

# BRAHMO SAMAJ AS AN ACTOR IN THE DISSEMINATION OF ARYAN INVASION THEORY (AIT) IN INDIA

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*Dissemination of a scientific theory often follows a circuitous route. It is a widespread notion supported by eminent scholars that the noted linguist and religious scholar F. Max Müller is responsible for the dissemination of the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), and thus played into the hands of imperial interests. In this article, we argue that there were other stakeholders in the process of the widespread acceptance of AIT. In particular, Brahma Samaj, a prominent socio-religious reform association in nineteenth-century India, also played a major role in the spreading of AIT. Prominent leaders of Brahma Samaj, actively or passively, collaborated with Müller in that process. We closely examine the development of affairs during that time and attempt to establish that the development of a scientific theory is not a unilateral process, but rather strongly influenced by the socio-political environments of the time.*

**Keywords:** Aryan Invasion Theory; Friedrich Max Müller; Brahma Samaj; colonialism; Christianity; Hinduism; caste system; Keshub Chandra Sen

## INTRODUCTION

“We see a re-union of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race,” proclaimed Keshub Chandra Sen, arguably the most prominent Indian religious reformer of his times, in a mass gathering in Calcutta, the capital of British India in March 1877.<sup>1</sup> This open embracing of the English nation by a distinguished member of the Indian elite is an event of paramount significance considering the fact that, only two decades previously, in 1857, Indian leaders had fought a gory battle to usurp British rule in India. The battle was widespread, with almost all of the Indian royalties united against British colonialism, only to accept defeat at the end.

The changes that took place during these two subsequent decades coincided with the rise of a popular theory, known as the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), proposed by F. Max Müller. The seemingly separate worlds of academic research, linguistic studies, religious reformation and political battles collided to pave the way for this theory. It is an often-

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1 Sen 1901.

debated argument that behind political, economic, and literary activities, strong social control is always in action. A major offshoot of this argument is the social construction of science and technology,<sup>2</sup> which argues that scientific works are not only products of the pursuit of truth, but also accede to the demands and prejudices of society. In this article, we explore the early dissemination of AIT in India. We investigate how the interests of the British Empire, Christian missionaries, and Brahmo Samaj, an elite social reformation movement in India, crossed paths to shape the course of AIT in India. While this study can be generalized to Oriental Studies and the field of any scientific theory, we focus on AIT, a prominent Oriental theory.

In his landmark work *Orientalism*, Edward Said proclaims that the apparent academic pursuit of nineteenth-century orientalists served nothing but the interests of colonial powers.<sup>3</sup> This echoes the ideas of Michel Foucault that *knowledge begets power*. Thomas R. Trautmann countered the views of Said, suggesting that Oriental Studies had serious academic interests, too.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Trautmann cited academicians before colonial rule who were interested in Oriental Studies. Trautmann assumed a rather narrow definition of an Oriental scholar: one with knowledge of Asian languages and not one who produced inaccurate depictions of the Orient based on secondary sources. Let us look into the deeper context of AIT on this basis.

F. Max Müller, a linguist with a strong background in Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, was definitely a scholarly genius of his age and satisfied the definition of Orientalist according to Trautmann. Yet, Müller is often (dis)-credited for wrongly putting forward AIT, which served as an instrument of political power, not exactly fitting the image of an Oriental scholar. This apparent contradiction is also present in the life of Müller, who often fought intellectual battles against devout Christians as well as Oriental scholars. To give an example, during the heated contest for the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit in 1860, Müller was cast as the one with fewer credentials to help the missionary cause in India by the supporters of the rival candidate, Monier-Williams.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Müller had an interest in ancient Sanskrit texts, which catered to the philosophical views of the Indian mind, whereas Monier-Williams had a profound knowledge of actual religious practices. Interestingly, even though Müller faced criticism from several quarters for being anti-Christian, he rather intended at some points in his life to promote Christianity in India. Also, in the general debate against reigning scientific heroes of that time, particularly Darwin, Müller was pitched as a devout Christian. Though Müller was primarily a literary scholar, his involvement with various agencies during his research makes it quite hard to classify him as “Orientalist” according to the definitions of either Said or Trautmann. However, Müller is considered the strongest force behind the propagation of AIT, which counters the argument of Trautmann.

What earlier historians have overlooked is that the development of any scientific theory needs vigorous interaction between the propounder and recipients of the theory. In the case of AIT, a key class of recipients was the educated Indian elite. We argue here that

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2 Healy 1982; Milic 1980; Said 1978.

3 Said 1978.

4 Trautmann 2004.

5 Beckerlegge 1997, p. 189.

the dissemination of AIT had a greater number of stakeholders than previously recognized in the literature. The focus of this article is the role played by Brahmo Samaj, a social reform movement spearheaded by the Indian elite, in the adoption and spread of AIT. The key point of our argument is that AIT served the interests of British imperialists, Christian missionaries, and Müller as well as the leaders of Brahmo Samaj. At the same time it can be argued that everyone participated in the proliferation of AIT in various capacities. The interests of these parties are not necessarily scholarly as Thomas R. Trautmann has suggested, not necessarily imperial as Edward Said argued, but include many aspects such as the religious, social and political viewpoints of the stakeholders.

The case presented in this article is that religious reform movements in India also played a role in the adoption and proliferation of AIT. Our idea is similar to that of Catherine Hall, who maintained that the “framework of them/us, or what is absolutely the same versus what is absolutely other, will not do. It is not possible to make sense of empire either theoretically or empirically through a binary lens: we need the dislocation of that binary and more elaborate, cross-cutting ways of thinking.”<sup>6</sup> Previous studies on the emergence of AIT focused solely on an individual cause-and-effect scenario, which is hardly the complete truth.

In the following, we briefly review the background of theories related to the Aryan myth. We will then closely study the contemporary state of the European academic and Indian socio-religious movement, the two prime foci of the current study.

## Nineteenth-Century European Politics and the Emergence of Oriental Studies

### *The Eastern question*

After the Russo-Turkish war that ended in 1774 with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the decline of this once powerful empire was only a matter of time. To safeguard their military, political and diplomatic interests, major European nations entered into a long power struggle, called the Eastern Question. This was one of the major issues in nineteenth-century European politics, particularly involving England, Germany, Russia and the Balkan nations.

Over a religious dispute, Russia went to war again with the Ottoman Empire from 1853 to 1856, the conflict known as the Crimean War. Britain and France wished to bolster the Ottoman Empire, partly to prevent the rise of Russia, and so supported the Ottomans with their military fleets. Russia was defeated, but gained ground later once France and several German states became embroiled in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. Later, to maintain the colonial supremacy of Britain over other European powers, the British Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli took a serious interest in foreign policy. After the Turks ceded Bulgaria at the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878, Britain arranged negotiations between Russia, Germany and Britain at the Congress of Berlin, during June and July 1878. In the Treaty of Berlin, Disraeli was able to reach an honorable agreement with Russia, though Czar Alexander II later described the congress as a “European coalition against Russia, under Bismarck”.

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6 Hall 2002, p. 16.

### *Oriental Studies*

This volatile political situation fostered the study of Oriental languages in England, partly from a military-political perspective. This is reflected in a letter dated 21 March 1854, just three days before war was declared against Russia. Max Müller received a letter from Sir Charles Trevelyan (then Assistant Secretary to the Treasury) asking for advice on how best to study the languages of the northern division of the Turkish empire and the adjoining provinces of Russia. Sir Charles requested that Müller at once prepare a treatise, showing which languages were spoken in that part of the world, their general structure, and the alphabets used, and what would be the most useful books to consult on the respective languages. By 16 May 1854, Max Müller was able to send his suggestions.<sup>7</sup> In his first letter to Sir Charles, Müller called attention to a subject that continued to occupy his thoughts almost to the end of his life. He writes: “It is undoubtedly high time that something should be done to encourage the study of Oriental languages in England; . . . in other Countries which have any political, commercial, or religious connections with the East, provision has been made, by Government or otherwise, to encourage young men to devote themselves to this branch of studies.” He strongly maintains: “In England alone, where the most vital interests are involved in a free intercourse with the East, hardly anything is done to foster Oriental Studies.”<sup>8</sup>

Müller was a keen follower of contemporary politics as reflected by his numerous letters. Long after, in 1890, a school of modern Oriental Studies was established in London. In the inaugural address, Müller mentioned the efforts he had made for the previous three decades, starting from the time of the Crimean War to the need for English Vernacular education. Müller had a specific interest in India for many reasons. First, Müller admired the deep-rooted colonial prowess that England enjoyed over India. In a letter dated November 1885, he writes, “There may be jealousies between England and her colonies, but if it came to extremities, the colonies would allow no hair of England to be touched. Even India, which was formerly a danger, has shown now that England’s enemies are her enemies.” Second, he knew how important it was to understand the subjects. He reflected during his speech at the inauguration of the school in 1890 on how greatly India could benefit if English merchants, clerks and employers in general were able to acquire the languages which the colonial subjects use. Finally, Müller was clearly intrigued by the ancient forms of religion that existed in Indian texts. In his treatise on different forms of religion, as delivered in the Gifford lecture series in 1891, he devoted a complete lecture, the “Physical Religion”, to Vedic literature. There, he also mentions that the assumed date of the earliest formation of Vedic literature was between 1500 BC and 1000 BC. Müller was not alone in his studies of ancient texts, though he certainly was an aberration among scholars of classical literature in confirming such an early date for Vedic literature. In his Gifford lecture series, he points this out in a rather blunt way: “Sanskrit is still looked upon as an unwelcome guest by many classical scholars and anything that can be said against it is welcomed by all who dislike the trouble of learning a new language.”<sup>9</sup>

7 Müller and Müller 1902, pp. 153–54.

8 Müller and Müller 1902, p. 154.

9 Müller 1891.

Thus, what started in an Oriental Studies with a preliminary political interest in Oriental languages, had slowly established itself as a separate and strong discipline. After wrestling with the facts and assumptions about the Aryan migration and the chronology of Vedic literature, Müller commented: “Perhaps we shall have to confess that after all our ideas of what human beings in India ought to have thought 3000 years ago are evolved from our inner consciousness and that we must learn to digest facts though they do not agree with our tastes and our preconceived ideas.”<sup>10</sup>

The preconceived ideas that Müller referred to in passing had something to do with the changing view of the world, as it was known, thanks to upheavals caused by several European scientific luminaries.

## The Nineteenth-Century European Scientific World: Abrupt Changes in Ancient Notions

The nineteenth-century scientific world in Europe witnessed the evolution of many prominent scientific theories. The rising dominance of science over faith was causing major upheavals in the reigning religious circles. There was a scientific revolution in almost every field of knowledge. Theologians and scientists were thrown into confusion, and they often entered into bitter conflict after the publication of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* in 1830–33. This challenged the theory of evolution from a Christian point of belief. Lyell was a major advocate of James Hutton’s idea of uniformitarianism, which states that the earth was shaped entirely by slow-moving forces, acting over a very long period of time. This was in contrast to catastrophism, a geologic idea of abrupt changes, which had been adapted in England to support belief in Noah’s flood.<sup>11</sup> Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* followed this in 1859. This purported to trace man’s origin to an ancient form, which diverged from monkey stock, arousing a controversy still very much alive today.

The hard-hitting empirical evidence brought forward by Lyell and Darwin challenged Victorian morality and longstanding Christian beliefs. Common people of the era suddenly found themselves in a state referred to as the Crisis of Faith. The result was partly an increased interest in ancient texts that would re-establish the supremacy of Christian beliefs and partly an obsession for new forms of science, which, at all times, were not really based on scientific merit.

In 1853, Arthur de Gobineau, a French aristocrat, who travelled around the world on official duties, published a book titled *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (*An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*), which found eager audiences in France and Germany. He suggested that all human beings originated from Biblical ancestors but colored races belong to different human families altogether. He blamed racial impurity for the turmoil in France. In essence, de Gobineau did not put forward any new ideas. He re-emphasized the theory of polygenism, which argues that different races evolved separately in different geographical locations without any common ancestor. In nineteenth-century Europe polygenism was a widely held belief, connected with the establishment of the Anthropological

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Whewell 1837.

