

The Meeting of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda

M RAM MURTY

M. Ram Murty, FRSC, is Queen's Research Chair & Head, Department of Mathematics Statistics, Jeffery Hall, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

In the following article, he discusses the various aspects of Swamiji's first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna, and based on his research and circumstantial evidences, questions the popular idea that Swamiji heard of Sri Ramakrishna's name for the first time from William Hastie, the principal of Scottish Church College in Calcutta where he was studying. He wishes to thank Drs. Hema and Kumar Murty as well as Swamis Tyagananda and Yogatmananda for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

The meeting of Sri Ramakrishna and Narendranath Datta (the future Swami Vivekananda) is, by any account, one of the most significant episodes in Indian history and the beginning of a spiritual renaissance of the world. Yet, when we look at the written records of this extraordinary event, we find a hazy and speculative treatment of how the first meeting came about.

Different Accounts of the Meeting

How did Narendranath meet Sri Ramakrishna? There are four accounts of how Naren came to see Sri Ramakrishna. The most popular one, circulated also in some recent articles is that Principal (Reverend) William Hastie of the Presidency College, a branch of the University of Calcutta where Naren was a student, told him of Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, in the context of explaining the celebrated poem of William Wordsworth entitled 'The Excursion'. It seems, by one account, that the instructor in charge of this class got disgusted at the students' inability to understand his explanations and left. Apparently,

Principal Hastie stepped in to take the class. In the course of the *impromptu* discourse, he explained that part of the poem dealing with 'trance'. He then instructed his students to go to the saint of Dakshineswar to see first hand the state of a trance. This puts William Hastie in a very favourable light and it is this account that was recently printed in *The Hindu* under the heading 'Master Visionary' referring to William Hastie. Similar stories abound in other papers too, the most recent one being in *The Telegraph* dated Sunday, February 1, 2009.

In an article dated June 23, 2002 in *The Hindu* newspaper, it is written that 'But for a chance remark during the Wordsworth lesson, there would not have been a Vivekananda. . . His meeting with Sri Ramakrishna and his transformation into Vivekananda, the "world teacher" are now part of legend, but less known perhaps is the greatness of Hastie and what he stood for.' It goes on to say that this event is 'more momentous' than the 'Battle of Plassey', a reference to the event that is cited as the beginning of British rule of India.

In this article, we call into question 'the greatness of Hastie and what he stood for.' We also call into question the credibility of this account in the light of the three other accounts that are given of the events that led to the meeting of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

One account of how Naren met Sri Ramakrishna comes from Dr. Bhupendranath Datta, Vivekananda's brother. He writes that Naren heard about Sri Ramakrishna from Keshab Chandra Sen, leader of the Brahmo Samaj. It is well-known that Narendranath was an ardent member of the Brahmo Samaj and Sri Ramakrishna was already acquainted with Keshab Chandra Sen and other leaders of the group.

A third account credits his uncle, Ramachandra Datta, who introduced him to Sri Ramakrishna. This is also described by Chatto-padhyaya:

In 1880, three small children in Ramachandra Datta's household died of smallpox. Ramachandra came to know of a saint living in Dakshineswar, a few miles north of Calcutta. Ramachandra started visiting the saint for peace of mind. At that time, Narendranath was sympathetic to Brahmo teachings, [and] as a result he looked down upon idol worship and saints and their beliefs. Ramachandra told Naren one day 'There lives a wonderful sadhu at Dakshineswar, his words are very sweet, why not visit him once with me?' Naren objected: 'Someone who worships images cannot be good.' In the end Ramachandra persuaded him to accompany him.

In some accounts, we find Narendranath saying that he had studied Kant, Hegel, Hume and other European philosophers. What can that illiterate man teach me? Again this arrogance may emanate from the courses he had taken at the Scottish Church College as

Hastie was considered an authority on these topics, having written several books on these themes.

