

# The Early Extremist: Bipin Chandra Pal's Synthesis of Modernity and Tradition

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## Introduction

While there is general agreement about the meaning of tradition, there is no consensus regarding the definition of modernity. In this article, for simplicity's sake, modernity will be equated with a rational, scientific and secular view of life.<sup>1</sup> This view was dominant in the West from the middle of the nineteenth century on. It was most clearly expressed by those whom Carlton Hayes categorized as the "Generation of Materialism" (1871-1900).<sup>2</sup> Man was certain that reason was the arbiter of all questions. He was confident that he could solve all of his problems and bring about a millennium. He strictly limited reality to those data which were subject to verification by the senses and he considered a transcendental view of life fanciful and outmoded. Towards the turn of the century, however, man's self-assuredness began to diminish. The more the frontiers of science advanced, the less certain were the scientist that they could fathom the universe. The cosmos seemed no longer a limited mass of matter of fact, one of the greatest astronomers, Sir James Jeans, concluded that the universe was more akin to a thought than a machine.<sup>3</sup>

Loss of scientific certitude naturally affected world view of modern western man. It is not by chance that the historian Franklin Le Van Baumer in his book *Main Current of Western Thought* refers to our age as "The Age of Anxiety. He argues that in the twentieth century man feels insecure because he has no acceptable values system to guide him. Although technological advance continues, people are becoming aware of the fact that the increase in man's ability to produce gadgets does not necessarily make his life more meaningful. It moreover has become apparent that a wholly secularized life is devoid of ultimate purposefulness. The distinguished Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, diagnosed the illness of the present age as being due to man's alienation from his Creator: "It is easy enough to drive the spirit out of the door. But when we have done so the salt of life grows flat - it loses its savour".<sup>5</sup> Consequently, in the west, men such as the historian, Sir Arnold Toynbee, and the philosopher, Jacques Martian, turned towards tradition, particularly in its spiritual aspect, to reconstruct their *Weltanschauung*.

In India, Bipinchandra Pal (1858-1932) was acutely aware of the fact that the conflict between modernity and tradition applied equally to the East and the West, and he evolved a synthesis which he hoped would have relevance to both civilizations. As is well known, Bipinchandra revolted in his youth against hidebound tradition, especially against the over-ritualization of Hinduism, image veneration and caste strictures. He prided himself on being a rationalist. In 1877 he joined the Bramho Samaj, Bipinchandra sided not with Keshabchandra Sen but with the more radical wing represented by Sivanath Sastri and Anandmohan Bose who favoured an increased emphasis on social reforms. Over all during his youth, Bipinchandra's religious concerns were largely confined to social action. While championing social reforms, Bipinchandra was actively opposed what he termed "medievalism": 1) unqualified monism which viewed the material universe as delusionary, 2) extreme asceticism, in particular, celibacy, 3) over-ritualization of religion, 4) "slavish" dependence upon a guru, 5) religious inequality (application of caste distinctions to religious worship).<sup>2</sup>

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In the 1880's Bipinchandra changed his religious views markedly. The problem of life and death was intimately connected with his transformation. In his *Memories of My Life and Times* he relates how profoundly he was affected by the death of his father in 1886 and the death of his first wife in 1890.<sup>2</sup> He became intensely aware of the precariousness of man's earthly existence. According to those who accepted matter as the ultimate reality of the universe, death meant the disintegration of one's physical substance, i.e. one's total extinction. Such a view was unacceptable to Bipinchandra. He was convinced that there must be more to man's life than his short earthly sojourn. Modern science failed to furnish him with a meaningful answer to the enigma of death. Gradually he came to the conclusion that the ancient Hindu scriptures offered satisfactory answers to his spiritual quest.

It is significant that it was through the writings of a westerner, Ralph Waldo Emerson, that Bipinchandra found his way back to Hindu tradition. In this connection it must be borne in mind that the currents of thought of east and west were constantly intermingling. We are all aware for example of eastern influence on Sir Edwin Arnold and at the same time of Sir Edwin Arnold's impact on Gandhiji. The light of truth had travelled from the East to the West and back to the East: its intrinsic validity had remained unharmed. Acknowledging his indebtedness to the great American transcendentalist, Bipinchandra states that Emerson converted him from dualism to monism. Henceforth he accepted a God who was imminent as well as transcendent and he no longer regarded matter and spirit as separate entities.<sup>2</sup> Bipinchandra found the strongest intellectual support for his changed world view in the Bhrgu-Varuna dialogue of the Taittiriya Upanisad. In his search for ultimate reality, Bhrgu practised yogic meditation and eventually recognized that the essence of the universe was neither food, nor life, nor breath, nor mind, nor intellect, but bliss.<sup>2</sup> In Bipinchandra's estimation, Bhrgu had proven 'scientifically' that there was a transcendent reality. Yoga thus emerged as the supreme science that could lead man to the realm beyond sense perception where neither microscopes nor telescopes were of any use.<sup>2</sup>

