

THE LIBERAL MORALITY OF MAHANIRVANA TANTRA AND THE BHADRALOKS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BENGAL

DIPANWITA DASGUPTA
COOCH BEHAR PANCHANAN
BARMA UNIVERSITY, INDIA.

Abstract

During the Brahmo Samaj Movement, the Mahanirvana Tantra (Tantra of Great Liberation), a Sanskrit text probably written in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century emerged as an inspirational text among the followers of Raja Rammohan Roy who was the pioneer of social reform movement of nineteenth century Bengal. The text denounced the ritualistic polytheism of the orthodox Hindu society and strictly raised the tone in favour of monotheism and condemn outside rituals and highlighted that the mantra and the dhyana as the path to the 'Param Brahma' (Supreme reality or Consciousness). The monolithic idea of the Mahanirvana Tantra reflects through a hymn i.e., "Om Sat-Cid-Ekam Brahma" means 'Om the one Being-Consciousness-Brahma'. The paper will show how the liberal morality of Mahanirvana Tanta transformed the socio-cultural perception of the English educated middle class Bengali Bhadrалoks (gentle folks) in Calcutta.

Keywords: Raja Rammohan Roy, Hindu society, Tantras

Higher Education &
Research Society

THE LIBERAL MORALITY OF MAHANIRVANA TANTRA AND THE *BHADRALOKS* IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BENGAL

- DIPANWITA DASGUPTA

During the Brahma Samaj Movement, the Mahanirvana Tantra (Tantra of Great Liberation), a Sanskrit text probably written in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century emerged as an inspirational text among the followers of Raja Rammohan Roy who was the pioneer of social reform movement of nineteenth century Bengal. The text denounced the ritualistic polytheism of the orthodox Hindu society and strictly raised the tone in favour of monotheism and condemn outside rituals and highlighted that the *mantra* and the *dhyana* as the path to the 'Param Brahma' (Supreme reality or Consciousness). The monolithic idea of the Mahanirvana Tantra reflects through a hymn i.e., "*Om Sat-Cid-Ekam Brahma*" means 'Om the one Being-Consciousness-Brahma'. The paper will show how the liberal morality of Mahanirvana Tanta transformed the socio-cultural perception of the English educated middle class Bengali *Bhadraloks* (gentle folks) in Calcutta.

The fundamentals of Tantra are extremely critical and divided and sub divided into various groups. Some of the scholars proclaim that the tantric philosophy was developed during the Vedic period. Later on it was nourished by the Hindu and Buddhist saints and received different interpretations. A number of the scholars believe that many of Hindu Tantras were written within 6th century to 8th century. Many of the Tantras preached about idolatry and polytheism. The Tantric text like *Kamika Tantra*, *Pranatoshini*, *Tantrasara*, *Saradatilak* once dominated the ideas of the common people of Bengal favoured the polytheism denouncing the fundamentals of Vedantic philosophy. These Tantras were full of mystic ideas and supported the ritualistic tradition of the orthodox Hinduism. But the Mahanirvana Tantra which was believed to be written in the much later period had a unique modern flavour. Many of the scholars believed that this Sanskrit text was written in the late eighteenth century. Some of the researcher believed that the text was judicially fabricated by Raja Rammohan Roy himself. Prior to the 18th century not a single tantric text mentioned about this text. Some of the scholars believed that the text was written by Hariharananda or by Rammohan Roy. The text may be written by a scholar who had strong believed in monotheism and supported the formation of the classless Hindu society. After

evaluating the judicial changes in the Bengal after 1765, John Duncan Martin Derrett (1977: 168) opined that the text may be written within 1773-1780.

