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Bharatbhoomi Punyabhoomi: In Search of a Global Theosophical India in Tarakishore Choudhury's Writings

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This article deals with a particular text, *Brahmavadi Rsi o Brahmanvidya* written by Tarakishore Choudhury, an illustrious High Court lawyer in twentieth century colonial Calcutta who later became the famous Vaishnava saint Swami Santadas Kathiya Baba. The essay aims to highlight the various nuances, contradictions and inflections of power within the intellectual universe of the colonized Western-educated Bengali intelligentsia in order to locate multiple “global” moments within the text. It inspects how the intellectual and theosophical shifts experienced by the author were shaped by the dual forces of a transnational information circuit sustained by a print economy underscored by the contours of the British empire as well as extra-rational indigenous traditions of knowledge-production. It also dissects how the comparativist framework within which ideas, societies and political economies produced in the ‘West’ and in India are juxtaposed by Choudhury. His aim was to discursively assert the spiritual and material glory of ancient India and construct a notion of a hyperreal India about to emerge on a global theosophical career both appropriating and subverting the intellectually dominant metanarratives of the ‘hyperreal West’ and colonial rule. The final section of the article focuses on the ambivalence and implicit assertions of autonomy by this intellectual actor in constructing what constitutes the ‘Indic’ and determining the terms through which Western discourses, if at all, were to be appropriated and reconstituted in the process.

Introduction

Andrew Sartori and Samuel Moyn attribute the emergence of the “global” as a spatial reference within the discipline of intellectual history, to its inception within the journal of *Modern Intellectual History* in 2004, which was primarily conceived as a “forum for scholarship on intellectual and cultural history from the mid-seventeenth century to the present, with primary attention to Europe and the Americas and to transnational developments that encompass the non-West.”¹

¹ Cited in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Global Intellectual History Beyond Hegel and Marx” in *History and Theory*, 54, 1 (2015):128. DOI: 10.1111/hith.10746

Such a proclamation is problematic because not only does it produce “Europe and the Americas” as privileged spatial circuits of ideas as Sanjay Subrahmanyam points out, but also forwards the construct of the “non-West” as a unitary spatial entity that is an “other” to the “West” which renders the “provincializing” of the West within the discussion difficult. In an issue of the journal focusing on South Asia, the editors admit that the journal had so far concentrated on “intellectual history that was essentially Western in orientation” even though, in the South Asian context, the methodological concern was described as “adapting the various languages of Western intellectual history to the circumstances of a colonial world”². The critical appraisals suggested by Samuel Moyn and Sartori include investigation of the “global as a meta-analytical category of the historian” most evident in Hegelian universalist and comparative histories, “intermediating agents or modes of circulation” and the “conceptions of the global scale.”³ However, such approaches obstruct the possibilities of recovering alternative polemical engagements with the “global” generated within and by the “colonial worlds”.

In this article I will focus on the Bengali treatise *Brahmanvadi Rsi o Brahmanvidya* (The Sages with Knowledge of *Brahman* and the Theosophy of *Brahman*),⁴ first published in 1911, in which Tarakishore Choudhury, an illustrious lawyer at the High Court in early twentieth century colonial Calcutta who later renounced his profession and family to become the Vaishnava saint *Swami 108 Santadas Kathiya Baba*, claims to provide an introduction to the philosophy of *Brahman* as delineated by the ancient Aryan sages through the *Darshanic* corpus.⁵ By doing so, I will locate multiple manifestations of what can be perceived as “global” in an intellectual discourse produced within “a colonial world” for a colonized yet elite Bengali readership with a Western education provided by a colonial regime.

² Charles Capper, Anthony La Vopa and Nicholas Phillipson, “A Message from the Editors” in *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 1(2007): 1. DOI: 10.1017/S1479244306001107.

³ Samuel Moyn & Andrew Sartori, “Approaches to Global Intellectual History” In *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn & Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁴ This is my translation. The term *Brahman* (not to be confused with Brahmin) has been used in the Vedas in multiple senses but this essay uses the term in the form Tarakishore Choudhury uses it, following the Upanishadic usage of the term to mean “one single, primary reality” to which “the world of multiplicity is, in fact, reducible”. It is derived from the Sanskrit root “*brh*” which means, “to grow”.