Society of London in 1863. Its members had a view completely opposite to that of Darwin and generally supported scientific racism, as proposed by authors like de Gobineau.

In 1839, Samuel George Morton, a noted physical anthropologist, published a monograph titled *Crania Americana*, in which he suggested that the intellectual capacity of a race could be measured from the size of the skull of its members. Works of other anthropologists, such as Josiah Nott, who supported the notion of polygenism, followed this. Further evidence from physical anthropologists suggested that long-headed, tall, blonde Nordic races were clearly demarcated from broad-headed people from the south.<sup>12</sup>

The general mood in nineteenth-century Europe was influenced by political turmoil and close contact, as a result of colonialism, with many peoples from diverse linguistic, cultural, geographical and ethnological backgrounds. Amidst all this, the European power struggle found an outlet in scientific theories, particularly for the purpose of racism.

## Development of the Aryan Myth

### *Development of the Aryan Race concept*

In 1786, Sir William Jones, a judge in the Calcutta High Court and also the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, made the following observation during the third anniversary discourse of the society: “The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them stronger affinity both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar than could have been produced by accident, so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which perhaps no longer exists.”<sup>13</sup>

Till the discovery of Sanskrit by linguistic scholars, the most ancient Indo-European language group known to scholars was ancient Indo-Iranian. Among linguists, this discovery led to significantly heightened activity around Sanskrit literature, particularly the study of the most archaic documents in Sanskrit – the Vedic texts. Soon, linguists started referring to the entire group as Proto-Indo-European language, also referred to as the Aryan languages. The term Aryan was associated with Indo-European since Indo-Iranian languages represented this group and Indo-Iranian-speaking people referred to themselves as Aryan in many places. The same term came to be used for the new language group, i.e., Proto-Indo-European language.

The term Aryan can be traced to the ancient Sanskrit word *ārya*, which occurs multiple times in different verses of *Rig Veda*, the oldest Vedic text. According to the translation in 1872 by Monier-Williams, Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University, the word had diverse meanings but is generally attached to a person who is noble and follows Vedic traditions. The word *Arya* is also found in ancient Iranian texts, particularly in the *Avesta*, the collection of sacred texts in Zoroastrianism. Unlike the Indian reference, the Iranian texts were ascribed to Aryans in a clear ethnic context.

The first reference to an Aryan race in linguistic research occurs on page 262 of the lectures on the Science of Language by Müller, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great

<sup>12</sup> Todd 1992, p. 248.

<sup>13</sup> Patil 2003, p. 249.

Britain in 1861. Müller comments: “While examining its ramification, learn at the same time why that name was chosen by the agricultural nomads, the ancestors of the Aryan race.” It might very well be an unintentional mistake as in the same lecture he mentioned “Aryan dialect”, “Aryan verb”, “Aryan speech” and “Aryan languages”. Nevertheless, the overlapping of a language-speaking group with a race continued. The mixing of language-speaking group and race also had something to do with what was taking shape across many European nations at the time.

### *Romantic Nationalism*

The European Romantic Movement or Romantic Nationalism is a movement that started emphasizing the emotional aspects of nature as a reaction against the Industrial Revolution and scientific rationalization, and left a deep impression on the rise of nationalistic sentiments. Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829) was a German poet, philosopher, Orientalist and one of the founders of the Romantic Movement in Germany. In Germany, for example, the Romantic Movement heightened interest in anything that was originally German. A collection of folk stories published by the Brothers Grimm represented the undiluted form of national culture and literature. In 1836, Gustav Klemm published a book titled *Handbook of German Antiquity*, which tried to retrace German culture through ancient literature and available archaeological data. Schlegel was extremely familiar with ancient Indian texts, as well as the Aryan myth, due to the Proto-Indo-European language family. In 1808, he published a book *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians)*.

In search of antecedents in antiquity, Schlegel put forward a theory. In the first-hand account of Julius Caesar’s “*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*” (Comments on the Gallic Wars), he mentioned Ariovistus, a German leader. Schlegel suggested that “Ario” is etymologically close to the German word “Ehre” (meaning honor), and hence is connected to Aryan.

Combined with the simultaneously evolving theories of polygenism and evidence from physical anthropologists, the Aryan connection became deeply embedded. In his lecture series on the science of language, Müller commented, “And as in Persia we found many proper names in which Arya formed an important ingredient, so we find again in German history names such as Ariovistus.” Müller put in the footnote that etymologically this connection may not be correct but, in the end, it was still only a footnote.

### *Home of the Aryans*

The last part missing of the puzzle was the need to determine the homeland of the mythical Aryan race. Diverse sets of archaeological data were being put forward to favor the respective claims for Germany, Western Russia and Scandinavia.<sup>14</sup> However, regardless of the actual homeland claim, it was well accepted, despite lack of any evidence other than linguistic matches, that there was a migration. Müller explored in depth the possible migration routes in his science of language lectures, starting with, “Two roads were open to the Aryans of Asia in their westward migrations.” It was implicit that the same Aryans did either migrate from central Asia to India, or migrated westward starting from India. It was

14 Todd 1992, p. 248.



also implicit that the westward migration led to different branches, including the Germans and British.

The kinship that could then clearly unite India and Europe would actually be welcomed by a significant group of Indian intellectuals, as discussed in the following sections. For Orientalists, like Müller, the circumstances of India at that time could be explained by degradation from their superior, ancient Aryan traditions.

It is interesting to note that around the same time, in the 1850s, Karl Marx, noted philosopher, economist and social commentator, in a series of articles in the *New York Daily Tribune*, justified the British colonization of India as a form of paternal colonialism, which exported civilization to end “Oriental despotism”. The story could not have been better positioned than what had already been established, even through half-baked theories: a lost kin from Europe bringing back civilization to India.

## Social Crisis in Nineteenth-Century India and the Emergence of “Brahmo Samaj”

India in the nineteenth century was a melting pot of widely contrasting ideas. On the one hand, there was a deluge of Western thought from the leaders of scientific evolution and the efforts of Christian missionaries to denigrate Indian religious practices. On the other hand, prevalent religious customs offered little to support the crisis of identity among a rational Indian youth.

“First send the missionaries, then send the merchants and send the army”<sup>15</sup> – this was the dominant policy of the European powers for spreading colonialism/imperialism, and which was also applied to India. For a detailed perspective on prevailing social conditions, we will look at the reminiscences of Mahendranath Datta, who grew up amidst serious social turmoil in Calcutta. Calcutta was the most prominent city and cultural center of India during the middle of the nineteenth century. There was an ongoing crisis in religious identity there, especially among the youth. This occurred as a result of the strong currents of ancient rituals coming up against the new wave of Western thought brought by Christian missionaries. The common people had very little knowledge of the literature disseminating the most ancient philosophical thought such as the Upanishads and Gita. Religion survived as a complex of social traditions, which could not stand up against the scrutiny of an inquisitive, rational mind. The so-called elite in society spent their time pursuing carnal pleasures, also carried out in the name of religion.

Young boys formed groups to fight against the deterioration of society, but could not offer an alternative religion that would match with their identity. Embracing Christianity offered a way out, but at the cost of losing their identity and becoming social outcasts. On the other hand, to combat Christianity would require considerable knowledge as well as courage.<sup>16</sup> The social hierarchy was deeply ingrained, to the point where people of different castes would not even eat at the same place.<sup>17</sup> Christian missionaries took full advantage of this social predicament. They openly proclaimed that Hinduism was nothing

<sup>15</sup> Datta 2010, pp. 22, 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; Hall 2002, p. 16.



but prejudice, and that it was entirely wrong.<sup>18</sup> There were also groups formed that completely denied the existence of any god whatsoever. In this struggling period in society, Keshub Chandra Sen started to preach Brahma Dharma and established “Brahmo Samaj” with the concept of a universal religion.

## Brahmo Samaj as a Socio-Religious Reform Movement during the Nineteenth Century in India

Brahmo Samaj (“Society of Brahma”, also translated as “Society of God”) was the societal component of Brahmoism. It was one of the most influential religious reformist movements<sup>19</sup> responsible for the making of modern India. Brahma Samaj was established in 1830 in Calcutta, the capital of British India, by Raja Rammohun Roy. Rammohun Roy was a rich, upper-caste Brahmin, a respectable Sanskrit scholar, well versed in several languages including Persian and English, as well as known for a few philosophical publications in Bengali.<sup>20</sup> Debendranath Tagore was a Hindu philosopher and religious reformer. The newfound Samaj was called Adi Brahma Samaj, where Adi stands for “Original” and Samaj means “congregation”. It began the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century, pioneering the religious, social and educational advance of the Hindu community.<sup>21</sup>

The religion of the Adi Brahma Samaj stood for repudiation of all “distinctions between people” and the foundation of a modern educated secular Indian nation under the timeless and formless One God. The Adi Dharma (literally meaning “original phenomena/disambiguation”) Brahmik religion was originated by the Bengali Brahmin Thakur clan of Rammohun Roy, Debendranath Tagore and Prasanna Kumar Tagore. This was the first organized casteless movement in British India and its influence reverberated from its heart in Bengal to Assam, Bombay State (modern Sindh, Maharashtra and Gujarat), Punjab and Madras, Hyderabad, and Bangalore. Various facets of this Adi Brahma Samaj took shape in the form of other religious movements in different parts of India.

In Calcutta, other prominent leaders of Brahma Samaj included Keshub Chandra Sen, Pratap Chandra Majumdar and Sivnath Sastri. The ideological differences between these leaders reverberated throughout different socio-religious movements in India. Furthermore, and importantly, the ideological struggles within the various schisms of Brahma Samaj played a key role in the emergence of AIT.

While the British Empire wanted a tool to connect to the Indian elites, Christian missionaries needed a theory to demonstrate the supremacy of Christianity and integrate it with Indian culture and society. On the other hand the Brahma Samaj, as a whole, was constantly looking to promote its own ideology regarding Christianity. In this article, we investigate the interests of these three parties involved in the dissemination of AIT.

18 Datta 2010, p. 21.

19 Farquhar 1915, p. 29.

20 Carpenter 1866, p. 19.

21 Official Brahma website Brahmosamaj.org. Retrieved 15 October 2012.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. In the next section, a short overview of Brahma Samaj is presented to provide a picture of developments in India at the time. In the third section, the relation between Brahma Samaj, Müller and Christian missionaries is explored, as well as the view of Christianity in India as anticipated by Müller. In the fourth section, the image of Christianity in India, as viewed by Keshub Chandra Sen, a prominent leader of Brahma Samaj and close acquaintance of Müller, is presented. This section also brings forth supportive evidence about how Keshub and Müller eventually agreed on AIT. The fifth section discusses the imperial involvement with Müller and Brahma Samaj. The final section concludes with a summary of the ideas in a cohesive manner.

## A SHORT OVERVIEW OF BRAHMO SAMAJ

Reform movements are a significant and arguably strong facet of Hinduism. Even as early as the time of the Buddha, his doctrines grew out of his protests against the tyranny of ruling social leaders. Brahma Samaj in the nineteenth century took the same path of initiating a large-scale reform movement in the name of religion to stop the decadence he observed across society.

Unlike previous social reform movements, the new communication with the entire world, and in particular with the Western world of modern science, was much better established. This became another reason to glorify this movement. In his book *The Religion of Brahma Samaj* Hem Chandra Sarkar notes:

Now and here, for the first time in the history of the world, the Eastern and Western civilisations, like two mighty rivers after a long parallel march, have at last met: together at the feet of the Himalayas to give birth to a truer, fuller, and completer civilisation for future humanity; and Brahmoism is the religion of that future humanity born of the union of the East and the West.<sup>22</sup>

Rammohun Roy, the founder of Brahma Samaj, believed in the sublime ideal of a universal religion without barriers of caste, color, nationality or race. He imagined the world would offer prayers to one eternal God. Roy was closely acquainted with diverse cultures such as the Buddhist, Islamic and Christian. He mastered numerous languages, including Greek and Hebrew, to study the Bible in the original. His tireless devotion, supreme oratorical skills and zeal for the single goal of propagating this ideology gave him a prophet-like standing among his followers.