A fourth account given by Swami Saradananda in the *Lilaprasanga* states that around 1881, Naren met Sri Ramakrishna at the house of Surendranath Mitra, one of the householder devotees of Sri Ramakrishna living in Calcutta. Apparently, the source of this story is Swami Brahmananda who was there at the gathering in Suresh Mitra's house. 'Swami Brahmananda said that Surendranath Mitra of Simla in Calcutta came to Dakshineswar at almost the same time with him. Surendra was very much attracted towards the Master at his very first visit. Drawn closer and closer to him within a short time, he took him home and celebrated a joyous festival. No good singer being available for the occasion, Surendra affectionately invited Narendra, the son of Viswanath Datta, his neighbour, to join the festival and treat the audience, especially the Master, to devotional songs. The first meeting of the Master and Vivekananda, . . . came to pass that way. It was probably the month of November 1881. Narendra, then eighteen years old, was preparing for the F.A. examination of the Calcutta University.'

This account seems more plausible since Narendra lived in the same neighbourhood as Surendra and Swami Brahmananda also remembers it this way.

In his book discussing first meetings with Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Prabhananda discusses all of these accounts and concludes that 'many biographers have finally agreed that an early meeting of the two at the house of Surendranath Mitra did take place . . . and hold that it served as a prelude to the "historic first meeting" of the two at Dakshineswar.' Yet, it is puzzling that though the evidence for the 'Hastie factor' is the weakest of the

four accounts, it is still thrust upon the reading public in many articles (such as the one in *The Hindu* cited above) and the same story is perpetuated in many places, several examples of which we give below.

The First Meeting

Sailendra Nath Dhar has written an extensive biography of Swami Vivekananda. In it, he calculates that the first meeting between Sri Ramakrishna and Naren must have taken place sometime between January 1882 and March 1882 since in the *Kathamrita*, we find the date of March 5, 1882 when Mahendranath Gupta (the author of the *Kathamrita*) met Naren for the first time at Dakshineswar. After giving all of these accounts, Dhar writes, 'The authors of *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* . . . are of the opinion that he came to hear about him from Mr. Hastie.' Indeed, in *The Life*, we find two quotations from Mr. Hastie. In neither case is the quote given a precise reference or even an indication of what source it came from. The first, quotes him as explaining the state of trance:

Such an experience is the result of purity of mind and concentration of some particular object, and it is rare indeed, particularly in these days. I have seen only one person who has experienced that blessed state of mind, and he is Ramakrishna Paramahansa of Dakshineswar. You can understand if you go there and see for yourself.

The Life then goes on to say, 'It was thus that Naren first heard of his future Master, and not through the Brahmo Samaj, of which he was a member.' In the next paragraph, Reverend Hastie is quoted again as saying,

Narendranath is really a genius. I have travelled far and wide but I have never yet come across a lad of his talents and possibilities, even in German universities, among philosophical students. He is bound to make a mark in life.

According to Chattopadhyaya, the source of both of these quotations is Haramohan Mitra about whom we shall say more below. This is also supported by Bhupendranath Datta in his book on Swami Vivekananda. But for now, we record that apart from putting forward the remarks by Reverend Hastie as the primary stimulus for the meeting of Narendranath and Sri Ramakrishna, it dismisses the idea that the Brahmo Samaj had anything to do with it, again without really any citation as to the source of these speculations.

Merely by inserting a remark in quotation marks and attributing this quotation to some individual does not make the quotation authentic, if no proper references are given. The bizarre consequence of this is that the speculation is reproduced as fact in subsequent publications, such as the pictorial biography of Swami Vivekananda, as well as Isherwood's chronicle of the life of Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples, where he even adds that Hastie had met Sri Ramakrishna, again without any evidence to substantiate it. To determine which of these four accounts is the more plausible one, Dhar concludes, is 'an exercise in futility as an attempt to decide which came earlier, the chicken or the egg.' The main thesis of this article is that the 'Hastie account' is less likely for several reasons. Let us examine the historical facts.

The Hastie Factor

In his voluminous biography of Swami Vivekananda, Sailendra Nath Dhar writes,

One day their professor of English literature being absent, (or according to one version) having left their class in disgust because the students could not understand Wordsworth, Mr. Hastie, who was passing by, stepped in and announced that he would take the class himself.