In 1876 the Adi Brahma Samaj first published the text along with a commentary of Kulavadhuta Srimad Hariharananda Bharati, the guru of Raja Rammohan Roy and it was edited by Anandachandra Vidyavagisha. The text contains 2,303 verses and began with religious conversation between Lord Siva and Devi Parvati in Mount Kailash. In the first chapter of the text the Lord Mahadeva discussed about the evils of the modern age and degradation of the morality. The Hindi translation of the text was published in 1896 from Bombay and it was translated by Jwala P. Misra. Arthur Avalon translated it in English. Few scholars mention the text as 'one of the original tantric' (Sastri, Gui: 54). Few believe that one of the oldest Sakta works (Bharati: 171).

At the beginning of the colonial rule, the alien rulers followed the policy of non-intervention in the socio-religious matter of the Indians. But soon the Utilitarian and the evangelicals influenced the ideological change in the colonial policy towards the Indian (Bandyopadhyay: 139). The knowledge about the orient became a vital tool to rule the vast number of native with small number of occidental people to whom the vast Indian sub-continent was not familiar. The Orientalist scholars equipped with specialized knowledge about Indian languages tried to provide a legitimate basis of the British rule in India by translating the ancient Indian texts written in Sanskrit, Pali, Kharosthi, Tamil and Brahmi. Influenced by the Orientalist scholars like William Jones and Colebrook, Rammohan Roy adopted the ideal of the Vedic Golden Age and its progressive decline, which he then adapted to the traditional Indian notion of the descending cycle time (Urban:62). As a private writing Clerk or 'Munshi' of Thomas Woodforde, Registrar of the Appellate Court at Murshidabad, Raja Rammohan Roy came closer to the western ideas and realized need to change the existing dogmatism within the Hinduism. Later on Roy left the job and joined the service under Willam Digby in Rungpur. In 1903 he came closer to Hariharananda, the religious guide of the Rammohan Roy and got the knowledge about philosophy of Mahanirvana Tantra. He was a worshiper of One True God according to the Mahanirvana Tantra. In 1815, Raja Ram Mohan Roy established *Atmiya Sabha* (Friendly Association) with the motive to discuss theological subjects. The meeting of the Sabha held once in a week in the Maniktola residence of the Raja Rammohan Roy. Many of the aristocratic middle class personalities of Calcutta such as Dwarakanath Tagore of Jorasanko, Prasanna Kumar Tagore of Pathurighata, Baikunthanath Munshi of Taki, Raja Kalisankar Ghosal of Bhukailash, Nanda kishore Bose, BrindabanMitra, Brojomohan Majumder, Nilratan Halder, Ananda Prosad Banarjee of Telenipara, Baidyanath Mukherjee, Hariharananda Tirthaswami, Pandit Sivaprosad Misra attended the meetings of *Atmiya Sabha* to discuss about evil scars of Hinduism like practice of sati, polygamy, brahmanical ritualistic image worship, rigid caste system and introduction of widow remarriage (Bose: 34). He campaigned of the abolition of Sati System, polygamy of the Hindu Kulins (Upper class) and

demanded the right of the woman in the society and the right for widow remarriage. Rammohan Roy was impressed by the high opinion of the Mahanirvana Tantra. The lines of the Mahanirvana Tantra were quoted by Roy in *Isho, Keno, Katha, Mundaka and Mandukyaupanishad, A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas* and various *Brahmanical Magazines*.

In a talk delivered by Swami Samarpanananda on '*Tantra Philosophy and its practices*' before the students of Indian Spiritual Heritage Diploma Course at Ramakrishna Vivekananda University, Belur Math in the year 2011, Swamiji mentioned unlike the other Tantra texts, the Mahanirvana Tantra has no conflict with the Vedas in terms of philosophical vision. Like the Vedanta philosophy, the Mahanirvana Tantra believes that the 'Brahma' is the supreme reality; on the other hand most of the Tantras believe that the Goddess Kali or Sakti is the supreme power in the universe. According to the Mahanirvana Tantra, the Supreme Brahma is ever Existent... changeless and it is free from all illusion (Mahanirvana Tantra; 3.5-8). It propagates the worship of the Supreme Brahman. The Mahanirvana Tantra was agent all types of external rituals, untouchability and caste discrimination. Like the Vedanta it believes that the 'Brahma' is the ultimate reality behind everything and it existed within the all living being irrespective of their caste, class and creed.

