

# Vain Talk Versus Plain Talk

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October 7, 1882. ‘Durga’ puja time. The occasion—a large-scale *Shradh* ceremony. *The Statesman* of Calcutta had published a letter from William Hastie of the General Assembly’s Institution. Scoffing at the ‘native Sanskrit verbalist’ for ‘his merely mechanical memory of phrases’, the writer in his letter lifted sky-high the ‘scientific European scholar whose intellectual superiority is beyond all question and so beneficent’.<sup>1</sup> However, within less than two decades of Hastie’s tirade, Swami Vivekananda had warned the world about the oncoming pernicious miseries unleashed by the ‘practical wisdom’—to use today’s jargon ‘secular wisdom’ of the scientific European.<sup>2</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore, just another two decades or so later (1920) than Vivekananda, had cautioned the world about ‘the gravitational pull of a giant planet of greed, with its . . . innumerable satellites’, set in motion by science.<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell soon followed this up, without mincing words. He said, ‘Where kindly impulses of the heart are absent, science only makes man more cleverly diabolic.’<sup>4</sup>

Albert Einstein too, somewhat belatedly, spoke up against Hastie’s vaunted ‘intellectual superiority’<sup>5</sup>: ‘Take care not to make intellect your God. It has powerful muscles but no personality. It cannot lead. It can only follow. It is blind to ends and values.’ Besides, ‘Knowledge of what *is* does not open directly to what *should* be’.<sup>6</sup>

Aldous Huxley wrote sternly in 1957

about the brewing nemesis springing from modern scientific technological (sci-tech) hubris against Nature<sup>7</sup>. Just the preceding year Arnold Toynbee had bemoaned the tragedy of educated Westernizers in countries like India about unreservedly lapping up the sci-tech-dominated secular Western gospel of the last 250 years as the ‘ultimate civilization’. But the sequel proved that this ‘pearl of great price’ bought from the intellectually supreme West was a penalty for being involved in the imminent Western spiritual crisis.<sup>8</sup> Yet, it is clear that such faithful Indian descendants of Hasties who command the corridors of present-day educational outfits in India are aplenty.

Two decades later Toynbee reverted, indirectly though, to the above naivete of Westernizers in developing countries. He had, for instance, condemned (1976) outright that the ‘rural-to-urban’ shift, triggered by the ‘unquestionably intellectually superior’ European, as a ‘social disaster’. He went on to predict that the intellectual urbanized regions are going to have to demobilize their ‘urban population’.<sup>9</sup> The heavyweight sci-tech messiahs of India are, however, today fascinated by ‘rurbanization’. Politicians, technocrats and business people are bubbling over with the intellectual slogan of ‘smart cities’.

Out of ill-judged haste, Hastie hurried a scathing condemnation at the allegedly hollow Brahmanism on September 27, and defended the saving rationale of modern

Christianity for interfering with the age-old culture of Bhāratvarsha.<sup>10</sup> Such reiteration of the ‘beneficence’ of European scientism had emerged at a time when several Western intellectuals, scientists included, seemed to be waiting in the wings to speak up with minds free from the colonizing mania of invasive Europeans. A few examples have just been quoted above. Aptly indeed had Schopenhauer, the noted German philosopher, summed up the folly somewhat in these words—the attempts of Westerners to vilify Indian philosophy and culture are akin to firing bullets at a cliff.

Earlier, in the same letter of September 27, Hastie seems to have already reached the climax of his intellectual diatribe.<sup>11</sup> He alleged that ‘The speculative Rishi’s . . . metaphysical system cannot answer even one of the questions of our modern world, and the whole of Brahminic theology has never really solved a single problem of human life of thought’.

Yet, as Toynbee (1976), tells us, it is *Tat tvam asi* of the Indian Rishi which is the truth<sup>12</sup>. The ace historian regards this as the basis of moral action by subduing greed and stimulating compassion. A few years later, Rifkin (1980), an industrial/economic analyst, extended the Rishi principle *Tat tvam asi* (That art Thou) to solve the most ominous, universal reality of today, Entropy (a law of physics that says matter always degrades from usable to unusable, to dissipation, to depletion, to disorderliness).<sup>13</sup> He has asserted: ‘To know this in the very ground of our being and conduct our life in accordance with this transcendent reality: this is the human development that comes from an adherence to traditional wisdom’.

So, Hastie’s cavalier dismissal of the Vedic-Hindu Rishi as altogether worthless for modern life realities is rebutted by at least two modern thinkers. They were after

all not apologists or evangelists of any colonizing Western religion. Wisdom realized through a lifetime of selfless meditation on the Ultimate Reality (by Brahminical Rishis) aeons ago remains perennially fresh and relevant.

