possibility of a Revelation, against the mediatorial office of Christ and other similar points, are neutralised and contradicted by the relics of Brahminical tradition. Brahminism is so far itself an evidence of Christian truth. It is an evidence in the same sense in which the excavations of Pompeii are evidence of old Roman history, and the discoveries of Nineveh of the Assyrian. Christianity, however, is so strongly attested by its own direct evidence that these corroborative facts can add nothing to its truth. (Banerjea, 1982:176)*

<sup>††</sup> Banerjea repeatedly adduces that Christianity always adheres and appeals to 'facts' and not puerile superstitions.



At this juncture, Rev. Banerjea, astonishingly, makes the point that Christianity has no need of any preceding religious tradition for substantiating its own sanctity and truth, and therefore, that the reference is to the archaeological sites. At best, Brahminism paves the path towards the acceptance of Christianity and this is precisely the point which Rev. Banerjea tries to make. He makes the claim that the study of history itself warrants that Christianity be given a fair hearing instead of tacitly ignoring its achievements. As he says in this regard:

*But the reception of European history, itself demands the reception of Christianity. The two are so interwoven that you cannot accept the one and reject the other. You cannot learn the history of the world independent of Christianity. No historian of the world has ever been able to frame his narrative without the light which the Bible casts on the infancy of human society. You cannot go over the history of nations without encountering facts which can only be explained on the supposition of Christian truth (Banerjea, 1982:177-8).*

This astounding claim, about the utter futility of historical enquiry without taking cognizance of Christianity, in the narrative of Rev. Banerjea makes a breaking point of departure from the realm of socio-historical analysis to the realm of polemics because cantering the entire history of the world from the vantage point of Christianity make the very presence and flourishing of other religions quite redundant. Moreover, if the rapid propagation of Christianity over vast regions of the world renders it pivotal then there are plenty of other religions that, since antiquity, also covered vast swathes of lands. Yet Rev. Banerjea is somewhat dismissive of those other religions, especially when he clarifies:

*It may be said that there were at least two other systems which had propagated as rapidly and as widely as Christianity, and yet we do not admit their claims. Buddhism in Eastern Asia and Mahomedanism in Central and West Asia and in the North of Africa had met with signal success in drawing converts. These systems however, propounded theories, not facts. Buddhism, at least, only presented speculative opinions for the contemplations of men, but did not challenge investigation of facts. And Mahomedanism propagated itself by the sword (Banerjea, 1982:171).*



It is here that Rev. Banerjea's dark spots are most revealing. On one fundamental point, Rev. Banerjea's stance is irreconcilable and this is on the question of the validity of non-Christian religions. Even though they do possess different kinds of redeeming features which have proved to be immensely beneficial to its votaries, yet Christianity simply does not belong to merely one among them. Christianity's place is exalted and elevated above other religions. It is not that other religions are merely manifestations of evil or satanic but on the contrary, Christianity acts as the fulfiller of the teachings of other religions (predominantly Brahmanism and also Islam in minor aspects).

Rev. Banerjea always remained a relentless critic of all those practices of Hindu religion which he found to be obnoxious such as Tantra. Similar criticism from Banerjea may also be found in the controversy surrounding the 'Shobha Bazar Rajbari Shradh ceremony' (1882) where W. Hastie, Principle of General Assembly's Institution, launched a vitriolic attack in 'The Statesman' on the participants of the funeral ceremony and lambasted them as acting contrary to the education which they had received and of paying reverence to obscurantist Hindu religious customs which should deter any educated person from following it (Hastie, 1883:178-86).

During the course of the controversy, many kinds of responses came from many Hindus, the most important one being from the revered Bengali author Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who wrote his letters under the pseudonym of 'Ram Chandra'. While Hastie vociferously denounced idolatry in any form and denounced any western educated Hindu who participated in them as committing some kind of heinous sacrilege and violation of moral principles, Chatterjee's responses primarily dwelt upon asking his adversary to peruse for himself the scriptures and their practical applications which Hastie found occasion to condemn (Hastie, 1883:151-2). Rev. Banerjea also participated in this debate by sending his reply in a single letter to the columns of 'The Statesman' on November 10, 1882, where he broached the subject of the religious practices indulged by the practitioners of 'Tantra' and even expressed his horror and contempt for the prevalence of such practices which he considered inimical to all morality and civilization. Ironically, in the course of his letter, he invoked Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel 'Kapalakundala' for exposing the crude barbarities which were practiced by the occult cultivators of 'Tantra.' He wrote,