Learning that they were reading Wordsworth's *Excursion*, he took up the portion that was to be done that day and came to where the Wanderer, after saying how his spirit clung to Margaret, observes,

'... so familiarly
Do I perceive her manner and her look
And presence, and so deeply do I feel
Her goodness, that, not seldom, in my walks
A momentary trance comes over me;
And to myself I seem to muse on One
By sorrow laid asleep.'

Mr. Hastie carefully explained the musing of the Wanderer and his 'trance' and said further that concentrating on the beauties of nature, the poet himself had some experiences of that state. He advised his students, if they wanted to actually see a person in a state of trance, to go to Dakshineswar, for there lived one there who often experienced that state of bliss—Paramahansa Ramakrishna.

That Wordsworth had some influence on Vivekananda's thought is evident since he amusingly begins one of his lectures in England by saying, "'Trailing clouds of glory do we come,'" says the poet. Not all of us come as trailing clouds of glory however; some of us come as trailing clouds of black fog.' The poet is of course Wordsworth and the line is from stanza five of his 'Ode on intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood.'

Our central thesis is that the explanation that Mr. Hastie is responsible for arousing Naren's interest in visiting Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar is untenable, given the facts

surrounding Reverend Hastie's mission in India and his views on 'Hindu idolatry' documented below. This raises another question. Given this evidence, why was the 'Hastie factor' thrust upon the readers of the *Life* as the plausible one over and above the other three explanations which are more plausible? Perhaps it is due to the psychological milieu of British India in which the biography was compiled.

Principal Reverend William Hastie also appears in the biography of another notable Bengali personality that encounters Sri Ramakrishna in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, and this is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a well-known author of 19th century Bengal and famous for the composition of *Vande Mataram*, a rousing song of modern India. Readers familiar with the *Kathamrita* will recall that the picture of Bankim painted there is not very complimentary. However, Bankim was a deep thinker and certainly one of the leading personalities in the Bengali renaissance.

Sri Aurobindo refers to Bankim as a 'rishi' and explains,

The Rishi is different from the saint. His life may not have been distinguished by superior holiness nor his character by an ideal beauty. He is not great by what he was himself but by what he has expressed. A great and vivifying message had to be given to a nation or to humanity, and God has chosen this mouth on which to shape the words of the message. . . Those words are the Mantra which he was born to reveal and of that Mantra he is the seer.

(To be continued. . .)

As various ornaments having different forms and names, are made out of the same lump of gold, so in different ages and countries, under different names and forms one God is worshipped. However various the fashions of His worship, though some love to call Him Father, and others Mother, yet it is one God who is worshipped under so many names, in all these ways.

—Sri Ramakrishna

The Meeting of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda

M RAM MURTY

(Continued from previous issue. . .)

The Mantra that Bankim revealed is 'Vande Mataram,' which became the chant of the Indian national movement and finally emerged as the national song today. Aurobindo expands his evaluation of Bankim by writing,

But even as a poet and stylist Bankim did a work of supreme national importance, not for the whole of India, or only indirectly for the whole of India, but for Bengal which was destined to lead India and be in the vanguard of national development. No nation can grow without finding a fit and satisfying medium of expression for the new self into which it was developing – without a language which shall give permanent shape to its thoughts and feelings and carry every new impulse swiftly and triumphantly into the consciousness of all. It was Bankim's first great service to India that he gave the race which stood in its vanguard such a perfect and satisfying medium.²⁰

Bankim's encounter with Reverend Hastie was played out in a series of letters from September to October 1882 and it was in response to Hastie's attack on Hindu idolatry. In a recent book²¹ on British Protestant missions in India, Chandra Mallampalli writes, 'the controversy ignited when news broke that some of Calcutta's most prominent Hindu citizens, known for their stand against image

worship, had attended a funeral ceremony at the famous Sobha Bazar Raj house in Calcutta, in which an idol of Krishna (worshipped as Gopinath, lord of the milkmaids) was venerated. In the first of his six letters to the *Statesman*, Hastie, shocked by this news, criticizes the learned Hindus for sending the message to their unenlightened countrymen that they approved of "idolatry"'. ... Hastie's tone was triumphalistic. Discoursing on idolatry with pompous alliteration and assorted polemical quips, ... he followed up his initial courtesies with blaring condemnation of the 'Shiva temple that makes one shudder,' the 'elephant-headed and huge-paunched Ganapati,' and the 'merry music and mincing movements of sensuality underlying Krishna worship.'"