Modern science and the materialistic Weltanschauung suffered a spectacular defeat, as far as Bipinchandra

was concerned, when in 1912 the White Star liner "Titanic" sank as a result of a collision with an iceberg in the Atlantic. In an essay in *Sahitya o sadhana*, Bipinchandra dramatically describes the disaster at sea. The "Titanic" appears to him the embodiment of western man's pride in his technological prowess; her extravagant conveniences, a symbol of man's hankering after physical comforts. In the dawning of her dancing, sporting passengers he perceives a warning against placing prime importance on sense indulgence.<sup>2</sup> Was this calamity not meant to remind us of the fact that the path of pleasure leads to perdition, whereas the yogic path of austerities leads to immortality? He added that this truth had not only been preached by India's arsis, but by the sages of all religions. And he cited Christ's saying: "if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me," and "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."<sup>+</sup> Renunciation and not dissipation was thus the way to true fulfilment.

Bipinchandra's reaction to the sinking of the "Titanic" provides a striking contrast to Voltaire's response to the earthquake of Lisbon in 1775. As a result of the earthquake the French philosopher lost all faith in a benevolent deity. Bengal's great son, Bipinchandra, on the contrary, was inspired by the shipwreck of the "Titanic" to place his whole trust in divine protection, provided one adhered to the yogic path.

Bipinchandra's reliance on yoga was partially due to the influence of his neo-vaishnava guru, Vijaya Krishna Goswami. He considered Vijaya Krishna Goswami as important as Ramakrishna Paramahansa for Bengal's religious renaissance. Personally he was more attracted to Vijaya Krishna than to Ramakrishna. He had no sympathy for Ramakrishna's strict asceticism and preferred the process of gradual sublimation of the senses practiced by Vijaya Krishna. He claimed that it was much more natural to experience the divine through all senses than to suppress the senses altogether.<sup>++</sup> One can, of course argue that in the case of Ramakrishna no mere suppression of the senses had occurred but that he had turned his sensory energy entirely towards the divine. Probably Bipinchandra's criticism of Ramakrishna was due to the fact that he considered Ramakrishna an unqualified monist, hence medieval.

<sup>+</sup>St. Matthew, 19:21 and 16:25.

<sup>++</sup>Pal, Bipinchandra, Saint Bijayakrishna Goswami (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 29-33.

On the other hand, Vijaya Krishna was his ideal combination of modernity and tradition. In his writing, Bipinchandra repeatedly mentioned that Neo-Vaisnavas adhered to qualified monism which he equated with a modern outlook.<sup>4</sup> As far as Vijaya Krishna was concerned; Bipinchandra valued the fact that the guru held progressive views regarding caste and ritual. Above all, he was grateful to the guru for initiating him in mantra yoga. Previously Bipinchandra had gained an intellectual understanding of man's immortality. Through Vijaya Krishna he attained what to him seemed empirical evidence of the fact that man was indestructible spirit: there was thus no reason to fear death.<sup>4</sup>

While Bipinchandra revered his guru, at no time did he unconditionally surrender to him. The traditional guru-disciple relationship was unacceptable to him who valued so highly independence of mind and proudly styled himself a "born rebel".<sup>4</sup> Although he was unwilling to be a traditional disciple, he drastically changed his way of living, following his initiation. He devoted a larger portion of his day to spiritual activities, such as reading sacred writings. He strictly regulated his diet and practiced ahimsa.<sup>4</sup>

The change in Bipinchandra's views affected his attitude towards image veneration. Under Bramho influence, he had rejected the use of images as idolatrous. He now concluded that images were material approximations of spiritual entities which the advanced yogis perceived during meditation. The existence of these entities did not negate the oneness of the creation. They were various aspects of the one, as was the Holy Trinity in Christianity.<sup>4</sup> It seems worth mentioning that during his stay in England and the United States. Bipinchandra discovered that he was better equipped to understand the concept of the Christian Trinity-one in ouisia, different in hupostatis-than many representatives of the Christian clergy for whom it was an inexplicable mystery.<sup>5</sup>

Bipinchandra's sympathetic view of image veneration and his acceptance of the Trinity signify a decisive turning away from rationalism and distinguish him clearly from Raja Rammohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore, the pioneers of the Brahma movement.