## The Foundation and Growth of Brahma Samaj

On 22 August 1828 Rammohun Roy started organizing weekly meetings for the worship of a formless God, irrespective of caste, creed or race. Two years later, a building was erected under the banner of the Theistic Church, or the Brahma Samaj. In 1838, Debendranath Tagore, a friend of Rammohun Roy and hailing from an aristocratic family, began taking

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22 Sarkar 1931.

a serious interest in his initiative. Rapid progress in the membership and enthusiasm was achieved under the aegis of Debendranath Tagore.

Rammohun Roy's approach toward his Hindu opponents as well as Christians was to refute their authority by citing passages from the Upanishads, an ancient set of Indian texts. To argue strongly against idol-worship, prevalent in Hinduism, Roy published some of the Upanishads in the original Sanskrit accompanied by Bengali and English translations. The Upanishads were follow-up texts of the ancient Vedic literature and therefore were also known as Vedanta, meaning "the end of Veda". Due to the strength of early Brahma Samaj ideals' reliance on Vedanta, it was also known as Vedantism. This also implicitly assumed that the Vedic texts were infallible. This turning back to the roots aroused much enthusiasm and added fuel to growing anti-Christian sentiment among the common people. Christianity was at that time actively preached in Calcutta, the capital of British India, and had achieved a number of conversions of young people from reputable Hindu families. However, the Christian doctrine of infallibility could not be maintained, as examined and refuted by Debendranath Tagore.

The precursor of the Brahma Samaj was called Tattwabodhini Sabha, or "truth-teaching society", established to discuss social and religious matters. In 1843, Debendranath Tagore institutionalized a Brahma Samaj with the principles of Rammohun Roy and named it Sadharan Brahma Samaj. In 1850, they rejected the religious authority of the Vedas, the ancient Indian scriptures, and published the tenets of Brahma Samaj in English. With this, the movement veered toward Universal Theism. Brahma Samaj took a leading role in many social movements. Debendranath Tagore refused to perform orthodox Hindu rites after the death of his father and had one of his daughters married according to newly minted Brahma rituals.

The infusion of youth in the Brahma movement grew significantly after Keshub Chandra Sen joined in 1857. Keshub was the son of Peary Mohun Sen, Debendranath Tagore's fellow student in the Hindu College. Keshub had unbounded respect for Debendranath, and they worked in perfect synchronization, journeying together to all parts of the country preaching their faith, and in turn creating many branches of the movement. Keshub wrote articles praising the tenets of Brahma Samaj and how it would revitalize the ancient religion of India against the onslaught of Christianity. However, Keshub changed his mind over time and grew distant from Tagore.

## **Differences between Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen**

Though Debendranath had left orthodox culture himself, many of his followers were still rooted in Hindu/Vedantic rituals. Keshub Chandra Sen desired to limit the official responsibilities of such members, while Tagore refused to deal sternly with loyal followers. The younger generation naturally accepted Sen's leadership. While Tagore initially yielded to their demands, the increasing modernization by Sen, such as inter-caste marriage, was unacceptable to Tagore.

In 1855, Charles Dall, an American Unitarian missionary, arrived in Calcutta and challenged the command of Debendranath Tagore. He formed the "Friends of Rammohun Society" in 1857, which several notable Indians joined. In 1866, Keshub became the protégé of Charles Dall and took center stage in a new movement with strong inclinations

toward Christianity. Eventually a new division of Brahmo Samaj was born in November 1866 under the sole leadership of Sen. This new organization was named Brahmo Samaj of India. The original Brahmo Samaj, founded by Debendranath Tagore, was then referred to as Adi Brahmo Samaj. The word Adi means “original” in Sanskrit. In Brahmo Samaj of India Keshub was appointed “Secretary for Life” and he declared that “God shall always be President of his Samaj”.

In a lecture delivered on 5 May 1866 in the Calcutta Medical Colleges, Keshub spoke on the topic of “Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia”. He identified Christ as Asiatic and bonded himself with him. He went on to protest the mix of nationalism and religion by stating, “I must therefore protest against that denationalization which is so general among native converts to Christianity.” He reminded Europeans of the high moral values of Christianity and finally ended on a universal note:

Let my European brethren do all they can to establish and consolidate the moral kingdom of Christ in India. Let them preach from their pulpits, and exhibit in their daily life the great principles of charity and self-sacrifice. And, on the basis of these principles, may brotherly intercourse and co-operation be established between them and my countrymen.<sup>23</sup>

Under Sen’s able and enthusiastic leadership, Brahmo Samaj of India quickly spread throughout the elite class of India. To mark the difference with Adi Brahmo Samaj, Sen gave a visible universal character to Brahmo Samaj of India. He drew upon the scriptures and inspiration from all the major religions of the world.

In 1870, Sen visited England with a few friends, where he received a warm welcome and aroused lively interest in the developments of the Brahmo movement of India.<sup>24</sup> The visit to England was planned also in order to counter the national religion campaign launched by Adi Brahmo Samaj. Keshub was vocal about the benefits of British rule in India. In a lecture delivered in London on 12 April 1870, he maintained: “The Lord in His mercy sent out the British nation to rescue India.” Keshub was granted a brief audience with the Queen-Empress who gave him an annuity of 300 pounds per year. Keshub declared all his followers to be loyal to Her Majesty’s sovereignty. Keshub’s positive attitude toward Christianity made him a frequent target of attack by writers in the *National Paper*. However, Keshub maintained his pro-Christian stance from a different point of view, by claiming that Christianity originated in the East, and therefore was part of Indian national culture.<sup>25</sup>

## The Declining Influence of Keshub Chandra Sen

In the same year Adi Brahmo Samaj launched a vigorous campaign against inter-caste marriage as instituted by Keshub. Keshub sought the legal opinion of Sir Henry Maine (Legal Member of the Viceroy’s Council) and was dismayed to learn that marriages conducted by his followers had no validity in law. To increase the trouble for Keshub, Adi Brahmo Samaj

23 Sen 1870.

24 Sarkar 1931, pp. 13–14.

25 Stevens 2011, pp. 94–95.

ensured the passage of the Special Marriages Act (Act III of 1872), which forced Keshub's followers to declare that they were "neither Hindoo, nor Mussalman nor Christian".

In 1874, a liberal faction within Keshub's group organized the Samadarshi party to counter Keshub's growing dictatorial tendencies. Later on the members of the Samadarshi party would constitute the Indian Association in support of the moderate nationalist ideology, and finally would form the Indian National Congress. It is worthwhile noting here that under the leading role of the Indian National Congress the freedom movement of India took shape.

In 1878, the marriage of Keshub's eldest daughter, Suniti, to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, Prince Nripendra Narayan, in violation of the Special Marriages Act of 1872, precipitated the first schism in Keshub Chandra Sen's organization. The Samadarshi party returned to its Brahma roots and reconstituted itself as Sadharan Brahma Samaj or the General Body of the Brahma Samaj. Keshub proposed universal religion, termed New Dispensation, around this time. The goal of this was to assimilate the growing sects of religions in India as well as around the world. Keshub Chandra Sen died at the young age of forty-five in 1884. Debendranath Tagore lived until 1905. However, his activities in Brahma Samaj were restricted when his third son, Hemendranath Tagore, took the helm as the chief minister of Adi Brahma Samaj.

## The Ideas and Influence of Brahma Samaj

The aims of the Brahma Samaj were as follows:

From this day we intend devoting ourselves to the propagation of Brahmaism and to the furtherance of the interests of our Church, apart from some of those with whom we have so long acted, but relying for aid and support on Him in whose hands are the destinies of man who supports every noble purpose, and has all along invisibly regulated the course of our Church who, in His inscrutable ways, has given strength when our Church languished from very feebleness, has vouchsafed life when her very vitality seemed ebbing away, and who has led her out from the darkness and superstition that eclipsed her face. May He enable us to discharge this sacred mission may He once more fill all the members of our Church with new life and resuscitated energy may He cause the day of hope to dawn upon the darkness of despair may He lead us out of the regions of discord and disunion into those of peace and tranquillity may He bless our cause and lead the millions of our countrymen into truth and salvation.<sup>26</sup>

Several members of Brahma Samaj played a leading role in organizing the Indian Political Association, forerunner to the Indian National Congress, as a platform for the educated middle class. This was the first organized casteless movement in British India.

Notable members of Brahma Samaj included, among many others: Satyendranath Tagore, the first Indian to join the Indian Civil Service in the British Empire and a

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<sup>26</sup> Sastri 1911.

protagonist for the emancipation of women in Indian society; Rabindranath Tagore, the foremost Indian literary figure in British India, who was awarded a knighthood but returned it in protest at British atrocities; Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, a statistician of repute and largely credited for helping the planning of modern India; and Jagadish Chandra Bose, a polymath and pioneer of radio science. It suffices to say that the Brahmo Samaj had the *crème de la crème* among its members as well as a large popular following.

In his own time, Keshub Chandra Sen was the most popular representative of Brahmo Samaj. Keshub could connect to Indian youth and Western audiences alike. His dynamic nature, young age and ability to reconcile various religious ideas gave him broad acceptance among Indian youth. He gained widespread fame because of his scholarship and eloquence, both among Indian and European audiences. It was clear that he was “by the common consent of a much larger circle of Indians and Europeans, the foremost Hindu of his time, the chief representative of Native enlightenment in India.”<sup>27</sup>

## THE COAGULATION OF BRAHMO SAMAJ: FROM CONFLICT TO COLLABORATION WITH CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES

From its inception, the religious reform movements retained a bittersweet relation with the Christian missionaries. There were conflicts between different groups of Brahmo Samaj as well as between the missionaries and Brahmo Samaj.

Christian missionaries closely followed the developments of Brahmo Samaj to win converts, if not to control the course of this movement direct to Christianity. In 1856, Christian preachers attempting to convert Adi Dharma adherents were banned from entry into the Brahmo premises by Debendranath Tagore. Between 1865 and 1866 there was a dispute in the Brahmo Samaj over caste distinctions, and Hemendranath Tagore – then in charge of the group which was henceforth known as the Adi Brahmo Samaj – expelled many younger members of the Samaj who were influenced by Christian missionaries from the Adi Samaj. It was the first schism in Brahmo Samaj. From 1867 onwards, the Adi Dharam movement became stridently nationalistic. Meanwhile the expelled Christian factions from Adi Samaj launched a sustained and bitter campaign to discourage the Adi Dharma missions from outside Bengal.

By this involvement with Christianity, “Rammohun Roy and his followers were held for a time to be the revealed character of the Vedas and in all their early controversies with Christian missionaries they maintained that there was no argument in favour of the divine inspiration of the Bible which does not apply with the same or even greater force of the Veda.”<sup>28</sup> In retaliation, the Reverend William Morton of the church Mission Society warned Vedantists that there would be no compromise with a system which through the ages has “debased the minds of men, deadened their consciousness, clouded their understanding, corrupted their hearts and countenanced every species of vice and

27 Slater 1884.

28 Müller 1884, pp. 52, 163.

immorality.”<sup>29</sup> To further strengthen the position of the reformist school against the Christian missionaries, the friends of Rammohun Ray, honest and fearless as they had always proved themselves to be, sent young scholars to Benares to study the Vedas and to report on their contents.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, there were cracks in the fragile reformist movements, which helped the cause of the missionaries. Lal Bihari De introduced a personal note on morality, which missionaries would use to their advantage in later decades, and De admitted that “I myself was a Brahmo though not in name yet in reality but I enjoyed no peace of mind. I could be sure He would pardon my sins.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite the ongoing conflicts, private correspondence between missionaries in India and their office in London reveals a somewhat respectful attitude toward the Vedantists. For example, in January 1846 a letter from Reverend James Long shows that he referred to the growing influence of Vedantism as evidenced by his “frequent and interesting conversations with educated Natives in Calcutta,” leading him to conclude, “A momentous change has taken place in Bengal.” He wrote “A few years ago an educated Native repudiated Hinduism and admitted the truth of Christianity, now I find that they resort to Vedantism as a kind of halfway house in which they lay outside the gross errors of Hinduism without admitting the Divine origin of Christianity.”<sup>32</sup>

There is another interesting letter in the same report of the Calcutta corresponding Committee (1846) by an itinerant missionary named De Rozario who, on his most recent tour, was amazed at growing Vedantic influence in suburban towns. The Brahmo newspaper was circulating widely, he reported, while Brahmo preachers were now appearing more regularly and making Christian-like speeches in the name of Vedantism. In the latter part of his letter, De Rozario recounted his visiting a Zamindar he knew well. He was shocked to learn that his friend’s son called his father a “bigoted idolator” and Hinduism a “damnable system”. But this was done not in the name of the Bible but the Vedanta. The son had subsequently helped establish a Vedantic society.<sup>33</sup> Clearly the opportunities for missionaries were being pre-empted by a new religious movement in Bengal.