In *Europe Reconsidered*, Tapan Raychaudhuri, gives a brief biography of Bankim. He writes,

In his literary career, Bankim felt compelled to challenge an immoderate expression of ethnocentricity of part of a highly educated Britisher, Reverend Hastie, Principal of the General Assembly's Institution run by the Scottish General Missionary Board ... [Hastie] expressed outrage in a letter to *The Statesman*. In it, he described the family idol as a 'gawky image gilded and adorned to attract the vulgar eye'...



M Ram Murty, FRSC, is Queen's Research Chair & Head, Department of Mathematics Statistics, Jeffery Hall, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada ☐

'As a friend of Hindu society' he decided to launch a sustained campaign against the 'glaring evil of idolatry'. But in doing so, he promised to carry with him 'all the breadth and tolerance of Christian charity.' Expectedly, the columns of *The Statesman* were filled for some weeks with angry protests. The protesters included Bankim, who first wrote under a pen name and later revealed his identity. The letters were eventually published by Hastie under the telling title, *English Enlightenment and Hindoo Idolatry*.²²

It is clear that Hastie comes from a long succession of Protestant missionaries whose view of India was of a primitive nation with heathen that needed to be converted to the Christian religion. For example, here is an excerpt from the letter Hastie wrote that Bankim was objecting to in *The Statesman* in 1882:

Notwithstanding all that has been written about the myriotheistic idolatry of India, no pen has yet adequately depicted the hideousness and grossness of the monstrous system. It has been well described by one who knew it as 'Satan's masterpiece. . . the most stupendous fortress and citadel of ancient error and idolatry now in the world. . . ' . . . The Hindu is just what his idol gods have made him. His own idolatry and not foreign conquerors, has been the curse of his history. No people was ever degraded except by itself, and this is most literally so with the Hindus.²³

Bankim retorted by writing in the same newspaper,

The English or the German language can possess no words or expressions to denote ideas or conceptions which have never entered into a Teutonic brain. . . A people so thoroughly unconnected with England or Germany as the old Sanskrit speaking people of India and developing a civilization and a literature peculiarly their own, had necessarily a vast store of ideas and conceptions utterly foreign to the Englishman

or the German, just as the Englishman or the German boasts a still vaster number of ideas utterly foreign to the Hindu . . . Mr. Hastie's position is the logical outcome of that monstrous claim to omniscience, which certain Europeans . . . put forward for themselves. . .²⁴

Bankim was a great writer both in Bengali and the English language. For instance, one can see in the above passage how he uses the word 'monstrous' to echo the same word used by Hastie in his attack of Hindu idolatry.



William Hastie

These facts also reveal why Vivekananda would try to explain image worship and defend it in his lectures in the west. It was probably what he heard from the missionaries in his school, given that the school's principal considered it his mission to convert the 'heathen.'

However, there are more historical details surrounding the personality of William Hastie. In her book *Converting Women*, Eliza Kent examines the status of women in colonial India. She focuses on concerns of the male

missionaries towards the women missionaries in India and protecting them from what they saw as a threat from the Indian male. Kent²⁵ writes, 'The presence of white women justified the construction of a multitude of social practices and procedures that tried to ensure women's protection, practices that in turn entailed an intensification of racial divisions and the vigilant policing of the behavior of both white women and Indian men.'