Along with the spread of western education, a group of Bengali people became acquainted with the writings of Bacon, Locke, Voltaire, Newton, Burke, Bentham, Mill and others and their vision was moulded by the western liberal and rational ideas. The western education provided them the outlook to evaluate the existing socio-cultural and religious condition in their surroundings. These anglicized elite people who were regarded as respectable in the Bengali society in the nineteenth century was known as *bhadralok*. J. H. Bloomfield (1968) was among the historians who have studied about the social structures of the Bengali society in the nineteenth century and portrayed the basic nature of the *bhadraloks*. Bloomfield defined them as the dominant elite who have particular kind of behaviour which was different from the mass in terms of their cultural value and sense of social propriety (Bloomfield: pp.5-6). Following the view of Professor Susobhan Chandra Sarkar nineteenth century Bengal can be defined as the age of conflicting ideas, the clash between the western idea of liberalism with the orthodox spiritualism and emotional superstitions.

Traditional Hindu society was divided into different caste and creed. The Vedic scriptures were supported the hierarchical division of the society on the basis of the birth. The coming of the Europeans changed the mindset of the Bengali *Bhadraloks* who have close contact with the colonizers, acquired the western education and became acquainted with the western thoughts. Raja Rammohan Roy, the leading exponent of socio-religious reform movement in India in the nineteenth century, realized that the Mahanirvana Tantra would become very much close to the mind educated Bengali youth as it possess a sense of

liberal morality based on the monotheism and fabricated with modern believes. Mahanirvana Tantra to some extent moulded the mentality of the educated Bengali in terms of equality in worshipping the God excluding the Brahmanical rituals. The liberal thoughts of Mahanirvana Tantra based on righteousness suitable for the reformation of society in the nineteenth century Bengal. The monotheistic philosophy of the Mahanirvana Tantra attracted the attention of the English educated middle class gentle men of Bengal whose vision was changed due to the expansion of the western education. It seems that this changed the religious perception of the English educated elites of Bengal during colonial era. The discussion of different religious texts was the part of the every session of Brahmamasaj. The motive of the disciples of Raja Rammohan Roy was to find out the inherent truth of Hinduism. Because they know that the contemporary religious practices was the product of the Brahmanical thoughts which were not highlighted in the ancient text of the Hindus. Post enlightenment rationalism was the guiding force behind changing mentality of the educated Bengali *Bhadraloks* who followed the Orientalist method exploring and translating ancient Sanskrit text and recovering in them the monolithic past of the Hindus.

Hugh Burban have studied the activities and philosophy of Raja Rammohan Roy and Brahma samaj movement to understand the impact of the Mahanirvana Tantra in socio-religious reform movement in colonial Bengal (Urban: 68). According to him Rammohan Roy in a calculated way used the philosophy of Vedanta and Mahanirvan Tantra to weaken the hold of the dominant Kulin class, especially their younger disinherited sons forced into service who constituted the mobile gentry or "*bhadralok*" of Bengal, from the Mughal zamindari system and align them to their new overlords of Company. In the nineteenth century the social reformers highly emphasised on the critical analysis of the Mahanirvana Tantra to express the inherence truth of the "Hinduism." When deployed by Indian elites and the leaders of Bengal Renaissance, Tantra would also served as a critical element in the reformation of Indian religious, cultural, and political identity in the nineteenth century (Urban: 46).