## Was “Brahmo Samaj of India” (Sadharan) a Representative of the Religious Multitudes of the Empire? The British View

Already within the scope of the original parent Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chandra Sen had honed his leadership and oratory skills, and become more and more recognized as the champion of Brahmo Samaj. In a lecture, delivered 8 April 1863, “The Brahmo Samaj Vindicated”,<sup>34</sup> he clearly defined his position, both against native opponents and Christian missionaries. However, in the course of forcing through more radical reforms, Keshub grew distant from the leadership of Brahmo Samaj and veered toward

29 Mozoomdar 1887, pp. 206, 208.

30 Müller 1884, pp. 163, 52.

31 Macpherson 1900, p. 55.

32 Kopf 1979, p. 9.

33 Kopf 1979, pp. 164–65.

34 Müller 1884, p. 54.



Christianity, particularly under the influence of the Unitarian preacher Charles Dall. Eventually, it led to the point where Keshub proclaimed the eastern roots of Christ.

Due to its open embracing of Christianity, Keshub and his organization was under constant scrutiny by missionaries as well as the British Government. It is noted by Prof. Oman:

From the time of his secession from the parent Society, Keshub by his writings and public lectures enlisted the sympathies of the Viceroy, Sir John Lawrence, who took a deep interest in the work of the native reformer, particularly as Keshub had spoken publicly of Christ in terms which seemed to justify the belief that he was Christian in all but open profession of the faith.<sup>35</sup>

There was serious consideration going on at this time whether Keshub would embrace Christianity or not. This led to the warm welcome Keshub received and the lively interest shown in his visit to England in 1870.

England was also undergoing a series of turbulent phases at that time. Walter Houghton identifies two “intellectual Currents” that were crucial to the “Victorian frame of Mind”: the “critical spirit” and the “will to believe”.<sup>36</sup> There was a dangerous imbalance between the “Spiritual” and the “material” in favor of the latter, and the idea that “Keshub may be the person to restore equilibrium.”<sup>37</sup>

In this scenario, it was considered as a definite possibility that “Hindu genius might give to the teaching of the Bible an interpretation so fresh that it might attain a new force for our own England, where, checked by the rapidly growing importance of the industrial arts and of physical science, the influence of the Christian faith seems to have reached a standstill, if it has not begun in some degree to recede.”<sup>38</sup> It was noted, “While Keshub was in England many missionary organizations expressed their hope that he would prove to be a valuable ally in moving his countrymen along the road towards Christianity.”<sup>39</sup>

The idea of converting Keshub to Christianity was not a covert one. When in 1856 Keshub stepped in as a student of the Bible with the help of Rev. T. H. Burne, Domestic Chaplain to Bishop Cotton, Max Müller opined, “If anyone could have persuaded Keshub Chandra Sen to become a Christian it would have been the large hearted Bishop Cotton.”<sup>40</sup> During Keshub’s visit to London the most precious event to him was his interview with Queen Victoria. The Queen showed interest in the condition of women, and also gave what amounted to an official approval to Keshub in society. Before he left England Queen Victoria gave him a large engraving of herself and two books, *The Early Years of the Prince Consort* and *Highland Journal*, with a personal inscription.

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35 Oman 1906, p. 118.

36 Houghton 1985.

37 *The Inquirer*, 23 April 1870.

38 *Ibid*.

39 Borthwick 1977, p. 71.

40 Müller 1884, p. 51.

Circumstances at the time of Keshub's visit to England led him to decline to visit forty towns that had already invited him, and he had even received invitations from America. He had wanted to continue his visit, but finally decided that his commitments in India were more important. He delivered a farewell sermon at the Unity Church, Islington, and later at the Unitarian Church in Southampton. This demonstrates the growing acceptance of Keshub by missionaries. Keshub's lifelong companion P. C. Majumdar described Keshub's British reception as "hero-worship".<sup>41</sup> He mentioned that, "when lecturing in different places, to find that the mere mention of Keshub Chunder Sen's name elicited applause for which I was hardly prepared."<sup>42</sup> Political and social circles openly praised Keshub, particularly noting his admiration for Christianity. A *Saturday Review* article from 4 June 1870 proclaimed:

Keshub Chunder Sen is an example of what Western, and especially English, civilization is making of native gentlemen in Bengal. He has thrown himself into the study of English religion and English books till he has thoroughly made himself at home with the ideas and general ways of thinking at least of our generation. . . . He is earnest in announcing his religious views, and his earnestness is of the English rather than the Oriental type.

Lord Lawrence, who earned quite a reputation for having quashed the Indian mutiny in Punjab during 1857, largely organized Keshub's visit to England. Lord Lawrence wrote in correspondence to Lord Cranborne that "The gulf between the two classes [the English in India and the 'natives'] is very wide . . . I look on this as the great danger to which our rule in India is exposed."<sup>43</sup> Keshub fitted there in two roles. He reminded the British of their duties, acting as the voice for India. Further, Keshub demonstrated what Imperial rule could make of a native Indian.

Though there was considerable disagreement over the Christianity that would be ultimately realized via Brahma Samaj, it was understood by Christian missionaries that Keshub was the strongest proponent amongst Indians, who could advance their mission.

Sir Bartle Frere identified Brahma Samaj as "a half-way house to Christianity" and thus "a decided step in the right direction".<sup>44</sup> Baptist Rev. Samuel Cox, a Christian Universalist, stated "I strongly suspect that Mr. Sen is much more distinctly Christian than as yet he knows himself to be."<sup>45</sup> Most notably, Arthur Stanley, the Dean of Westminster, recognizing the difference of Keshub's spiritual form of Christianity, agreed to this possibility, and warmly welcomed Keshub by stating: "There would arise some native form of Indian Christianity. (Cheers.) The first dawn of that native form is seen through the religious reformers of whom the guest of the evening is the leading representative."<sup>46</sup>

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41 Mozoomdar 1887, p. 142.

42 Müller 1884, p. 72.

43 John Lawrence Collection, to Lord Cranborne, Calcutta, 19 December 1866.

44 *The Record Supplement*, 20 April 1870.

45 Collet 1871, p. 384 (speaking at a reception in Nottingham, 12 June 1870).

46 Collet 1871, p. 10 (speaking at a reception in Nottingham, 12 June 1870).

## The Concepts of the Leaders of Brahmo Samaj and Max Müller: Setting up a Network with a Redefined Brahmo Samaj

In this early phase of religious reform movements, Max Müller, German-born philologist and Orientalist and one of the founders of the Western academic field of Oriental Studies and the discipline of comparative religion, had strong connections with and even stronger opinions about the religious leaders of Bengal. These opinions were biased. This bias is apparent in his description of “men of the type of Rammohun Roy” (founder of the Brahmo-Sabha movement which preceded Brahmo Samaj). These men, he said, “Could not, and did not, shut their eyes to the superiority of Christianity from an ethical point of view. They despised in their heart the idols, as worshipped by the vulgar and had long learnt to doubt the efficacy of their sacrifices.” In his writing on the subject, the biases of Müller’s own strong religious beliefs, with ties to Christianity, are apparent.<sup>47</sup> He held opinions about other prominent leaders as well. Debendranath had become frightened or allowed himself to be frightened by his more conservative friends. He and his friends were prepared to give up all that was idolatrous and pernicious, but they would not part with all their ancient national customs, they would not have their religion denationalized.<sup>48</sup> Müller says,

Open before their eyes . . . they found all they wanted in their own ancient literature, and in the book of nature, open before their eyes, while Keshub (who was one of the members of Adi Brahmo Samaj and later the founder of Sadharan Brahmo Samaj) was looking more and more beyond the narrow frontiers of India, and seeking for spiritual food in a less degree, in the Koran and other sacred books.<sup>49</sup>

From another point of view it is clearly evident that in 1866 Max Müller, who regularly corresponded with both Debendranath and Keshub, saw the problem of national identity. He writes, “So far I can judge, Debendranath and his friends were averse to unnecessary innovations, and afraid of anything likely to wound the national feelings of the great mass of the people.” Müller said they wanted above all to retain the national character of their religion. A so-called universal form would make their religion appear grotesque and ridiculous to the nation. They pleaded for toleration of Hindu usages and customs, which appeared to them innocent.

On the other hand, during this period when India was riven by religious reforms as well as political movements, Müller had complete faith in Keshub Chandra Sen to produce Christianity in India. Müller said “After his lecture on ‘Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia’, delivered in 1866, native and European felt convinced that Keshub Chandra Sen would openly embrace Christianity.” Referring to Brahmo Samaj, Müller said “A most active missionary organization was constituted and the preachers were sent to travel from one part of the country to the other.”<sup>50</sup>

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47 Mozoomdar 1887.

48 Müller 1884, pp. 55–56.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Müller F. M., 1884, pp. 61–62.

In 1870, Dr. Milan, the new Bishop of Calcutta, forwarded a letter on Brahmo Samaj to Max Müller, written to him by Satyendranath Tagore, another prominent leader of the religious reform movement. As Max Müller was intimately acquainted later with Keshub Chandra Sen and Mozoomdar, leaders of the Samaj, he always took the deepest interest in the whole movement. Through this Samaj, Max Müller, missionaries and lovers of Christianity wanted to spread Christianity in India. They tried to convince Satyendranath Tagore about Christianity by the Vedas, but he was not satisfied with words. He questioned so much about Christianity that even Müller had no idea how to respond.<sup>51</sup>

## Müller's Interest in Spreading Christianity in India

Nevertheless, Müller was convinced and eager for the spread of Christianity in India. As we see from his letters, "India is much riper for Christianity than Rome or Greece was at the time of St. Paul. The rotten tree has for some time had artificial supports, because its fall would have been inconvenient for the Government."<sup>52</sup>

Müller also closely adhered to the goal of a universal religion based on his scientific theory on religion, which he tried to apply in India as a platform of his research. "Only two points seemed to us of real importance in the teaching of his last years, first: the striving after a universal religion and the recognition of a common substance in all religions, secondly: the more open recognition of the historical superiority of Christianity as compared with more ancient of faith."<sup>53</sup> Regarding the first point we can see that Keshub and his work impressed Müller and the Christian missionaries. Müller fully supported the "Sadharan Brahmo Samaj" and he compared it to a church. He also said "if there is ever to be a real religion in India, it will, I believe, owe its very life-blood to the large heart of Rammohun Roy and his worthy disciples, Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen."<sup>54</sup>

Müller was well aware of international missionary activities and fully sympathized with their cause. In a lecture delivered in Westminster Abbey on 3 December 1873, Müller mentions the difficulty of preaching: "And, in fact, as the official report to which I have referred testifies in strong terms, the presence of the great evils which Indian missionaries have to confront, has often produced in them a noble and truly Christian indifference to the trivial divergences between themselves."<sup>55</sup> It sounds almost devilish when he mentions in the same lecture that: "The misery of the war on the coast of Africa, the terrible prospect of the Indian famine, may furnish the very opening which we most desire. They may be the very touchstones by which these suffering heathens will test the practical efficiency of a Christian government and a Christian nation, of Christian missionaries and Christian people, and, having so tested it, will judge."