*I should have thought that under these circumstances there could only be two issues to be argued on –*

*(1) whether the class just defined, was morally wrong in sanctioning and encouraging, by their presence the performance of rites and ceremonies, in which they had no faith whatever;*

*(2) whether the gentleman whom Mr. Hastie had singled out by name all belonged to the condemned class.*

*These, the real issues of the question, were scarcely touched in the controversy that has now closed. In fact, they were almost entirely forgotten in the concluding letter of Ram Chandra, which again, unconsciously to the writer, contained views and terms fully justifying the charge with which Mr. Hastie had commenced the controversy. I believe that there are many Hindus who, inclining to be Vedant, and looking for the Mukti which it promises, have nothing to say to Prakriti, while even those who speak of Purusha and Prakriti, the vast majority is innocent of the worship of any 'illicit union'. If there be worshippers and imitators of 'illicit unions', they must chiefly be in the circles of Mohunts and recluse hermits, whether of the Vaishanava and Shakya sects. Householders, men of repute in society, the better class of the Hindu community, cannot and could not be included in such secret circles....(Banerjea, 1883:183-4).*

Thus, by means of an inclusive approach which embraced all and that appealed to virtue and reason and which could be adopted with good conscience by Christians and Hindus alike, Rev. Banerjea attempts to address both sides of the question with remarkable felicity. Just because a minuscule minority of occultist practice the rituals of 'Tantra' does not necessarily imply that every other Hindu should ascribe and bear the humiliation and of being a follower of such a kind of doctrine.

What, indeed, Rev. Banerjea tried to convey through his writings was the basic and most important caveat of reserving his judgement until the full content of any specific religious doctrine is analysed. This means that before denouncing any non-Christian religious practice, it



had to be studied and examined in all its aspects and inherent subtleties involved so that an even handed inference could be drawn. The way in which he treated Brahmanism as a predecessor and some kind of a quasi proto-Christianity signifies that he is in full sympathy with the creed under examination and is not reluctant to bestow praise and admiration where it is due. This kind of inclusive approach to Brahminism meant that there would be no knee jerk response to its doctrines but rather a reasoned critique from which the practitioners of Christianity can also learn. And most unusually, Rev. Banerjea's outreach to the Muslim community was something of a rarity.

Again, he does not completely negate the role of Prophet Muhamamd in his efforts to remove idolatry from Arabia but rather what he intended regarding Islam was that Jesus Christ's message is not anything completely alien and alienable from their creed. This is precisely what makes Rev. Banerjea's approach to ancient Indic religious traditions unique because he was completely willing to consider their claims upon the human mind and intellect. Unlike Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Toru Dutt who often unwittingly made unfavourable comments about ancient Indic past and also in the case of Michael madhusudan Dutt, in providing stereotypical Islamophobic depictions of characters from medieval history or in their personal correspondences, as will be shown the next two chapters, Rev. Banerjea never engaged in such kind of uncritical assertions. He never adopted any militant stance especially in seeking conversions from other creeds to Christianity. He had baptised Gyanendramohan Tagore, son of Prosannakumar Tagore and had played a pivotal part in introducing Michael Madhusudan Dutt to his higher ups in the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Lahiri, 2013:81-2).

### **3.3: CONCLUSION:**

Thus, what emerges from this study of Rev. Banerjea'a writings is that of a person who is unflinching in his devotion to what he considered to be truth and virtuous and who, despite his tryst with radical rationalism in the youth, nevertheless considered Christianity to be a panacea for all the social evils perplexing Hindu society. Yet he was respectful of the antiquity of the Vedic scriptures and never begrudged their authoritative status in Hindu society but rather sought and exhorted people of other creeds to consider the merits of Christinity and then, if need be, adopt it. His writings never reveal any kind of bigoted animus against other creeds. Ultimately he sought always a religious harmony and peace within a general Christian socio-cultural environment.



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