Explaining the context in which arose a case involving a British missionary, Miss Mary Pigot and the confrontation with Reverend William Hastie, Kent²⁶ writes, 'Although it is true that Western women did have more scope in the colonies than at home for exercising skills and talents, colonial women were hedged about by conventions and expectations of proper conduct, which, if transgressed, could result in a hasty and humiliating loss of reputation. That women missionaries were not immune from the dynamics of sexual jealousy is vividly illustrated in the trial of Miss Pigot, a single lady missionary with the United Scottish Mission. Her case illustrates the multiple social forces with which 'unprotected' European women had to contend.'

It seems that Reverend Hastie cast aspersions on the character of Miss Pigot which led to a libel suit by the latter. Hastie lost this case

and had to pay damages to Miss Pigot. Kent²⁷ amplifies as follows.

'Miss Pigot, an unmarried middle-aged Anglo-Indian woman, ran the Church of Scotland's orphanage and zenana mission in Calcutta from 1870 to 1883. From newspaper accounts from the period, it seems that she did a tolerable job of managing these institutions and was well liked by both foreign missionaries and Christian and non-Christian Indians. However, starting in 1879, a clergy-man newly arrived in Calcutta, Rev. William Hastie, circulated reports that she was both incompetent in her professional capacity, and more important, indiscreet and immodest in her dealings with men. Hastie, the head of a college run under the auspices of the Church of Scotland, insinuated in reports that he sent to the Home Committee that she had had improper relationships with both an Indian Christian teacher at her school, Babu Kali Charan Banerjee, and Prof. Wilson, a lay teacher at the college managed by Rev. Hastie. In 1883, after a trip to Scotland to try to reclaim her good name with the principal men of the church, Miss Pigot returned to Calcutta and charged Hastie with libel.'

Hastie lost this lawsuit and had to pay Miss Pigot 3000 rupees in damages. By claiming insolvency, Hastie avoided paying these damages.

(To be continued. . .)



References

Note: References of the first part of the article published in Aug. 2011: [The location in the article is given in square brackets.]

1. [Page 310, 'The most popular one, circulated also in some recent articles'] See Swami Prabhananda's short biography of Swami Vivekananda, published in Prospects, Vol. 33, No. 2, June 2003, Springer.
2. [Page 310, '...this account that was recently printed in The Hindu'] See <http://www.thehinduonline/thehindu/mag/2002/06/23/stories2002062300310400.htm>
3. [Page 310, '...the most recent one being in The Telegraph dated Sunday, February 1, 2009.'] See http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090201/jsp/calcutta/story_10468987.jsp
4. [Page 311, '...Dr. Bhupendranath Datta, Vivekananda's brother. He writes'] See Bhupendranath Datta, *Swami Vivekananda, Patriot-Prophet*, Nababharat Publishers, 1954, Calcutta, p. 173.

The Meeting of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda

M RAM MURTY

(Continued from previous issue. . .)

The 'Hastie factor' was put forward by Haramohan Mitra, and it may be illuminating to say a few words about Mitra especially in this context. A short biography of him has been written by Swami Chetanananda in his book, *They Lived With God*. There, we find the following story.

One summer evening in 1887, Swamiji was conversing with Haramohan in his home about the deep meaning of Sri Ramakrishna's message. Inspired, the Swami said, '... One can write shelves of philosophical books based on a single teaching of Sri Ramakrishna.'

Surprised, Haramohan replied, 'Is that so? But we don't find any such profundity in his teachings. Could you explain one of his teachings in that manner?'

'Do you have the brains,' asked the Swami, 'to understand the Master? Well, take anything of his and I shall explain it to you.'

'All right,' Haramohan said, 'please explain the story of the elephant god and the mahout god, which illustrated his instruction to see God in all beings.'