51 Müller and Müller 1902, pp. 332, 182.

52 Müller and Müller 1902, pp. 332, 182.

53 Müller 1884, pp. 163, 52.

54 Müller 1884, pp. 77, 80, 82.

55 Müller 1874.

It can be noted that Müller was not alone in his ideologies and beliefs. He was part of Victorian English society, with its steady rise as a colonial power. Such ideas were very dominant at that time. The Christian mission had become an important representative of Victorian society, especially in the non-European world. The idea of a heroic mission moving into dark civilizations to rescue the struggling races fitted very well with the public imagination of a Victorian heroic ideal. This is best captured in the words of an almost mythic figure, the Protestant missionary martyr Dr. David Livingstone, who said, “We come among them [the heathen] as members of a superior race and servants of a government that desires to elevate the more degraded portions of the human family. We are the adherents of a benign holy religion and may by consistent conduct and wise, patient efforts become the harbingers of peace to a hitherto distracted and trodden race.”<sup>56</sup>

Noted historian K. M. Panikkar assessed the missionary activities to be the “most serious, persistent and planned effort of European nations” in nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>57</sup> Müller was part of this social fabric. Despite his dedication to Christianity, Müller had a liberal view, which he never refrained from propagating. In a lecture on 3 December 1873 he proclaims that the blending of religions is what brings the most beautiful form:

Whenever two religions are brought into contact, when members of each live together in peace, abstaining from all direct attempts at conversion, whether by force or by argument, though conscious all the time of the fact that they and their religion are on their trial, that they are being watched, that they are responsible for all they say and do – the effect has always been the greatest blessing to both. It calls out all the best elements in each, and at the same time keeps under all that is felt to be of doubtful value, of uncertain truth. Whenever this has happened in the history of the world, it has generally led either to the reform of both systems, or to the foundation of a new religion.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps these thoughts summarize the ideology of Müller most fittingly. He was possibly more interested in seeing Brahma Samaj blossom into a new form of universal religion than in adopting Christianity as it was. To blend these two religions together, the scientific basis came from his racial theories.

## KESHUB’S NEW SYNTHESIS: MAKING BRAHMO SAMAJ REALLY UNIVERSAL

Keshub’s modernization efforts had to go hand in hand with a religious view. While Rammohun Roy, Debendranath Tagore and other national reformers like Dayananda Saraswati spoke against idol-worship polytheism, Keshub moved significantly ahead by drawing on Christian, Islamic and Zoroastrian ideas. He accepted, as in the case of Christianity, that inspiration is the only source of religion. The key question around religion, namely the nature of God that puzzles Western minds, is clearly answered in his

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56 Livingstone 1865; Symondson 1970, p. 65.

57 Panikkar 1961.

58 Müller 1874.

doctrines. In *The Religion of the Brahma Samaj*, it is mentioned that there is no apparent “difficulty in reconciling these seemingly irreconcilable conceptions. God, indeed, is immanent. He is not an extra-cosmic, mechanical artificer of the universe.” A universal religion could stand stronger on the pillars of a universal connection of race, culture or language. During the public lecture delivered by Keshub as early as 1866, we see that there is an implicit assumption of the theory of racial similarity, which is also flavored by repeated reminders on the Asiatic origins of Jesus.

### **Keshub’s Silent Support of AIT: Asiatic Christ**

In the lecture delivered titled “Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia”, Keshub wonders why “instead of mutual good feeling and brotherly intercourse, we find the bitterest rancour and hatred”. In the same lecture, he extends the hand of religious brotherhood by claiming, “Europeans and natives are both children of God”. Further to the claim that Jesus was Asiatic, Keshub suggests that Asiatics can better comprehend the Bible: “And is it not true that an Asiatic can read the imageries and allegories of the Gospel, and its descriptions of natural sceneries, of customs and manners, with greater interest, and a fuller perception of their force and beauty, than Europeans?” Keshub, in no uncertain terms, showed a deep loyalty to the British sovereign and accepted the political supremacy imposed by the British as a “social and moral blessing”.

To connect the Western ideas with Oriental customs, the Asiatic origin of Christ is repeatedly mentioned by Keshub. He reprimands the converts:

They deliberately and voluntarily cut themselves off from native society as soon as they are baptized, and, as an inevitable consequence, come to contract a sort of repugnance to everything Oriental, and an enthusiastic admiration for everything European. (Hear, hear.) They seem to be ashamed of their country and their nationality. They forget that Christ, their master, was an Asiatic, and that it is not necessary in following him to make themselves alien to their country or race.

This reinforced the universal nature of Keshub’s religious view, which was shared by Jesus as well. This idea of an ancient Christian spirit preserved in Asiatic origins strongly resonates with the theory of a lost racial connection between Europeans and Indians that was gaining momentum in the European scientific world around the same time.

Keshub openly invited missionaries by stating, “Let my European brethren do all they can to establish and consolidate the moral kingdom of Christ in India.” However, there was a conflict between Keshub’s expectations and those of the missionaries. He writes in a letter to Max Müller about his disappointments over the visit to England:

The British public ought to know how the most advanced type of Hinduism in India is trying to absorb and assimilate the Christianity of Christ, and how it is establishing and spreading, under the name of the New Dispensation, a new Hinduism, which combines Yoga and Bhakti, and also a new Christianity,

which blends together Apostolical faith and modern civilisation and science. It is this Christianity.

Keshub's reconfiguration coincided with the religious and colonial crises of 1857 to 1886 faced by the British kingdom and by Christian missionaries. This made them all the more excited about the possibility of proliferating through Keshub. There was no doubt about his ability to strike a chord with the educated elite. Keshub had the capacity to produce radically new ideas and was also humble enough to give up the movement he generated. It was observed, therefore, "There were still some grounds for the excitement of the missionaries."<sup>59</sup>

There was some understanding of the subtle overtones of Christianity in Keshub's methods. Borthwick says, "Keshub was, in fact, engaged in a tremendous effort to apply Christianity to India and thereby create a new synthesis, and he was using the Brahma Samaj as the means for this."<sup>60</sup> The *Friend of India*, the journal of the Baptist missionaries at Serampore until 1875, when it was acquired by the dissident imperial critic Robert Knight, followed the activities of Brahma Samaj of India closely throughout the 1870s and 1880s, and was the most important source of information on Keshub's activities in Britain, where its articles were reproduced in newspapers such as the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Birmingham Daily Post*.<sup>61</sup> The *Friend of India* was generally supportive of Keshub in the early 1870s – it applauded the activities of the Indian Reform Association, and praised Keshub's lecture "Primitive Faith and Modern Speculations" for propounding "a great key principle of religion which cannot fail to spread, and spread for good."<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, "Collet remained concerned that the emotional side of religion should be kept in check by a commitment to Brahmaism as a social gospel – 'emotion' could prove a dangerous attraction to members of 'so susceptible a race'."<sup>63</sup>

## The Relation between the AIT and the Anti-Caste and Anti-Brahman Movement

Despite the religious proposals from Keshub, Brahma Samaj was essentially a social reformation movement, very much like many other similar movements throughout India. It is important to understand the contemporary social reformation agenda and the entry of AIT in this context.

Before the advent of the British colonial rulers, Islam had been widely spread by the rulers of India for more than five centuries. In the face of Islamic beliefs, Hindus questioned their long-standing caste system that was highly discriminatory in practice. At the ideological level, social reformers fought back against Islam with slogans like "Equality and Fraternity". On the other hand, caste was deeply embedded in the social fabric as an

59 Borthwick 1977, p. 71.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Hirschmann 2008; Hirschmann 2004.

62 Hirschmann 2008.

63 Collet 1877, pp. 22–23.



identity, which was hard to uproot quickly. Like any strong social movement, with mounting tension to abolish the caste system, the system had its proponents, who offered myriad reasons to justify its presence. A unanimously accepted source of reference was a set of key Vedic texts, which were, again, open to different interpretations. Reformers debated whether the Varnasram (caste system) proposed in the ancient Sanskrit literature was merely a model to be adapted for a different time or a universal model that needed to be followed at all times. Keshub promoted universal brotherhood among Brahmos but the social undercurrents were present nonetheless. Social movements in other parts of India were often more vigorous.

In 1873, Jyotirao Phule established Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth), which denounced the caste system completely and rejected the Vedas as the opportunistic creation of upper caste Hindus. Romila Thapar wrote, “Jyotirao Phule maintained that the Aryan invasion explained the arrival of alien Brahmans and their dominance and oppression of the lower castes. The invasion was necessary to this view of history.”<sup>64</sup>

The dominance of Brahmans (upper caste Hindus) in various prominent political, social and administrative roles was another important issue, which attracted attention from the British rulers as well as the non-Brahmin population. Either for a divisive or inclusive political agenda, positive discrimination for the under-represented population began. “The process of distinguishing began with the education department segregating first the Hindus into Brahmans and ‘other Hindus’ in the year 1870. By the year 1874, the segregation had changed to Brahmans and ‘Hindus and non-Brahmans’. By the early 1880s it was made ‘Brahmans, Vaishyas, Shudras and other Hindus’.”<sup>65</sup>

In the southern part of India, a series of anti-Brahmin conferences was organized by noted political leaders, Sir Pitti Theagaraya Chetty and Taravath Madhavan Nair, who eventually formed the Justice Party in 1917 to air their opinions. This suited the colonial rulers perfectly. Nair spoke in a meeting in 1917, “Non-Brahmins were looking to the British Government for protection, to hold scales evenly and to mete out Justice, but when they saw a movement progressing whose object was to undermine British influence and power in this country, they thought it their duty to rally round the British Government and to support them.”<sup>66</sup>

In a nutshell, AIT helped fuel discord among various established ethno-racial groups in India. The oppressed classes vented their frustration toward upper-caste Hindus and fully accepted AIT. A large section of upper-caste Hindus also embraced the newfound brotherhood with their colonial rulers. This policy worked well even later, when during the upper-caste-led freedom movement in India in 1935, British prime minister Winston Churchill mentioned that “the British had as much right to be in India as anyone else there, except perhaps ‘the Depressed Classes’, who are the native stock”.

64 Thapar 2000, 30 Sep.–13 Oct.

65 Bahuguna n.d.

66 Arooran 1980a, 1980b.

## AIT and Its Contradiction with Christianity

Throughout the proposition of AIT, there remained the possibility that it would contradict Christianity and arouse a deeper admiration for universal religiosity predating Judeo-Christian history. This did not happen due to two balancing forces. First, the raciologists in Europe were busy finding a connection between the “English soldiers” and “the dark Bengalese”. Second, the Indian elite reformers accepted this racial unification as well as acceding to the religious supremacy of Christianity, partly due to the inexplicable decline in the social, religious and economic structure of India.

In 1859, Max Müller wrote:

Although the Brahmans of India belong to the same family, the Aryan or Indo-European family, which civilised the whole of Europe, the two great branches of that primitive race were kept asunder for centuries after their first separation. The main stream of the Aryan nations has always flowed towards the north-west. No historian can tell us by what impulse those adventurous Nomads were driven on through Asia towards the isles and shores of Europe. The first start of this world-wide migration belongs to a period far beyond the reach of documentary history; to times when the soil of Europe had not been trodden by either Celts, Germans, Slavonians, Romans, or Greeks.<sup>67</sup>

Seven years after the above publication, Keshub proclaims, to deafening applause, in his public lecture: “I am proud, that I am an Asiatic. And was not Jesus Christ an Asiatic?”

With these strongly entrenched ideologies, the only remaining piece of the puzzle was to show that, ideologically, ancient Vedic texts had similar preaching as in relatively modern Biblical texts. Also, it had to be accepted that revelation is not unique to Christianity.