The Mahanirvana Tantra has an egalitarian look towards the society and it expresses a liberal attitude towards women. Mahanirvana Tantra points out that every woman on earth represents the supreme Goddess (Naikar: 104). It condemns the practice of Sati or widow-burning, asserted that "the woman who in her delusion ascends the funeral pyre of her husband shall go to hell" (Urban: 67). The text supported the property right of the woman and mentioned that the woman inherited her husband's property dies leaving daughters, then the property is taken to have gone back to her husband and from him to the daughters (Avalon: 365). In Derrett's opinion the Mahanirvana Tantra emphatically explains a conception of inheritance totally foreign to the Hindu law (1977:155). Philosophy of the Mahanirvana Tantra is different from the orthodox law texts like Manusmriti and Dayabhaga. It also teaches a philosophy which is little different from

the orthodox system of the Vedanta and Samkhya (Winternitz: 523). The orthodox texts mainly based on castism and opposed the inter-caste marriage by propagating 'Brahma marriage' on the other hand the no caste restriction on the marriage. In the context of the nineteenth century the MahanirvanaTantra advocates the 'Saiva marriage' which openly promulgate Bengali youth accepted the progressive thoughts of the book of great liberation.

To John Duncan Martin Derrett (1977:197) the text is a judicial fabrication of old religious tendency and guided by reformist motives. According to him the catholic Christianity had an impact on the philosophical vision of the Mahanirvana Tantra; especially it preached that the mantra or hymn possessed the power to purify the Yavana (i.e. even Muslims) and Chandalas (out caste). According to him this idea of the purification of the Mahanirvana Tantra had some similarity with the ideas of the Baptism.

The Mahanirvana Tantra must be understood within the context of the social, political, and legal situation of early colonial Bengal (Urban: 67). The text was extremely popular among the reformers of nineteenth century Bengal, as well as among the early members of the Brahma samaj. The reformist idea of the Raja Rammohan Roy was moulded by the philosophy of the Mahanirvana Tantra and uses it as the base of his socio-religious reform in the nineteenth century. Most importantly the Mahanirvana Tantra condemns the 'Satidaha' or widow burning which was the main agenda of the movement conducted by Raja Rammohan Roy. Following the path of the Mahanirvana Tantra, Raja Rammohan Roy preached the worship of the formless deity or Brahma and criticized the modern age as full of religious corruption, idolatry and dogmatism. The return to the purity of original Hinduism therefore demands a recovery of the original monotheistic, rational sprite articulated by the Vedanta. The text described the equality of all human beings and expresses a hope for freedom for all castes. There is a unique similarity between the philosophy of the Mahanirvana Tantra and the British Indian law of the nineteenth century. Because of that reason the western educated Bengali youths became interested in this enigmatic text.

Almost like the Vedantic philosophy Mahanirvana Tantra depicted the man as 'Param Brahma' (Supreme universal self or sprite) and preached that all human irrespective of their caste have the right to worship the 'Brahma'. The Mahanirvana Tantra states (Vidyaratna: 17):

Jativedanakarttavaya Prasade Paramatmane |

Jaha Suddhabuddhyng Kuruteswa Mahapataki Bhabet|| [92]

It means that castism is not the duty of a man. Everyone should have the right to get the blessing of the Paramatma. So the ideas of the Mahanirvana Tantra based on the liberalism and guided by the morality denouncing the traditional ideas of the orthodox

Hinduism. This liberal philosophy formed the basis concept of the Bengal Renaissance. Though, there are strong differences of opinion among the critics how far the social reformers wanted the abolition of the casteism in the Hindu society in Bengal. More than that the Mahanirvana Tantra opined that if a man belongs to the untouchable but possessed firm faith in 'Param Brahma' then a Brahmin who don't have any knowledge about the Vedanta can eat from the hand of the untouchable (Vidyaratna: 19). The text preached that the man must be morally upright.

Because of the impact of the colonial rules of property right in the 1770s, the Mahanirvana Tantra which was believed to be written in the last decade of the eighteenth century, expressed a complete different opinion from the traditional Hindu Sastra regarding property right of the individuals and stated that modern forms of marriage like mutual consent (*parasparecchaya*) or assembled congregation (*anumanyatam*). The Mahanirvana Tantra's view on the Hindu law was surprisingly different from the other ancient Indian text on law.