At once, Swami Vivekananda launched into the controversial doctrines of free will versus predestination and self-effort versus the will of God—a perpetual unresolved conflict among

scholars of both the East and West. For three continuous days, Swamiji explained to Haramohan in simple language that the Master's story was a solution to that age-old controversy.²⁸

It seems that there were at least two other occasions when Swami Vivekananda became annoyed with Haramohan Mitra. In his letter to Shashi (Swami Ramakrishnananda) written in 1895, Swamiji expresses some irritation at him. 'Haramohan has coined the word *Lord Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, I see. What does he mean? English Lord or Duke?'²⁹ Swami Chetanananda in his brief biography of Haramohan, writes,

While he was in America, Swami Vivekananda gave permission to Haramohan to publish his lectures. He did so to ease the poverty of his old friend. But later, in a letter written on October 28, 1896, Swamiji expressed his irritation at the cheap quality of materials used for the publication. He wrote, 'That Haramohan is a fool ... and his printing is diabolical. There is no use publishing books that way; it is cheating the public and should not be done.'³⁰

There are several other occasions when Haramohan makes an appearance in the *Kathamrita*. We will not go into further details since they only support the sketch of Haramohan given above. From all of these descrip-

 M Ram Murty, FRSC, is Queen's Research Chair & Head, Department of Mathematics Statistics Jeffery Hall, Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada □

tions, the picture that emerges of him is of a well-intentioned incompetent person and lacking in insight.

It seems (to me) that Haramohan was keen to document some certification of Swamiji's greatness from a 'western' source. It is quite possible that Hastie knew of Sri Ramakrishna, but based on his vitriolic views of 'Hindu idolatry' it is doubtful that he would recommend his students to visit the saint or hold him up as an example of an 'English enlightenment.' It may be that Principal Hastie had a very high opinion of young Narendranath. But surely, we do not need Hastie's testimony to certify Narendranath's genius.

The facts speak for themselves. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Hastie was appointed as principal of the Church of Scotland College in 1878, at the age of 36.

There he showed zeal and energy alike as academic organizer, as missionary, and as a writer. In 1881, he published the first part of *The Elements of Philosophy*, and in 1882 he issued an enlarged version of Dr. Th. Christlieb's *Protestant Mission to the Heathen*. In 1883, his *English Enlightenment and Hindoo Idolatry* (a reprint of six letters from the Calcutta Statesman) gave educated natives some offence. Complaints, too, of the discipline of the college led the Foreign Missions Committee to relieve him of his post of principal in November 1883, and his able appeal to the general assembly at Edinburgh on 29 May 1884 was rejected by 193 to 90. A period of exclusion from ecclesiastical office followed, and Hastie occupied himself in translating from German, Italian and French works on theology, philosophy and law. . . . He died suddenly in Edinburgh on 31 August 1903 . . . He was unmarried.³¹

From these brief biographical facts, we see that Hastie was a scholar with some

knowledge of Western philosophy, in particular the works of Hegel and Kant, since he translated some of their works into English. But he saw his primary role as a missionary and used philosophy, especially the writings of Hegel regarding the superiority of Christianity among all religions, as a support for his mission.

Thus, when we examine all the historical facts, the letters written by Hastie in *The Statesman*, his caustic exchanges with Bankim on Hindu idolatry, his subsequent libel case from Miss Pigot, the picture that emerges of Hastie is that he was a puritanical zealot bent on reforming the 'heathen' from their idolatry. Clearly he did not have good relations with the missionaries in his own community. If Hastie denounced idolatry so vehemently in his time, it explains to some extent Vivekananda's position often taken in writings in defence of image worship. That this was the prevalent view of Hinduism both in Europe and North America can be seen from reading newspaper accounts of Swamiji's lectures in the west.

To give one small example, the *Detroit Free Press* reported on February 18, 1894 concerning the lecture 'The Divinity of Man' delivered by Swami Viveka Ananda [Vivekananda] at the Unitarian Church in Detroit. Incorrectly stating the title of his lecture, as well as his name, they wrote, 'Speaking on "The Divinity of God," Vive Kananda wove a metaphysical texture on affairs human and divine so logical that he made science appear like common sense.' The lecture was followed by questions. Here is a sample of the type of questions asked: 'Do the people of India throw their children into the jaws of crocodiles? Do they kill themselves beneath the wheels of the juggernaut? Do they burn widows with their husbands?'³²

With his characteristic humour, he replied by saying that only the softer children are thrown because they are easily masticated by the crocodiles! He addressed the other questions with equal wit.