James Martineau, the influential Unitarian philosopher and preacher, believed in God and Christ, but not that Christ was the unique revelation of God in history. He disliked the label “Unitarian” and felt that belief should never be static. They were totally against the idea of Church and Bible. The Unitarian religion was a non-traditional and personal kind that was very similar to Brahmoism. When Keshub was in England, they organized his itinerary among a small but influential group in social reform activities and in theological circles. Martineau naturally agreed with Keshub’s views. Other prominent Christian leaders were interested, too. Dean Stanley from the Broad Church carefully followed the developments in Brahma Samaj: “They felt that Brahmoism was moving towards Christianity, and that being an indigenous movement, it would have greater power than proselytization by foreign missionaries to rescue and convert the masses from the depths of idolatry.”<sup>68</sup>

From Borthwick’s viewpoint, Müller was renowned for his belief that every religion had a core of truth, and he saw Brahmoism as entering that core in Hindu religion. Like many others he also saw the Brahma Samaj as a step toward Indian Christianity, as even though

67 Müller 1859.

68 Borthwick 1977, pp. 102, 103.

he believed in the truth of all religions, he felt that the moral beauty of Christ and Christianity was the summit of civilized belief.<sup>69</sup>

## Retracing of the Brahma Movement toward Hinduism

Keshub's following of the middle path, however, alienated him from many devout missionaries, who were concerned about his ultimate goals. There were attempts to destroy the good reputation of Keshub because he dared to criticize their work.<sup>70</sup> By late 1873, a vast majority of missionary organizations had turned against Keshub. The immediate cause may have been the initiation ceremony of the Unitarian Charles Dall into the Brahma Samaj, in the course of which Keshub made it clear that he was a "pure and not a Christian theist".<sup>71</sup> Many members of the Brahma Samaj of India in Calcutta then echoed this claim of "pure" as opposed to "Christian" theism. The *Illustrated Missionary News* in London expressed considerable shock that "Christ has been deliberately rejected" and lamented that the Brahmos' "glory has departed".<sup>72</sup> Having failed to accept the "life-giving element" of the Godhead of Christ and the atonement for sin, the Brahma Movement, which for a while seemed so hopeful in its tendency toward Christianity, appeared now to have reached its climax and to be receding towards Hinduism again.<sup>73</sup>

Keshub Chandra Sen had his own firm opinions about the position of India in terms of political and religious landscape. When Keshub was in England on 13 April 1870 he met a Mr. Raken, who had been in India for long time. Raken wanted to know the opinion of Keshub about Christianity. Keshub maintained that "India cannot be truly happy and prosperous unless she throws off the foreign yoke of the British Government." He also said: "He thinks with the author of the 'Bible in India', which he has translated into English, that Christianity has been derived wholly from India."<sup>74</sup>

"The monthly journal of the Baptist Missionary Society, the *Missionary Herald*, agreed that Brahmoism would prove 'a nine day wonder' and that 'Hinduism will tend more and more to become a mere cloak for the absence of all religion'."<sup>75</sup> For most of the missionary organizations, there existed no middle path. "One could move either forwards or backwards along the path to Christian religion and the lack of full acceptance of Christianity would result in retrogression towards Hinduism or atheism."<sup>76</sup>

Keshub had moved dangerously far from the principles of scriptural authority and reason, which were essential to "stable" religion, and there appeared to be little chance that he would return to the Christian fold. While Rammohun had adhered to reason and, in "The Precepts of Jesus", had propounded Christian teachings as "the supreme guide to life

69 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

70 *Ibid.*, pp. 124–26.

71 *The Monthly Record*, 1 November 1873.

72 *Illustrated Missionary News*, 1 September 1873.

73 *Ibid.*

74 Sen 1938, pp. 36, 72, *Missionary Herald*, 1 July 1873.

75 *Missionary Herald*, 1 July 1873.

76 *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, 1 July 1878.

eternal”, Keshub’s “comprehensive” approach had retreated from Rammohun’s principles, either as a result of “moral cowardice”, “national prejudice” or misguided “sincere conviction”.<sup>77</sup>

Müller understood the difference of opinions, he himself being branded as an anti-Christian from certain quarters. Müller tried to bridge this gap by suggesting to Christian missionaries that Keshub was helping their cause: “These Indian puritans are not against us; for all the highest purposes of life they are with us, and we, I trust, with them.”<sup>78</sup>

## Müller and Keshub: The Method of Integration

The relationship between Müller and Keshub has been extensively discussed in the previous sections, but as the main protagonists for the dissemination of AIT, this point deserves further attention.

The studies of Vedantic traditions in Brahma Samaj by Rammohun Roy and Debendranath Tagore influenced Keshub’s interest in the study of comparative religion. However, the comparative project pursued within the New Dispensation was also influenced by the work of Max Müller. Müller had a deep interest in the Indian social reform movements, having established correspondence with Debendranath Tagore, a few letters of which he presented in his autobiographical *Auld Lang Syne* in the section dealing with “My Indian Friends”. He recalls Debendranath as being “too conservative to be able to follow his young friend in all his reforms.” This young friend was Keshub.<sup>79</sup>

Müller had taken a long interest in Indian customs and was well acquainted with the diverse groups among the Indian elite, both from the traditional and modern faction. The author of the voluminous Sanskrit dictionary *Shabdakalpadruma*, Raja Radhakanta Deb, as well as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a social reformer from Maharashtra, were full of praise for Müller. They called him “Bhatta Makshamooler”, which is essentially elevating him to a high social standing in India, where a person from a foreign land is derogatorily referred to as a “Mlecchha” (an uncivilized outsider).<sup>80</sup> Müller exchanged lengthy correspondence with Deb in order to understand Indian traditions. The method Müller used was, however, under the influence of the “relentless dominance of textuality” as argued by Girardot.<sup>81</sup> Comparative studies of the Vedic tradition vis-à-vis, for example, Teutonic mythology, gave little access to the Indian mind. In an interesting argument, Wilfred Cantwell Smith noted, “turning the Hindu Veda into a written book is an entrancing instance of nineteenth-century Western cultural imperialism, here quietly imposing the Western sense of “Scripture””.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, Müller attempted all methods of integrating the two cultures by seeking to answer “why then should there be no Christian Vedantists?”<sup>83</sup> The only question that

77 *Ibid.*

78 Müller 1874.

79 Müller 1898.

80 Deshpande 2015, p. 7.

81 Girardot 2002b.

82 Smith 1988.

83 Müller 1891, p. 71.

mattered is what would be the best process of integration. In that aspect, sometimes Müller played the role of a passive observer and sometimes participated actively. He wrote: "It is most interesting to watch the compromise made between Hinduism and Islam four hundred years ago and to compare it with the compromise between Hinduism and Christianity that is now so eloquently advocated by the followers of Rammohun Roy and Keshub Chunder Sen."<sup>84</sup> He was also assured of the loyalty of Keshub to the Christian church and quoted his letter stating: "Woe unto us, if I ever conceived the project of setting up a movement against the Church of Christ! Perish these lips if they utter a word of rebellion against Jesus,"<sup>85</sup> which indicates that in some earlier letter Müller had made a suggestive query. The difficulty was always in reconciling society, philosophy and religion, for which neither Müller nor Keshub had a definite answer. However, Muller reflected that the strategy was wrong when the possibility of reconciliation had been better during the earlier period: "He (Rammohun Roy) used language far too deprecatory, as it seems to me, toward the religious and philosophical inheritance of India. Then was the time to act, but there were no Christian ambassadors to grasp the hands that were stretched out. Such missionaries as were in India then wanted unconditional surrender and submission, not union or conciliation."<sup>86</sup> Müller adopted the later method while engaging with Keshub. While Müller proposed the theory of scientific religion, Keshub raised the idea of natural religion stemming from inspirational communion with saints.

In 1880, Keshub started an experiment with his pilgrimage of saints. It was an elaborately arranged event that replicated the socio-religious context of one or another part of the ancient world and the reforms introduced by a saint of that time. During March, he chose Greece at the time of Socrates. A week-long seminar would make the disciples live in the presence of Moses, Mohammad or another prophet, with the home of Keshub transformed to resemble the historical site of that time. For Keshub, the Müllerian rational comparison of sacred texts and the inspirational comparison of divine attributes through communion with saints were thus two sides of the same coin.<sup>87</sup> Müller was also convinced of this when he commented on a lecture of Keshub's: "Thus he writes in his Lecture, 'The Apostles of the New Dispensation': Only science can deliver the world, and bring light and order out of the chaos and darkness of multiplied Churches. If there is science in all things, is there no science in the dispensations of God?"<sup>88</sup> The idea of scientific religion had been firmly established.

However, the "Indian" method, Keshub claimed, was superior as it worked through comparison to "unity" with greater alacrity: without learning, without philosophy, without erudition, Asia jumped, under a sort of natural impulse, into the unsectarian eclecticism of

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84 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

87 Müller 1881, p. 150. Majumdar certainly expressed this view in a letter to Müller, writing: "What you are doing as a philosopher and philologist we are trying to do as men of devotion and faith. It is the same universal recognition of all truths, and all prophets. I grant we are doing it in a Hindu style, perhaps in a Bengali style."

88 Müller 1884 (Müller 2013, pp. 78–79).

faith. What Asia has done intuitively, Europe will do reflectively. The West will have to verify theologically what the East has realized in religious consciousness. Great scholars will be called upon to vindicate and verify, upon philosophical grounds, the scientific unity of all the great religions, which Asia has founded and shaped with all the simplicity and freshness of natural inspiration.<sup>89</sup>

In 1880, this was reflected in a letter from Keshub to Müller dated 22 December: “I can assure you God has been very kind to us in our trials and tribulation, and all the antagonism and persecution we have suffered have greatly strengthened us and helped the progress and extension of our church . . . . Our influence spreads on all sides, there is far greater enthusiasm among us now than in any previous in the history of our Church.”<sup>90</sup>

When Keshub was in England in 1870 he met Max Müller and Dean Stanley of Broad Church for a meeting in which they had conversed on Indian subjects, especially the Vedas. After this discussion Müller wrote to his wife: “We soon got into a warm discussion, and it was curious to see how we almost made him confess himself a Christian.” This same thing Müller again referred to in his book *Auld Lang Syne*, in which he said that he asked Keshub why he was not declaring himself publicly as a Christian, seeing that he was a true follower of Christ. But Keshub handled this very tactfully. He replied “Suppose that thirty years hence people find out that I was a disciple of Christ, what would be the harm? Only were I to profess myself a Christian now, all my influence would be gone at once.”<sup>91</sup>

## Keshub’s Adoption of AIT

Keshub Chandra Sen was deeply impressed by Christianity. In the New Dispensation, he inserted thirty-nine articles which closely resembled the prayer book of the Anglican Church.<sup>92</sup> Sen was also aware of the developments in the science of religion. To justify the object of his new Samaj, he proclaimed in a lecture “We, Apostles of the New Dispensation”:

Come then to the synthetic utility of the New Dispensation. You will see how all other dispensations are harmonized and unified in this, a whole host of churches resolved into a scientific unity. . . . They are connected in one continuous chain which may be traced to the earliest age. . . . The New Dispensation has discovered the missing link. It has found the secret thread, which goes through these dispensations, and keeps them together. Where others see only

89 Sen 1901, p. 62.

90 Müller 1881; 1884, p. 90.

91 Borthwick 1971, p. 110: “Miss Collet wrote, ‘To the end Max Müller preserved his faith in Keshub Chandra Sen, and did all he could to uphold him and his work against the attacks made on him in India and England’ and in another letter to Miss Collet from Max Müller in 1881, Jan 23, wrote about Keshub Chandra Sen that he gave ‘more open recognition of Historical Superiority of Christianity as compared with more ancient forms of faith.’”

92 Bose 1884, p. 126.

confusion and anomaly, it sees order and continuity. Joyfully it exclaims, “I have found the science of dispensation at last, unity in multiplicity.”<sup>93</sup>

Unmistakably, the discovery of the “science” in the religion is something that came from the influence of Oriental Studies, notably from Müller. The author Ram Chandra Bose published a book on this during Sen’s lifetime, in which it is conjectured that Sen wanted to please everybody with his universal religion, and the claim of a synthetic religion to connect all religions is strongly challenged. In particular, the religion of Veda is dubbed as a sublime form of polytheism. Therefore, Bose argued that it could never be connected to theism.<sup>94</sup> These writings appeared in paper form in the *Indian Evangelical Review*. This clearly reflected the strong opposition of many Brahmos from other factions toward Keshub’s New Dispensation.