Roy and Tagore had tried to base their reforms on the Upanisads alone and had rejected the Purana as medieval. Bipinchandra greatly valued the Upanisads but he contended that the Puranas and not the Upanisads constituted the highest stage in the evolution of Hinduism. In his introduction to the Study of Hinduism, Bipinchandra, employing Hegelian

dialectic, posits three stages in the evolution of Hinduism: (1) The perceptive stage-time of the Vedas (thesis): in this phase cognition is based on sense perception: "The Deity here is not really an invisible, super-sensuous Being but are (sic) all visible and 'sensible' gods and goddesses...."<sup>6</sup> (2) The reflective stage-time of the Upanisada (antithesis): Man has risen above sense perception of the realization of the transcendental plane of Puranas (synthesis): by means of imagination man has given concrete shape to the unseen, transcendental.<sup>7</sup> Bipinchandra uses the fact that the use of images is normally associated with the Puranic age and not with the time of the Upanishads as an additional argument in defence of image veneration. In summary, he concludes that the Puranas have successfully reconciled the relative with the absolute the seen with the unseen. Undoubtedly his Vaisnava background influenced his attitude towards the Puranas. After all, it was in the Puranic age that the Krishna-Radha concept crystallized. And Bipinchandra contends that the Brahman of the Upanisads is inferior Krishna-Radha. Brahman constitutes undifferentiated impersonal ultimate reality. It is through Radha, the embodiment of Love, that Krishna realizes "His Own Personality":<sup>8</sup> "Their mutual relation is one of inconceivable difference in identity and identity in difference".<sup>9</sup> Bipinchandra's insistence on the superiority of the Puranic concept of the absolute over that of the Upanisads is clearly based on his fear that unqualified monism inevitably results in an other-worldly attitude and thus keeps man from playing an active part in this world.

The defence of the Puranas in no way implies that Bipinchandra has turned reactionary. On the contrary, he consistently opposed reactionary movements. He was especially concerned that the religious revival that was overtaking India might assume extreme dimensions. He personally favoured a middle ground between modernity and tradition. The best elements of modernity ought to be combined with the most valuable heritage of the past. While he praised the progressive outlook of the Arya Samaj, he was dismayed by its intolerance and its narrow-minded insistence upon Vedic infallibility.<sup>4</sup>

Bipinchandra supported modern education which ought to include science and technology. He willingly recognized the fact that English education had made positive contributions to the freedom movement in India. At the same time he criticised the English educational system for its failure to make subject matter relevant to Indians. Of what use was a knowledge of the British fauna or flora to Indian

students?<sup>4</sup> A modern Indian educational system must foster a spirit of patriotism. But patriotism alone was insufficient. He felt strongly that modern ideas, such as liberty, equality and fraternity must be the underpinning of an independent India. Upon attaining swaraj, India ought to be governed on a truly democratic basis which must include provisions for initiative recall and referendum.<sup>4</sup> In view of his suspicion of the traditional guru-disciple relationship, it is not surprising that he was particularly concerned about the possibility that Gandhiji might turn into a political guru whom the Indian people would blindly follow.<sup>4</sup> And his opposition to the Mahatma is partially based on such considerations. A staunch advocate of individual freedom, Bipinchandra, however, clearly stated that freedom must not be confused with ..... and the defence or individual rights must not lead to the un... Individualism of the West. The traditional Hindu emphasis on duty ought to be retained.<sup>6</sup>

Bipinchandra was not only opposed to modern man's selfish pursuit or his individual goals, he was also apprehensive about the dangers lurking in modern nationalism. Independence must be coupled with inter-dependence, he contended. In this age of shrinking distance, ruthless competition among the nations was suicidal. He, therefore, pleaded for a world-federation. Competition was a slogan of the past. It had to be replaced by cooperation.<sup>7</sup> And cooperation must go beyond the realm of politics and economics. Bipinchandra was convinced that the Hindu vision of an ultimate unity underlying all diversity was an essential basis for human cooperation. After all, were not all nations' particular aspects of the one reality? Was it not the Hindu synthesizing genius that had led him to the scheme of world federation just as it had led India's eminent scientist, Sir Jagdishchandra Bose to detect the unity of the organic and unorganic world? Yoga, the science which could cope with man's inner nature and with the transcendent reality, was most appropriate for this modern age. And had not India's sages proclaimed that it was man's foremost purpose to unfold his latent divinity?<sup>5</sup> Seeing the divine potential in man was decidedly a more noble view than that of the modern social scientist who regarded man as the helpless product of his environment. Thus Bipinchandra's personal solution of combing a modern way of life with Hindu spirituality seemed universally applicable. By offering India's spiritual riches to the world while accepting the best of the West, Bipinchandra had arrived at a similar solution as had been suggested by Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo Ghose. Alas, the proposed synthesis still

awaits implementation on a more than individual basis, both in the East and in the West.

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