Meaning of Image Worship

This was the prevailing view of Hinduism and it is no wonder that missionaries went to India to convert the 'heathen.' The missionaries in India did not make efforts to dispel such views but rather propagated them. The main reason was they never made any attempts to understand it. They found Kali hideous, Krishna and the 'rasa lila' vulgar and it was easy to classify it as idolatrous and primitive. It is this conflict that was re-enacted on the pages of *The Statesman* between Hastie and Bankim. Responding to Hastie's criticism of image worship, Bankim wrote on October 28, 1882,

Modern science has shown that Hindus always knew that the phenomena of nature are simply the manifestations of force. They worship, therefore, Nature as force. *Sakti*, literally and ordinarily means force or energy. As destructive energy, force is Kali, hideous and terrible, because destructive energy is hideous and terrible. As constructive energy, force is the bright and resplendent Durga. . . The God is always believed, by every worshipper, to exist apart from the image. The image is simply the visible and accessible medium through which I choose to send my homage to the throne of the Invisible and the Inaccessible . . . the image is holy, not because the worshipper believes it to be his God—he believes in no such thing—but because he has made contact with his own heart for the sake of culture and discipline to treat it as God's image.³³

In his lecture, *My Plan of Campaign*, Swami Vivekananda said,

It has become a trite saying that idolatry is wrong and every man swallows it at the present time without questioning. I once thought so, and to pay the penalty of that I had to learn my lesson sitting at the feet of a man who realized everything through idols; I allude to Ramakrishna Paramahansa. If such Ramakrishna Paramahansas are produced by idol worship, what will you have—the reformer's creed or any number of idols? . . . Take a thousand idols more if you can produce Ramakrishna Paramahansas through idol worship.³⁴

During his itinerant days, Swami Vivekananda confronted the Maharaja of Alwar, Mangal Singh, who was a strong critic of idol worship. The encounter is related in *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* as follows.

The Maharaja told Swamiji that he had no faith in idol worship and with a derisive tone said, 'You see, I really cannot worship wood, earth, stone or metal like other people. Does this mean I shall fare worse in the life hereafter?' The Swami responded politely by saying that everyone should follow the religious ideal according to one's own faith. But then, the Swami's eyes fell upon a portrait of the Maharaja that was hanging on the wall. Looking at it, he asked, 'Whose picture is this?' The servant who was nearby answered that it was the likeness of the Maharaja. Then the Swami ordered him, 'Spit upon it!'

The servant shrieked in horror. But the Swami continued. 'Spit upon it! I say spit! Anyone of you may spit upon it.' The servant cried out by saying, 'Swamiji, what are you asking me to do? This is the likeness of the Maharaja. How can I do such a thing?'

The Swami reminded them that the Maharaja was not bodily present in the picture. The picture is only a piece of paper. It does not contain his flesh and bones. 'Yet, you refuse to spit because you see in this photograph the shadow of the

Maharaja. By spitting on the photo, you feel you are insulting the Maharaja. So you see your highness, though you are not bodily present in the photograph in the literal sense, you are present in another sense. That is why your servant was reluctant to spit upon it. Thus it is also with devotees who worship stone and metal images of gods and goddesses. It is because an image brings to their minds the special form and attributes of the Divinity and helps them to concentrate and that is why the devotee worships God in an image.³⁵

In his inspired commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Vinoba Bhave highlights the similarities between poetic metaphors and image worship. Expounding on the significance of the 'viswarupa' and its relation to image worship, Bhave writes,³⁶

Many people have opposed image worship. Foreigners, and even thinkers of our own country have found fault with it. But the more I think of it, the more I realize its beauty. What is the meaning of it? Image worship is the vidya, the art, of expressing the whole universe in a little object. Is it wrong to learn the vidya which helps us to see the whole world in a little village? This is not mere imagination, it is a matter of direct experience. What there is in the cosmic form, all of it is contained in a little image, in a grain of sand . . . All the world in a grain of sand. . . . The basis of image worship is the same as that of metaphors and similes in poetry.