Keshub stood strong against the opposition and stuck to his new faith. However, an interesting turn occurred when he chose to use the term Aryan. In a book summarizing the new dispensation, it is named “the Sacred Laws of the Aryans of the New Dispensation”. This removed whatever doubts anyone had had before, that the Aryans are indeed a race, which is connected by religious principles and not just a people who spoke the same language. Sen addressed the entire Indian populace saying: “It is only the national law of the Aryans of the New Church in India.” Aryan connected Indians, British, Christianity and the Vedas. In the sacred laws, he connects the *Rig Veda* and the baptism of the Son of God in the river Jordan in subsequent laws.<sup>95</sup>

## The Relationship between AIT and the British Monarchy

The Victorian era was notable as a period of transitions, from ancient beliefs to scientific rationalism, from local battles to international industrial and military capitalism. The role of a strong underlying theory justifying supremacy was not unknown to the elite, in particular the British monarchy. Scientific racial theories as well as emerging disciplines surrounding race, language and culture were quickly absorbed. Max Müller played a major role in this.<sup>96</sup>

This has been noted by many studies of Victorian culture, such as that of Daniel O’Leary: “The new imperial culture in speeches, addresses, and myriad public utterances, described itself with a vocabulary learned from the philologists, and the ‘Britons’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ which emerged from the antiquarian studies of Max Müller (1823 to 1900).”<sup>97</sup>

During the Victorian era, Max Müller was by far the most influential scholar and he was close to the monarchy. To Baron von Bunsen on 25 August 1856, he wrote:

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93 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

94 *Ibid.*

95 Sen 1889, p. 6. Though it is not clear whether Keshub used the term Aryan with or without the knowledge of Müller, it is clear that the idea of a common racial origin fitted very well to grouping the peoples together again in a new, universal religion. Sen did exactly that.

96 O’Leary 2000. For a valuable outline of the use of the term “race” in England before the nineteenth century, see Hudson 1996.

97 O’Leary 2000.



After the last annexation the territorial conquest of India ceases – what follows next is the struggle in the realm of religion and of spirit, in which, of course, centre the interests of the nations. India is much riper for Christianity than Rome or Greece were at the time of St. Paul. Dhulip Singh is much at Court, and is evidently destined to play a political part in India. I wish I could get in touch with him in some quite natural way. Could it be managed with the help of Prince Albert or would you help me to it?

In many ways, Müller was a protégé of Baron von Bunsen, the Prussian Ambassador to the British court and close to the prince consort, Albert, husband of Queen Victoria. Müller's steady rise in the esteem of British royalty was obvious in his letters in January 1864, when he mentions: "The Queen was very kind, said she was looking forward to the lectures." The Queen indeed attended the lectures together with the princesses, having been to no lectures for ten years. Müller, with little pride, proclaims, "She listened very attentively, and did not knit at all, though her work was brought." The lectures were on the topic of the Science of Language. The British royalty hosted Müller at Osborne for these lectures. Before leaving, he gave a morning lecture to Prince Arthur and Sir James Clarke, physician of Queen Victoria. The concluding words of that lecture were:

When the last two volumes of Veda are published we shall have saved from destruction a work, older than *Iliad*, older than any other literary document of that noble race of mankind to which the greatest nations in the world's history have belonged – a race which after receiving from a Semitic race, from the Jews, its best treasure, its religion, the religion of the Old and New testaments, is now with the English in the van, carrying on slowly but irresistibly the conquest of the world by means of commerce, colonization, education and conversion.

It is difficult to find a more apt summary of the claims of Müller. In these few sentences, he painted a picture of racial supremacy, justified colonial rule and linked the British with something more ancient than the *Iliad* – this is exactly what the proponents of European Romanticism pursued. Müller was not alone in closeness to the monarchy in these efforts. Joseph Barber Lightfoot was the chaplain of Queen Victoria and a Hebrew and Classical scholar. He wrote several commentaries on the New Testament between 1865 and 1875, where he also took up the study of raciology based on philological and etymological evidence.

Needless to say, when Keshub visited England in 1870, the stage was all set for him. He reiterated the same beliefs that the royalty had learned from scholars like Müller.

## USING THE TOOLS OF BRITISH EMPIRE: THE POLITICIZATION OF BRAHMO SAMAJ

The discovery of ancient Indian texts and the subsequent adoption of AIT were welcomed by British imperialists as a useful mode for maintaining the status quo. Lord Curzon dubbed it "the necessary furniture of empire" and AIT gained a broad sweep of acceptance

via the dialogues of Max Müller and Keshub Chandra Sen as well as the active participation of Christian missionaries.

As early as 1804 Alexander Tod delivered a brilliant dissertation in Bengali on whether “the translation of the best works extant in the Sanskrit into the popular language of India would promote the extension of science and civilization.”<sup>98</sup> However, the necessity arose from a completely different viewpoint. Mastering the history and culture of the colonial subjects was considered important for multiple reasons. The nationwide revolution in 1857 clearly showed that it was not sufficient to rely on the loyalty of a handful of landlords and kings. Around this time, Müller proposed the scientific study of languages and demonstrated the deep connection between India and Europe. This was eagerly adopted by British rulers as well as by Christian missionaries.

The move away from constitutional notions of British rule in India toward a vision of the British monarchy as the dynastic successor of the Mughals was symbolized above all by Victoria’s assumption of the title of Empress of India in 1876, and the vast Delhi durbar of the following year.<sup>99</sup>

As Meredith Borthwick has said, Keshub’s glowing devotion to the British queen and British rule in India was without opposition, and fully convinced educated Indians at that time. It naturally endeared him to the British community and officials. “It increased his influence with them too, as having unmistakably established his loyalty; he could then go on to criticize the British without being accused of ingratitude.”<sup>100</sup> However, Keshub embraced AIT openly despite his shifting stance toward the British monarchy.

In March 1877, Sen in a public address urged Indians to be loyal to Queen Victoria, the Empress of India. He reminded his “educated countrymen” that it was the “British government that came to your rescue, as God’s ambassador, when your country was sunk in ignorance and superstition and hopeless jejuneness, and has since lifted you to your present high position.” Sen continued: “India in her present fallen condition seems destined to sit at the feet of England for many long years to learn Western art and science. Thus while we learn modern science from England, England learns ancient wisdom from India.” Sen went on to declare with a flourish: “Gentlemen, in the advent of the English nation in India we see a re-union of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race.”<sup>101</sup> The last rhetoric about “parted cousins” is an unmistakable sign of Keshub embracing and popularizing AIT among Indian intellectuals. Interestingly, despite his later renunciation of AIT and his close connection to Keshub, Müller never refuted Keshub’s adoption of AIT. Though Müller later mentioned that AIT was more about a language than a race, he tiptoed toward “racial” theory in other instances, such as the following. In an address delivered in 1883 on Rammohun Ray, he mentioned, “Ram Mohan Roy was an Aryan belonging to the south-eastern branch of the Aryan race and he spoke an Aryan language, the Bengali. . . . We recognize in Ram Mohan Roy’s visit to England the meeting again of the two great branches of the Aryan race, after

98 Kopf 1969, p. 100.

99 Cohn 1983.

100 Borthwick 1977, p. 68.

101 Sen 1901.

they had been separated so long that they lost all recollection of their common origin, common language and common faith.”<sup>102</sup> Clearly, Keshub and Müller agreed on this aspect and even extended the origin of the “linguistic” branches to a “common faith”.

In England, Gladstone’s return to power in 1880, and his appointment of Ripon as Viceroy, served to reinvigorate the liberal program of increasing the rights and role of the Indian urban elite.<sup>103</sup> But Ripon’s efforts were a failure, “a stormy interlude in the era of paternalism which had swept over India since the Mutiny.”<sup>104</sup>

Liberal calls for greater Indian participation in government were frustrated by a growing perception that British paternalistic rule must be strengthened in the face of growing Indian national consciousness, lest the empire be placed in grave danger. As the Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, J. R. Seeley, put it in 1881, “If the feeling of a common nationality began to exist there [in India] only feebly, from that day almost our Empire would cease to exist.”<sup>105</sup> Hierarchical and paternalistic conceptions of British imperial rule, bolstered by fears that Indian “nationalism” could lead to the demise of empire, were paralleled by the emergence of more militaristic and patriotic popular conceptions of empire.<sup>106</sup>

As both McClelland and Rose have argued, from the 1880s the language of “citizenship” in Britain began to be tied more closely to notions of national and imperial duties, and acquired a more distinctly militaristic and masculinized tone.<sup>107</sup>

It was also from the 1880s that elementary state education in England began to acquire a more overtly imperialist slant, as teachers were encouraged to foster notions of good citizenship and patriotism in the classroom.<sup>108</sup> Of course, emergent discourses of popular imperialism existed in tension with Gladstonian liberal rhetoric in the 1880s, and did not achieve a high degree of popular acceptance until the 1890s.<sup>109</sup>

Nevertheless, Disraeli’s more aggressive imperialism had certainly left an imprint on British attitudes toward the Empire, and a need for a more muscular, conservative approach toward people of other cultures was articulated in a variety of political, popular and academic arenas. It was in the 1880s that Max Müller’s arch-rival at Oxford, Monier-Williams, began to move away from his previously liberal position on “Oriental” religions and to become increasingly critical of the “limp-wristed comparative scholarship” exemplified by Müller’s *Sacred Books*, a project which he denounced in 1887 as an “unmanly” example of “jelly-fish tolerance”.<sup>110</sup>

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102 Müller 1884, p. 11, “Raja Ram Mohan Roy 1774–1833.” This was an address delivered at the Bristol Museum on 27 September 1883 on the fiftieth anniversary of Raja’s death. Mookerjee 1970, pp. 24–28.

103 Koditschek 2011, p. 321.

104 Metcalf 1964.

105 Mehrota 1971, p. 208.

106 Kennedy 2002.

107 McClelland 2006, pp. 284–88.

108 McClelland 2006; Heathorn 2000, p. 286.

109 Cunningham 1981.

110 Girardot 2002a, p. 247.

In this context, Keshub's claims to have founded a new world religion that would rejuvenate morality in India and Britain were not regarded as worthy of serious attention:

In 1876, with Ananda Mohan Bose taking the lead, the constitutional issue within the Samaj between progressives and Keshub came to a head. Sibnath Sastri, then a Sanskrit teacher at Hare School, as spiritual leader of the progressives also took a leading part in the agitation. Keshub was now being attacked as an advocate of divine right of kings, in which his support of Queen Victoria was linked to his absolutist rule over the Brahmo Samaj.<sup>111</sup>

The English Unitarians continued to support the Brahmo Samaj of India, and *The Inquirer* declared in 1877 that the organization still represented “the best hope of the future of religion in India”.<sup>112</sup>

Keshub's criticisms of British rule in India became increasingly vitriolic in the 1880s. In the most politically charged of all his public addresses, “Asia's Message to Europe”, delivered before a vast audience of Bengalis and Europeans in January 1883, Keshub opened with a long and electrifying depiction of British brutality in India:

Whence this plaintive and mournful cry, which so profoundly distresses the patriot's breast? It seems that a whole continent is writhing beneath the lash of oppression, and sending forth from the depths of its heart a deep wail of woe. It is India that weeps. Nay, not India alone; all Asia cries. Many there are in Europe who hold that Asia is a vile woman, full of impurity and uncleanness. Her scriptures tell lies; her prophets are all impostors; her people are all untruthful and deceitful. Europe has perpetrated frightful havoc among the nations of the East. Europe, why do thy eyes still roll in wild fury and insatiate antagonism, as if bent upon Asia's total annihilation? Before the formidable artillery of Europe's aggressive civilization the scriptures and prophets, the language and literature, of the East, nay her customs and manners, her social and domestic institutions, and her very industries have undergone a cruel slaughter. The rivers that flow eastward and the rivers that flow westward are crimson with Asiatic gore.<sup>113</sup>

While Keshub encouraged the British to continue their tendency of “extending the franchise” (echoing his calls in 1870 for the British to increase the level of participation of Indians in government), he ultimately pulls back from explicitly demanding any political concessions from the British, saying of Asia: “Any secular reconciliation or political treaty she would altogether repudiate.”<sup>114</sup>

111 Kopf 1979.

112 *The Inquirer*, 20 January 1877.