I give just one more instance bearing on the ‘beneficence’ of superior scientific intelligence trumpeted in 1882. Kathleen Raine, an eminent British literary figure, had thus cried out in 1997 to an insensitive audience of Indian elite in New Delhi:

. . . we look to the Orient to rescue us from a materially affluent but spiritually destitute world. . . . It could be questioned whether our modern technological culture is a civilization at all. It is a hell, a nightmare as Yeats calls it.<sup>14</sup>

Leaving aside the two Indian sages mentioned earlier, the above ensemble of honest, open-minded thoughts of such plain-talking Westerners doubtlessly proves the perennial validity of the supra-intellectual spiritual intuitions of our Rishis, right up to this day, and the futility of the ill-motivated proclamations about a few ill-understood visible rituals and observances from a class of ‘scientific scholars’.

### Bankim Chandra on the stage

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (using the pseudonym of Ram Chandra) had, however, come to grips in a straight fight with Hastie during that momentous Durga Puja fortnight of 1882. *The Statesman* continued to be the medium of exchanges between Bankim and Hastie. To the three successive long ‘intellectual’ letters of Hastie (September 22, 26 and 27), the first brief yet precise advice from Bankim appeared on 6 October. He wrote, ‘Mr. Hastie’s attempt to storm the “inner citadel of the Hindoo religion” should be preceded by his study of the original

scriptures “with a Hindoo, with one who *believes* in them”.<sup>15</sup> Here, we acknowledge the openness of *The Statesman* (1882) in publishing Bankim’s rejoinders. It seems almost certain that no Indian English daily of today would care to do so.

The butt of Hastie’s criticism in his three pretentious (and at times patronizing) letters was directed at the monstrous grossness, hideousness, sensuousness etc infecting the worship of idols by the Hindus. Thus Krishna, Kālī, Ganapati, Shiva et. al. were all denounced by him as vile titillation of the sensual, leading to ‘defilement of the soul’.<sup>16</sup> The Hindus had no vision of the transcendent reality. Idols are merely weird images produced out of subjective feeling. Bankim was right in advising Hastie to learn about the philosophy underlying creation of all idols with ‘a Hindoo who *believes* in them’.<sup>17</sup> At this very hour we are aware of countless householders or renunciant devotees who are attaining to supreme and pure spiritual communion with some idol or the other at the centre of their existence. After all, idols in religion signify some elevating ideal. Spiritual masters of India have quite often affirmed that idols are the material representations of their spiritual visions. God-with-form is as much true as God-without-form. Idols are not fictitious, but visionary revelations.

The perceptions of three recent Christians may be quoted here with profit to buttress Bankim’s genuine advice to Hastie. Ronald Nixon, Cambridge Tripos and an ex-RAF pilot, had come to India after the First World War. He arrived here from Britain in the late 1920s to teach English at Lucknow and Benaras universities. Shortly he got transmuted into Krishna Prem, a self-effacing Vaishnava saint, embracing Gopāla as his idol—which is but one aspect of the Rādhā-Krishna cult. Krishna Prem’s ringing

testimony was: ‘To me there He stands, no shadowy cosmic figure, but the eternal cowherd in peacock feathers and yellow dhoti, maddening the soul with the ineffable music of His flute’. And Nixon was a disciple of a Hindu woman saint, Yashoda Mai<sup>18</sup>. Krishna Prem passed away in Almora in 1966. Sri Aurobindo was an admirer of Krishna Prem’s ‘*pashyanti buddhi*’—seeing intelligence. This is far above ordinary intellect.

Richard Schiffman, an American, has offered a masterly view of the essence of the idol of Kālī. ‘Many of the early orientalist [Hastie may well be enlisted among them] never did stay long enough to ask the proper questions about Kali. If they had . . . they would have learned that Kali’s sword and severed heads symbolize precisely the same thing that the cross symbolizes for Christians—victory of Spirit over matter.’<sup>19</sup> For the devotee who is familiar with the esoteric purpose of Kālī’s sword sees it as pointing towards the deadly enemies like pride, lust, greed etc on the path to spiritual unfoldment. The right arms of the Kālī idol signify the Divine protection for sincere seekers.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, Isherwood assails the ugly myths attached to the Shiva-linga<sup>21</sup>: ‘There are people who have chosen to see sexual symbolism in the spire and the font of a Christian church. But Christians do not recognize this symbolism; and even the most hostile critics of Christianity cannot pretend that it is a sex-cult. The same is true of the cult of Shiva.’