This echoes the famous lines of William Blake in his 'Auguries of Innocence' where he wrote,

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

Bhave's perspective on image worship could have been enlightening to the poetic



Surendra Nath Mitra

disposition of Reverend Hastie. The eloquent letters of Bankim had no effect on Hastie's position regarding image worship.

All of these exchanges had already occurred when Bankim met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time. In 1883, Hastie was already dismissed as Principal of the Church of Scotland College where Narendranath was a student. Hastie returned to England and continued his translations of works of German philosophy.

According to the *Kathamrita*, the meeting of Bankim and Sri Ramakrishna took place on December 6, 1884. Making a humorous reference to the literal meaning of the word 'bankim' Sri Ramakrishna asks, 'Bankim! Well, what has made you bent?' and Bankim replies 'Why, sir, boots are responsible for it. The kicks of our white masters have bent my body.'³⁷ This is a clear indication of what Bankim felt he was up against on the intellectual battlefield concerning the prevailing western views of India and Hinduism in particular.

Conclusion

In view of this documentary evidence, it is unlikely that such a person as Hastie would invite everyone to go and see Sri Ramakrishna, someone who attained enlightenment through idolatry! It is possible that Hastie held an ambivalent view of India, but primarily that of a missionary 'to educate and enlighten' the 'heathen'. We find in many of the informal discussions of Swami Vivekananda with the literate public the same issues coming up again and again. Such stereotypical views have not diminished and we see this emerging even in academic classrooms in North America in the present information age. The only remedy is

to put the facts up front and let the educated public decide. This is the role of the scholar.

In conclusion, we have on very good authority that there was a meeting between Sri Ramakrishna and Narendranath Datta that took place in Surendranath Mitra's house around November 1881. Since Surendranath was Naren's neighbour and Sri Ramakrishna was practically the 'talk of the town,' it is highly likely that Naren heard about the saint from his own relatives like Ramachandra Datta or his neighbour, Surendranath Mitra. This was probably the likely scenario. □

(Concluded.)

References

28. Swami Chetanananda, *They Lived with God*, Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1989, p. 332.
29. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 12th Edition, Advaita Ashrama, 1991, Vol. 6, p. 338
30. Swami Chetanananda, *They Lived with God*, Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1989, p. 332.
31. *Dictionary of National Biography*, by Sir Leslie Stephen, Elibron Classics, 2005, p. 222.
32. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 3, Advaita Ashrama, 1991, p. 496-497.
33. Jogesh Chandra Bagal, *Bankim Rachanavali*, Sahitya Samsad, 1969, Calcutta, pp. 214-216.
34. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 3, p. 218.
35. *The Life of Swami Vivekananda, by Eastern and Western Disciples*, Volume 1, Advaita Ashrama, 1979, p. 269.
36. Acharya Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita*, Macmillan Co., New York, 1960, pp. 150-152.
37. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 1977, p. 666-667.

Ramakrishna recognized in Naren's furious and obstinate strength a divine power. He could see clearly that, once it had exercised itself in questioning and doubt and thoroughly exhausted them, that same power would one day lead a multitude of weaker souls to God.

So Ramakrishna was supremely patient with Naren. The more Naren thrashed about the better, as far as he was concerned. This feisty 'big one' was not about to get away, in any event. Naren was hooked. His struggles could only drive the hook still deeper. In the meantime, the sport of it was a wonder to behold, and a strong tonic for Sri Ramakrishna. One aspect of the Master's yearning had been fulfilled by Rakhal—his gentle, contemplative side—and Rakhal's coming had been a literal fulfilment of Ramakrishna's prayer to the Mother for a mild and affectionate spiritual son. But Ramakrishna had made a prayer of a sterner sort as well. Sensing, perhaps, that the very best that was inside of him would come out only under the fire of battle, the Master had prayed, 'Mother, send me someone who will dispute my realizations!'

It was a prayer that Naren's coming was to answer in excess.

—Richard Schiffman, *Sri Ramakrishna—A Prophet for the New Age*, p.149