When Swami Vivekananda was young he was moved by the progressive ideology of the brahma swamaj. While studying in Scottish Church College, the young Narendranath Dutta joined the Brahma Samaj. Although the Vedanta philosophy from the basis of his religious thought, there were certain reflections of the liberal thoughts Mahanirvana Tantra in his writings. The Mahanirvana Tantra propagated that the Brahma is living within every living beings. In similar way Swami Vivekananda believed that the Supreme God is living among the poor Indians.

Mahanirvana Tantra opposed the traditional practices such as worshiping of the God and Goddess, funeral of the ancestors, pilgrimage etc. In nineteenth century Raja Rammohan Roy helped to developed Hinduism as a middle class religion. According to Hugh B Urban the Mahanirvana Tantra played a strategic role in Rammohan's larger programme of reform and his defence of Hinduism against its western critics (Urban: 69). B. N. Dasgupta in 'The Life and Times of Raja Rammohan Roy' mentioned Rammohan Roy picked up selected portion of the Mahanirvana Tantra which were similar to his reformist philosophy and ignored the rest of the text (154). Derrett believes that the text was aimed to purify tantric religion and turned it into a popular among the Hindus (168). At the same time he also thought that the author of the text wanted to resist the inevitable confrontation with the Christianity. The text provided a strong theoretical basis to the progressive minded middle class socio-religious reformers who were strongly opposing the orthodox bigots of the nineteenth century urban Calcutta.

WORKS CITED:

Urban, Hugh B, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Motilal Banaridass Publishers, Delhi, 2007

Derrett, John Duncan Martin, *Essays in Classical and Modern Hindu Law: consequences of the intellectual exchange with the foreign powers*, BRILL, 1977

Agehananda Bharati (Leopold Fischer), *The Trantic Tradition*, London, 1965

Vidyaratna, Kaliprassana, *Mahanirvanatrantram*, 3rd edition, Calcutta, 1300 B.S, 1894

Kapoor, Subodh, *A Short Introduction of Sakta Philosophy*, Indigo Books, 2002

Shah, Pragna Rasiklal, *Tantra: Its Therapeutic Aspect*, Puthi Pustak, 1987

Parmeshwaranand, Swami, *Dictionary of the Dharmasastra*, Sarup & Sons, 2003

Doniger, Wendy, *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, Manchester University Press, 1988

Finegan, Jack, *An Archaeological History of Religions of Indian Asia*, Paragon House Publisher, 1989

Kinsley, David R., *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*, Prentice Hall, 1993

Ramanand Vidya Bhawan, *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 34, Issues 1-4, 1985

Bose, Nimai Sadhan, *Indian Awakening and Bengal*, Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, 1976

Major, Andrea, *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, 2007

Vivekananda, Swami, *Awakened India*, 1992

Naikar, Basavaraj S., *Indian English Literature*, Volume. 3, Atlantic Publishers and Distributers, 2007

Winternitz, Moriz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Pt. 1, University of Calcutta, 1963.

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition and After: A History of Modern India*, Orient Blackswan, 2015.

Hatcher, Brian A., *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the faith of the Modern Vedantist: Rare Discourse from Early Colonial Bengal*, Oxford University Press, 2008

Sastri, Hrishikesh, Gui, S.C., *Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit manuscript in the library of the Calcutta Sanskrit College*, Vol.5, Calcutta, 1903

Woodroffe, Sir John, *Mahanirvana Tantra*. NuVision Publications, 2007

Taylor, Kathleen, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: 'an Indian soul in a European body?'* SOAS London studies on south Asia. Illustrated edition. Routledge, 2001

Avalon, Arthur, *Mahanirvana Tantra*, Forgotten Books, 1913.