Yet, it is such ideals in our idols that Hastie had offensively and crudely declared to be the ‘one chief cause of the demoralization and degradation of India’.<sup>22</sup> And such abominations have been correlated by him as ‘the necessity of their intellectual limitations’.<sup>23</sup> But 1882 was, unexpectedly,

still a period when a Bankim could retort with dignified anguish and get it published in *The Statesman*:

Mr. Hastie attacks, without any provocation, the proceedings of a solemn mourning ceremony held in the private dwelling house of one of the most respectable Hindu families in the country; attacks all the most respected members of native society; attacks their religion; attacks the religion of the nation. And all this without the slightest provocation. . . . And then, when a humble individual of the nation . . . ventures upon a single retort, Mr. Hastie's temper is on fire and it explodes.<sup>24</sup>

As if providentially, by 1982 the summit of transcendental realization, through primarily the worship of the Kāli idol, had already been scaled for the world to see. And Schiffman, in his book on Sri Ramakrishna (1994) has written about it with marvellous eloquence.<sup>25</sup> Several other contemporary scholars and authorities on comparative cultural studies in the West have voiced their grave worries about the much-touted 'beneficence' of superlative European intellect. These writers, as a relevant sample, range from 1967 to 2007, from Andre Malraux to Ramsey Clark.<sup>26</sup> But such supra-intelligent perceptions are always flouted by super-intelligent multi-national business interests and some do-gooder world bodies like the UNESCO, UNDP, World Bank etc.

The great blunder and danger in all this is the rapid planned growth of modern Indian Hasties in our educational institutions—all the way from schools and colleges to universities. This is compounded by the near-obliteration of Bankim Chatterjees, or even shades of him, in the post-1950 milieu of independent *Bharat*. We have none today who could match the courage of a 1882-Bankim to call the bluff

from the likes of Hasties who claim to be endowed with 'superior intelligence'. Bankim says,<sup>27</sup> 'You can translate a word by a word, but behind the word is an idea, the thing which the word denotes. And this idea you cannot translate if it does not exist among the people in whose language you are translating' (e.g. the Teutonic languages). Even if, per chance, and odd person might come out frankly on such issues, he is unlikely to be given any quarters on platforms or in media. This conforms to today's JNU-brand of democratic freedom of speech in reverse. *Independent, self-respecting minds are being almost forced to become an extinct species in independent India.*

Swami Vivekananda (1890's) had offered in his *Addresses on Bhakti Yoga* some pertinent 'intellectually superior' basis for idolatry:

If a man thinks that by worshipping an idol or the ghosts or spirits of the departed he will be saved, he is entirely mistaken. We may worship anything for seeing God *in it*, if we can forget the idol and see God there. We must not project any image upon God. But we may fill any image with that Life which is God. . . . We may worship a picture as God, but not God as the picture. God in the picture is right, but the picture as God is wrong.<sup>28</sup>

Sometime during the same period he had shout out this truth about idolatry: 'The world has not gone one step beyond idolatry yet. They cannot act from ideas . . . they want the person, the man'. And he might as well have added 'the things'. How correct this critique is in today's society of secular fashion parades, shopping malls, TV heroes or heroines etc. The difference is: *sacred idolatry contains always some grain of elevating idealism; secular idol-ism invites immediate or potential disaster.*

In his letter of October 14, Hastie threw a vain ‘challenge [to] the Pundits of Bengal to show that they understand their own sacred literature and are able to defend it at the bar of modern science’<sup>29</sup> which he claims as super-intellectual. Bankim’s response to this vain attack (16 October) was the following plain logic:

Does Mr. Hastie believe that any department of human thought which has had its influence on a large portion of the human race, will yield any valuable results without loving and reverential study? If [he] thinks he can comprehend it without studying the original sources in a spirit of patient, honest and reverential search after truth . . . he will fail in arriving at a correct comprehension of Hinduism . . . the oldest and the most enduring of all religious systems. . . .<sup>30</sup>

Bankim’s words like ‘loving’, ‘reverential’ ‘most enduring’ etc have been echoed almost in toto by many later Western scholars like Thomas Merton, A. L. Basham, Will Durant, Sister Nivedita, Klostermeier and their ilk. It is a matter of shame that most of our own post-independent Indian writers and teachers of history, sociology, political science and journalism have, however, been dominating the Indian educational stage following ‘Hastie’s lead’. To put up Vedic-Sanatan-Hinduism as the

accused seems to be their professional motto.

It may be recalled to them and all others that, with all her intellectual limitations, idolatry, superstitions and all that, *Bhāratvarsha* still strives to live up to her ideals at the deepest levels. Hence her acclaimed endurance, despite the unprovoked cruelties inflicted on her. On the other hand, all the global problems from colonization to World Wars, from global warming to terrorism have unfortunately sprung from the West in spite of its great intellectual and scientific accomplishments. Congratulations to those rare souls among them who can frankly admit such overall deleterious consequences of their progress and look to the Orient for eventual succour. Such persons are perhaps aware that low-need, low-greed Bharatiya GDP from 0 AD to 1700 AD ranged from 33% to 25%.<sup>31</sup> And this was achieved without invading and plundering other peoples. Vedantism, not Tantrism or ‘idolatry’, being the general basis of Hinduism, India’s postures across history become understandable. Vedantism is not a one-book or one-prophet system. This is the reason. It does not panic, it is patient. Seeing the escalating depredations by some aggressive one-book, one-prophet systems, the world should be grateful to Hinduism for its characteristic ethos. ■

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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(Continued to page 30)