

# **A Pioneer in Hindu-Christian Dialogue in Depth**

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**B**rahmobandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) seemed to be a combination of opposites: Hinduism and Christianity, Eastern and Western culture, anti-British revolutionary, who emerged as a bold pioneer of independence of our motherland. Dr. Julius Lipner has written what is perhaps the best biography of this multi-faceted person: educationist, poet, religious enthusiast, philosopher, nationalist, theologian, writer, journalist and even athlete; there are few spheres he does not seem to have touched; and whatever he touched, he enriched.<sup>1</sup> But above all, he is a pioneer in modern Hindu-Christian dialogue in depth.

## **His Early Life**

He was born Bhavani Charan Banerjea on February 11, 1861 in Khannyam, a small village about 36 miles north of Calcutta, in an orthodox Brahmin family. Throughout his early life, he became acquainted with popular Hinduism as well as the Sanskritic tradition and adhered firmly to his caste exigencies. His father was a police inspector employed by the British. He endeavoured to give Bhavani an English education in Protestant schools and colleges.<sup>2</sup>

In 1877, Bhavani decided to leave college and join the army; in his own words, “*to learn the art of fighting and drive out the English*”<sup>3</sup> but did not get support. He resolved

not to marry or pass University examinations, but to liberate India at the risk of his own life.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Hindu Reformer**

Slowly, Bhavani interacted with several of the leading figures of the Bengali Renaissance, such as Swami Vivekananda, Keshab Chandra Sen, Priya Nath Mullick, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and P.C. Majumdar.<sup>5</sup> In 1882, he became a disciple of Keshab Chandra Sen, leader of the *Brahmo Samaj*, and continued after his death, under his successor, P. C. Mozumdar. Both Sen and Mozumdar were prominent social workers, inspired by the person of Jesus Christ, yet committed to Hindu reform, a combination which undoubtedly had an impact on Bhavani.<sup>6</sup>

Around 1889, an unexpected event, associated with his father's illness, turned the direction of Bhavani's life. His father had been transferred to Multan, in West Punjab; Bhavani rushed to Multan to nurse him and, as his father lay dying, he saw on his bookshelf Joseph Faa di Bruno's standard work on Catholicism entitled '*Catholic Belief*'. Bhavani read the book into the night and, after his father's death, took it with him<sup>7</sup> and started giving more serious attention to the theological status of Christ<sup>8</sup>. He voluntarily stated attending classes being given every Sunday evening by Joseph Redman, a C. M. S. missionary and visited regularly a certain Rev Heaton who convinced him of the mystery of the resurrection of Christ and gradually helped him to accept that Christ is the co-eternal Son of the Father.<sup>9</sup>

## **The Christian Witness**

In 1889, Bhavani gave a lecture seeking to demonstrate that "*Christ fulfilled the universal desire of the Hindus who had ever been looking forward to the advent of a sinless*

*Guru (a Sat Guru, a Nishkalanka Avatar)*<sup>10</sup>. Then in 1890, he founded a journal '*Harmony*'. Here he shows his dependence on Thomistic thought, which he had already mastered. He distinguishes between natural religion derived from reason and supernatural religion (Catholic) derived from divine revelation, but not opposed to reason.

On 26<sup>th</sup> February 1891, Bhavani was accepted in the Church by Rev. Heaton, but did not join the Anglicans. Instead he met a Jesuit, Fr. Salinger and on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1891, he was united with the Catholic Church, for culturally, "the Catholics represented a Church which spanned East and West and was not identified with the British colonial powers, as was the Protestant Church" and theologically, "Catholics had a much more positive attitude towards India and the Hindu religion than was evident in the more confrontational, discontinuous approach which typified Protestants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India". Asked by a census official whether he was a Roman Catholic or a Protestant he replied, "*Neither. Put me down as an Indian Catholic*"<sup>11</sup>. This marks an early distinction between belief and behaviour, which would be the hallmark of his theology (i.e. *believe* as a Catholic, *behave* as a Hindu). In *Sophia*, the magazine that he founded with full support of Catholic authorities and edited, it is affirmed, "We are Hindu in so far as our physical and mental constitution is concerned, but in regard to our immortal soul we are Catholic. We are Hindu-Catholic."<sup>12</sup>

From 1891 he experienced sustained persecution from his Hindu friends, but was comforted by the baptism of two of his close colleagues, Parmanand and Khemchand,<sup>13</sup> and in 1893, a third Rewachand (known as Animananda), who became his biographer. Bhavani also adopted a new baptismal name: Theophilus, perhaps because of the opinion that St. Theophilus was the first to use the word "Trinity".

He added the second portion of his family name *Upadhyay*, which means teacher or sub-teacher. Theophilus (lover of God) means Brahmabandhab, in Bengali. It suggests an early love for the Trinity, an area in which he would later excel in the most important work of his life: the Sanskrit hymn, ‘*Vande, Sat-Chit-Anandam*’, in honour of the Trinity, which has immortalised his name<sup>14</sup>. He has also composed a lovely prayer adoring the Infinite Being.

## The Theologian

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay was of course well ahead of his times, even too much ahead, where dialogue in depth is concerned. He would be “glad to be called a Christian, if by that is meant allegiance to Jesus, the Redeemer of fallen humanity and the Source of all righteousness, to the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the human soul to make it a heavenly abode of the Father and the Son”. “But,” he continues, “People here understand by the term ‘Christian’ a man who drinks liquor and eats beef, who hates the scriptures of India as lies and her inspired men as imposters ... in this sense of the term, we are not Christian ... we mean to preach the reconciliation of all religions in Christ”<sup>15</sup>.