⁵ Radhakishnan, “Introduction”, in *The Principle Upanisads* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953), 52.

⁵ As Wilhelm Halbfass has shown, the term *Darśana* by the 8th century had become a commonplace term in Indian doxographic literature, referring to the “main schools or systems of what is commonly called ‘Indian philosophy’.” Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 264. Andrew Nicholson argues, contradicting both the polarizing historiographical discourses of ‘Hindu unity’ being either a “timeless truth” or a colonial “invented tradition”, that by the late medieval period, the scholars of the “six systems” (*saddarśana*) namely Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta, had come to be considered part of a single philosophical theistic tradition (*astika*) as opposed to atheistic traditions (*Nastika*) like Buddhism and Jainism. Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2-3.

A study of “global” tendencies within a singular text meant for limited regional readership, whether in the employment of scientific rationalism and Western scientific theories as hermeneutic key to the Sastras⁶ or in the frequent conjuring of Western societies as a comparative framework, reveals the peculiarities of the colonial moment underscored by “the synergy produced by the fecund coexistence of different spatial scales”⁷ where the idea of a “hyperreal” West⁸ dominates the intellectual universe of the colonized elite, whose agency in mediating, translating and constituting the contours of such a conjecture, nevertheless, is no less significant. However, this article shows how in this process, India emerges as a hyperreality in itself - about to embark on a global career through the theosophy of *Brahmanvidya* (knowledge of the *Brahman*).

The first section of this article situates the shift in the intellectual orientation of Choudhury from an ardent advocate of reason to an apologist for the axiomatic quality of the *Sastric* word within a ‘global’ framework of knowledge production through the newspaper economy crisscrossing the British Empire. These hermeneutic shifts are crucial for historically grasping the agenda and the clusters of readership he explicitly targets in the introduction to the text under discussion. The second section looks deeper into the complex intellectual exercise that led to the production of certain discourses within the text, meant to restore the faith of the colonized Bengali intelligentsia, on the *Sastras* and the glorious material and spiritual past of ancient *Bharat*.⁹ Finally, the third section explores Choudhury’s authorial agency and agenda which informed selective intertextualities and translatory enterprises. Methodologically, this work, in aspiring to interrogate the historical intricacies and ambivalences that underpinned the appropriation and reconstitution of categories produced in and by the ‘West’ to articulate concepts considered ‘Indic’, reflects on the ‘global’ in terms of modes of conceptual flows

⁶ *Sastra* is a Sanskrit term meaning treatise on a particular field. In this essay, *Sastras* have been used to mean *Srutis* (the 4 Vedas including the Upanishads, considered as the revealed word of God), and *Smritis* which include *Dharmasastras* (ethical codes) propounded by Manu, and *Dharmasutras* or commentaries on the Vedic scriptures by later scholars and the Puranas and epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata). These are the texts which Choudhury primarily refers to by the term ‘*Sastra*,’ which he identifies as the sources of *Brahmanvidya*.

⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Global Intellectual History Beyond Hegel and Marx” in *History and Theory*, 54, 1(2015):137. DOI: 10.1111/hith.10746.

⁸ The concept of ‘hyperreality’ was developed by Jean Baudrillard in “Simulacra and Simulation” whereby he asserts that simulation generates “models of a real without origin or reality” which he refers to as “hyperreality”. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (N/a: University of Michigan Press, 1994). By the term “hyperreal West”, I am referring to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s conceptualization of “Europe” and “India” as “figures of imagination whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate” and his identification of “Europe” as a “reified category” celebrated within “relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern”. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

⁹ I prefer to translate ‘Bharat’ as South Asia in Choudhury’s case rather than India since Choudhury’s Bharat is not limited to the post-partition cartographic expanse connoted by the latter. To him *Bharatbhoomi* was a sacred land, where the eternal *sanatana dharma* and knowledge of Brahman had revealed themselves to the Aryan sages and had flourished.

and agents who intellectually inhabit and negotiate spatial scales, following Moyn and Sartori. At the same time, it brings the very mode of universalist and comparative historiography, also evident in Choudhury's writings under historical dissection.

The Author: Intellectual Shift, 'Global' Contours and 'Global Readership(?)'