113 Sen 1901, pp. 49–51.

114 Sen 1901, pp. 69, 106.

Instead, he proposes a “spiritual alliance”, effected through a “double and perfect atonement” in which the unification of fallen humanity with Christ is mirrored by the unification of “Asia” and “Europe”.<sup>115</sup> After entreating Asia and Europe to “shake hands with each other with the utmost cordiality”, he reiterates his belief in the providential character of Queen Victoria.<sup>116</sup>

David Arnold has called the “Orientalist Triptych” (a view of Indian history in which a golden classical Hindu age had been destroyed by a tyrannical Muslim rule which had providentially given way to British regeneration) was an idea expressed not only by earlier universalists such as Ram Mohan, but also by contemporary nationalists such as Bankimchandra, Bipin Chandra Pal and writers in the *National Paper*.<sup>117</sup> Amiya Sen notes that Bipin Chandra Pal wrote as late as 1913 of Indian nationalist thought standing “not only for the furtherance of the case of freedom in India but also for the continuance of the British connection.”<sup>118</sup> Many of Keshub’s contemporaries criticized British rule and demanded the increase of Indian participation in government without calling for the end of British rule – indeed, this was initially the position of the Indian National Congress.<sup>119</sup> This shows that despite harboring distaste for the way India was being ruled, the emotional connection to British rule could never be forgotten. This can be strongly linked to the rise of AIT at that time. As David Kopf has summarized the situation, “the alarming increase of yellow dog racism and cultural imperialism ultimately made a mockery of Brahma universalism.”<sup>120</sup>

The case of AIT was further strengthened by another important aspect. The use of AIT by the missionaries was common. As noted by Romila Thapar, “Müller’s books were read in India and his views were endorsed in various influential publications, such as John Muir’s *Original Sanskrit Texts* (1858–1863) and John Wilson’s *Indian Caste* (1877). Both authors were Christian missionaries and drew attention to the plight of the low castes, oppressed by Brahmins, an oppression which they claimed went back to the Aryan invasions.” The people in the lower socio-economic strata found a sympathizer and a “scientific” cause for raising their voices against the Brahmins, whom they could claim to be outsiders. Prominent Indian leaders such as Jyotirao Phule, who held that “The invasion of the Aryans was crucial to the creation of segregated groups in the form of castes, where the Aryans were the victorious aliens who kept the indigenous people permanently subordinated,” enthusiastically accepted this view.<sup>121</sup>

Keshub’s close relationship with Lord Lawrence was often noted, and the efforts of Brahmors to reform Indian religion were described as operating in tandem with the efforts of the British government.<sup>122</sup> Brahmors’ participation in Congress represented an alliance

115 Sen 1901, pp. 106, 97.

116 Sen 1901, pp. 117–18.

117 Arnold 2000.

118 Sen 1993, p. 60.

119 Mehrota 1971, pp. 545–602.

120 Kopf 1975, p. 64.

121 Thapar 1996, pp. 3–29.

122 *Glasgow Herald*, 18 January 1884; *Daily News*, 9 January 1884.

between liberal and rational politics. Both were derived from progressive Western values, an aspiration of the newly educated professional middle class toward the shortcomings of British rule and who defended the utility and positive good of Western influence.<sup>123</sup>

From this perspective, the original goal of universal religion took the back stage. Hence Collet's sense of disappointment: "It is because we thought so highly of the Brahmo Samaj at one time, and hoped so much from it, that we regret so deeply its fall. At one time its religion was rational, spiritual, and sublime in its simplicity; now it has degenerated into mysticism, absurdity, and ceremonial folly."<sup>124</sup>

Collet's *The Brahmo Year Book* had provided "absolutely conclusive" evidence of Keshub's "downward tendency from Theism to superstition."<sup>125</sup> At the same time, to find harmony in discord, Keshub promoted New Dispensation, a universal religion. Among the thirty-nine articles published in 1879 for New Dispensation, a particular one stands out – Loyalty to Sovereign.<sup>126</sup>

## SUMMARY

The initial fervor of the discovery of linguistic-cultural similarity slowly permeated the Indian social reformers. The reform movement took another course; the propagation of universal religion did not occur as expected by Keshub, but the idea that there was a migration of a race coming from the heartland of Europe remained deeply ingrained.

## Transition of Social Reform Movements

The dominance of Keshub and his followers slowly yielded to new forms in the movement, which started with the Cooch Behar marriage controversy. He gave his daughter, Suniti Devi, in marriage to Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar; he revived the performance of mystical plays, and he took part in one. These changes alienated many of his followers, who deserted his standard and founded the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj on 15 May 1878. In sanctioning the Cooch Bihar marriage, Keshub effectively contradicted many of his strongest beliefs as expressed throughout the 1860s and 1870s, contravened his greatest legislative achievement as a reformer (the 1872 Act), and betrayed – in the eyes of many – the fundamental principles of progressive Brahmoism. This fact, together with the growing tendency of Keshub toward mysticism and spiritual teaching from the Indian philosophies, created increasing distance between him and the intellectual elite circles of India.

At the same time, the rising fervor of patriotism in India as well as the proliferation of AIT in caste-based politics dented Keshub's mesmerizing influence to some extent. The *National Paper*, which Debendranath commissioned Nabagopal Mitra to start in 1865, proved from 1867 on to be the most effective means of propagating Hindu Brahmo nationalism against Keshubite Universalism among the Western-educated population in

123 Kopf 1979, p. 147.

124 *The Inquirer*, 8 Sept 1833.

125 *The Inquirer*, 9 April 1883.

126 Bose 1884, p. 130.

Bengal.<sup>127</sup> Some factions of Brahma Samaj adopted new doctrines with “Brahmos welcome the co-existence of Brahma principles with governance, but oppose all governance in conflict with Brahma principles,” which conflicted with Keshub’s loyalty to the sovereignty.

### Did Keshub Play a Role in the British–Missionary Alliance?

Keshub’s unflinching loyalty to the sovereign definitely made him an ideal candidate for demonstrating the efficacy of the British rule in India. However, his tendency toward mystic traditions was a failure in the eyes of Christian missionaries, who had at one time been convinced that Keshub was the best person to spread Christianity in India. For Orientalists, he was already an established ally as he proclaimed the benefit of the “lost kinship” several times. At this juncture, Orientalists had nothing further to convey to Keshub; missionaries had a diminishing interest, whereas the British government were interested in linking Keshub with prominent leaders to further their cause. In fact, it is interesting to note that the British government played an important role in the Cooch Bihar marriage, knowing very well that this would ruin the reformist movement initiated by Keshub.

The British government had long-established relations with many Indian kings and Jamindars (landlords), either in the form of alliances, domination or simply friendly relations, who in turn acted as their representatives within a larger fabric of paternal colonialism. They wanted to extend their influence and intervene in the affairs of Cooch Behar, and remove “evil and retrograde” tradition run by the then ruler. To achieve their purposes the British sent the Raja (king) to Ward’s Institute, Benares, and later to Bankipur College, Patna, under an English tutor. The British aimed to mould him into a model ruler of a modern state, and finally sent him to England to finish his education, though the ladies of the palace objected strongly. Pratap Chandra Mazumdar first heard in 1877 that the British government had decided that Keshub’s daughter would be a suitable bride for the Maharajah. The British persisted in this, writing continually to Keshub. The Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Dalton, wrote to Keshub on 22 January 1878, saying that the Lieutenant Governor had decided that the Raja was to go to England in March, and so should be married before then. To overcome Keshub’s repugnance at having his daughter marry before she turned fourteen, Dalton suggested that it would not be a marriage in “the ordinary acceptance of the term” but a “solemn betrothal” only. In effect, the British authorities proposed a legal marriage that would not be consummated till the parties were of age. It was a compromise that would suit British purposes. Keshub was persuaded to see this as being of great benefit to the spread of Brahmoism and enlightenment in India.

Why did Keshub agree to a marriage that caused him so much public and personal distress? Pratap Chandra Mazumdar recalls, “He fervently believed that the representatives of the British Government could never deceive him.”<sup>128</sup> Keshub wrote later to Max Müller that his agreement to the marriage had stemmed from a combination of his conviction that the marriage was providential, and his duty to place the public good before his individual interest: “I saw the finger of God in all the arrangements, trials and struggles in connection with the marriage. A whole kingdom was to be reformed, and all my individual

<sup>127</sup> Bagal 1968.

<sup>128</sup> Mozoomdar 1887, p. 239.



interests were absorbed in the vastness of God's saving economy or in what people would call public good."<sup>129</sup>

While Mazumdar never wavered in his devotion to Keshub, his letters to Max Müller in the 1880s indicate that he was concerned by many of Keshub's innovations. As he admitted in a letter written during August 1881, Keshub was "becoming more and more metaphysical" to the point where "he may completely elude popular understanding, and that is why I am the more anxious to explain him."<sup>130</sup> Mazumdar's desire to "explain some of his principles from a simple and rational theistic ground" took the form of a series of accounts of the New Dispensation sent to *The Inquirer*, which presented a version of Keshub's teachings sanitized for English Unitarian audiences. He also promulgated a view of the New Dispensation as an expression of "simple primitive Theism" in a series of lectures delivered during a visit to England in 1883.<sup>131</sup> Mazumdar claims that a "high government official" confided after Keshub's death that Keshub had the capacity to "excite the thousands", and that his professions of loyalty as opposed to "political discontent" were valued highly by the British.<sup>132</sup>

Keshub's final years marked a stark decrease in his influence. Nevertheless, he raised enough attention to attract intellectual Indians to AIT, so much so that every national group of importance had a clearly defined standpoint on AIT and used it for their own purposes. The role of Keshub Chandra Sen and Brahma Samaj was decisive in that. Though Müller's ultimate goal is not clear, his hesitation to take a stand helped the spread of AIT to a great extent. Christian missionaries and the British Empire clearly used it for their own benefit.

## Propounder-Recipient-Facilitator

Several actors, notably Orientalists, Brahma Samaj, Christian missionaries and the British Empire together played a role in the spreading of AIT in India. For any theory to be accepted, there needs to be a propounder, a recipient and finally a facilitator. On a grand scale, the propounders of the theory were the Orientalists, of whom Max Müller played the leading role. The recipients were the multitude of Indian social reformers, notably Brahma Samaj, which was led by Keshub. Christian missionaries and British imperialists facilitated the process. Ignorant of the ultimate outcome, Keshub and Müller tried multiple avenues for reconciling the lost kinship between Europe and India. Sometimes it merged the sovereign with the Church and sometimes it took the form of a universal religion.

While it remains arguable whether or not AIT ever had any basis in reality, it can be concluded without dispute that the modern proliferation of the *idea* of AIT took place in the nineteenth century without any resistance.

Brahma Samaj, which was started by Raja Rammohun Roy and Debendranath Tagore, took shape hugely under its influential leader Keshub Chandra Sen. Keshub Chandra

<sup>129</sup> Müller 1881; 1884, p. 114.

<sup>130</sup> Müller 1884, pp. 163, 52.

<sup>131</sup> *The Inquirer*, 8 Sept 1883.

<sup>132</sup> Kopf 1975, p. 64.

Sen and other prominent leaders of Brahma Samaj interacted closely with Müller, the proponent of AIT. In an interesting turn of events, everyone used AIT to suit their own purposes.

The “Young Bengal” (Keshub) preferred his middle path to Christianity, Debendranath wrote in his autobiography.<sup>133</sup> Keshub proposed a universal religion in his faction of Brahma Samaj and caught the attention of British and Indians alike with his oratory skills. Under the leadership of Keshub Chandra Sen, Brahma Samaj played an influential role in shaping the ideologies at Calcutta, the capital of British India. It marked a slow shift from the period of ideological stagnation in the wake of Macaulayism and ended with rising signs of patriotism.<sup>134</sup> On the other hand, Christian missionaries used AIT to sympathize with the people in the lower socio-economic strata. British imperialists dubbed AIT the “furniture of Empire”.

Clearly AIT was popularized as a “scientific” theory, which was supported by leaders of influential standing across the nation. The first glimpse of this came through Brahma Samaj. At the end, the only remaining questions were who belongs to an Aryan race and who does not, or whether the European Aryans were superior to the branch which migrated to India or not.<sup>135</sup> In this confusion, unfortunately, the scientific basis of AIT itself was never questioned.

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133 Thakur 1914, p. 100.

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