Upadhyay explored many great theological themes. He used Athanasius’ work on the divinity of Christ. He interacted positively and negatively with the Vedic tradition through 1896. During 1897 his focus shifted to the Vedantic tradition. It is then that he began to emphasise the theological potential of Sankara’s *advaitic* Vedantism as a starting point for Christian theology. His lectures sought to reconcile neo-Thomism with Sankara’s *Advaitism*. Gradually he comes to recognise that Sankara is the Indian counterpart to the Aristotle of the West.<sup>16</sup> Prior to that, he had relied heav-

ily upon establishing primitive, universal theism to counter pantheistic tendencies in India.

Quoting Aquinas, Upadhyay rightly holds that evil is a negation or lack of good. Sin, moral evil, is a reality from which the only escape and sure refuge is Christ. “He who takes his stand on this rock of righteousness, leaving his tempest-tossed frail bark of self, will no more be swallowed up by the depthless abyss of sin”, he says. He refutes the theory of transmigration of souls on the grounds of the permanent identity and immortality of the soul; and so he comes to the end of human and Salvation. He does not argue; he just explains, but he does that superbly<sup>17</sup>.

Naturally Upadhyay went too far at times. But these are minor aberrations in a vast scheme of his work and thought. In 1904, Upadhyay delivered an extremely controversial lecture in Bengali on *The True Nature of Krishna*, which showed how he understood the relationship between a Hindu *avatar* and the incarnation of Christ.<sup>18</sup> His comparison between “Avatar” and “Incarnation” could have been deeper. For though the Hindi translation of Incarnation is Avatar and the English translation of Avatar is Incarnation, their meanings are actually radically different. For while Avatar is a manifestation of God or of divine power in a human being, Incarnation is *Sharirdharan*: taking a body, actually becoming human, human enough to suffer and die<sup>19</sup>.

## The Nationalist

From 1904, Upadhyay threw himself wholeheartedly into the nationalist movement. In July, he wrote a letter saying that he had not abandoned the faith. He then started a new daily Bengali newspaper *Sandhya* which continued till his death. On August 7, 1904 he officially united with the *Swadeshi* movement, a nationalist confrontational move-

ment against Viceroy Lord Curzon's Partition of Bengal, which roused popular anger against the British presence in India. Upadhyay's *Sandhya* became one of its leading journalistic voices.<sup>20</sup>

After this, Upadhyay wrote some of his most scathing articles against the British, one of them, "*Blooming the Sedition: the Firinghi in a fix*". The *firinghi* was a racially offensive word, he often applied to the British. The police searched the *Sandhya* offices and arrested Upadhyay, charging him with sedition against the British government. Upadhyay refused to appear in court saying that it was his humble share of the God-appointed mission of fighting for *Swaraj*. While the trial was still on, he fell ill and was rushed to the Campbell Medical College in Calcutta, where he received a hernia operation, from which he developed a tetanus infection and had a painful death on October 27, 1907.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay has been compared to St Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the West. The writings of both Upadhyay (who died at the age of 49), and Aquinas (who died at the age of 48) were misunderstood and severely criticised; it took long before Aquinas' work was recognized and appreciated. Upadhyay is slowly beginning to emerge from the mist. However, Upadhyay has opened the eyes of the Christians to the need of adaptation to Indian culture and ethos. His advice to missionaries is *interesting*. "The itinerant missionaries should be thoroughly Hindu in their mode of living. They should, if necessary, be strict vegetarians and teetotallers, and put on the yellow *sanyasi* garb. The central mission should adopt the policy of the glorious old Fathers of the South (a reference to Di No-

bili and Beschi), well versed in Sanskrit, for one ignorant of Sanskrit, will hardly be able to face his opponents.

## Notes

- 1 Satya Manthan Sanstha, Varanasi, UP, *Some Eminent Missionaries of India*, 2001, p 44
- 2 Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1969 p.27
- 3 B. Animananda, , *The Blade*, Roy and Son, Calcutta, n. d., p 14
- 4 Ibidem, p 18
- 5 Cfr C. Fonseca, “A Prophet disowned” *Vidyajyoti*, (April 1980), p 177ff
- 6 B. Animananda, *The Blade*, op cit., p 31
- 7 C. Fonseca, op cit., p 178
- 8 J Lipner & Gispert-Sauch, *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, Vol I. Bangalore: U.T.C, 1991, p xxxi
- 9 T. C. Tennent, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations*, ISPCK, Delhi 2005, p 18.
- 10 B. Animananda, *The Blade*, op cit., p 20
- 11 Ibidem p 39
- 12 T. C. Tennent, op cit., p 20
- 13 B. Animananda, *The Blade*, op cit., p 47
- 14 T. C. Tennent, op cit., p 21
- 15 B. Animananda, *The Blade*, op cit., p 39
- 16 *Sophia*, July 1897, Vols. 4, 8 and 9.
- 17 Satya Manthan Sanstha op cit. p 47
- 18 B Animananda, *The Blade*, p 123-130
- 19 Satya Manthan Sanstha op cit. p 47
- 20 C. Fonseca, Upadhyaya Brahmabandav: The Political Years, *Indian Church History Review* (April 1981), p 18-29.
- 21 T. C. Tennent, op cit., p 27; B. Animananda, *The Blade* p 168