Born to a Brahmin family in Sylhet district of present-day Bangladesh in 1859, Tarakishore Choudhury, while studying F.A. from Presidency College, lost faith in Brahminical norms under the ideological influence of the nationalist leader Surendranath Banerjee¹⁰ and the Brahma leader Sibnath Sastri, and as a result discarded the Brahminical austerities, which he had been performing devoutly from his childhood. Initially an agnostic, he was gradually inclined towards Monotheism and joined the *Brahmo Samaj*¹¹ in 1877-78. However, as evident from Bipin Chandra Pal's *Memoirs*, Choudhury became a member of the *Sadharan Brahma Samaj*, the clique which, under Shibnath Sastri, broke away from Keshav Chandra Sen's *Bharatvarshiya Brahma Samaj* in 1878, in opposition to his decision to marry his fourteen year-old daughter to the Hindu Raja of Coochbihar.¹² He self-tutored himself on History and Political Economy and Hamilton's Lectures, Fowlers' Inductive Logic which were part of the B.A. syllabi for Philosophy, and also J.S.Mill's Inductive Logic.¹³ Later, he joined a *Jogisampradaya* cult while remaining a part of the *Brahmo Samaj* and was followed by Bijoy Krishna Goswami¹⁴, then a fellow Brahma leader and a family friend, who also passed the B.L.

¹⁰ Surendranath Banerjee was a moderate nationalist leader who was the founder of the Indian National Conference and later a senior leader of the Indian National Congress, the bastion of associational politics of prayer and petition. Later he gave leadership to the Swadeshi anti-partition movement in response to the British government's partition of Bengal in 1905.

¹¹ The Brahma Samaj had been formed by Rammohan Roy in 1828 as a religious movement which sought to focus on the worship of *Nirakar*(formless) *Brahman* as delineated in the Upanishads by purifying Hinduism of elements like priestcraft and idolatry. Choudhury joined the *Bharatiya Brahma Samaj* under Keshab Chandra Sen, which had split from the *Adi Brahma Samaj* presided over by Debendranath Tagore. It is noteworthy that under Keshab Sen, the Samaj had grown increasingly theistic with the introduction of devotional elements from the Bhakti tradition in Bengal like Kirtans, besides concerning itself with female emancipation and abolition of caste discrimination. The Brahma Samaj split again when Sen was perceived by the Sibnath Sastri faction as violating the Indian Marriage Act of 1872. "History of the Brahma Samaj", www.thebrahmosamaj.net, accessed February 12, 2017, <http://www.thebrahmosamaj.net/history/history.html>.

¹² Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of my Life and Times*, 317-318, cited in *Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: *Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar*, 2008), 10.

¹³ Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, *SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: *Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar*, 2008), 9-14.

¹⁴ Bijoy Krishna Goswami was also a Brahma leader who later emerged as a famous saint of the neo-Gaudiya Vaishnavite tradition that adhered to the theosophical position of *Achintya-abhedabhed* (inconceivable difference and non-difference), a form of what Andrew Sartori calls immanent monism that critiques Advaita Vedanta's notion of abstract monism ("phe-

Examination in 1884¹⁵. Meanwhile, he was gradually losing interest in the *Brahmo Samaj*, evident from a letter he wrote to the *Tattva Koumudi Patrika*, where he stated that the *Samaj* has failed to transcend materiality and become the fount which can quench the spiritual quest of people and “instill the belief among outsiders that one can attain *darshan* (used here in the sense of spiritual realization rather than in terms of the conventional connotation of visual engagement with a deity) of the true Being, bathe in the light of truth, purity and love and become free from the bondage of desires (*moha-pash*) by becoming a part of the *Samaj*”¹⁶. That Choudhury was iterating a feeling that had resonances among other Brahmos as well is evident from Amiya Sen’s contention:

[t]hat Brahmodharma was increasingly becoming a dull, uninspiring faith, with no basis in popular perceptions is a complaint that latter day Brahmos were often heard to make...highly revisionist Brahmos like Bipin Pal were subsequently to become one of the important spokesmen of Bengal Vaishnavism¹⁷.

According to Bipin Chandra Pal, by the 1890s he “was recognized as one of the very best lawyers in the profession, taking his place in the estimates of many of those who worked with him, only next to that of Sir Rashbehari Ghosh [...]”¹⁸. On the religious front, he was realizing that despite having attained certain yogic abilities through the *Sampradaya* cult¹⁹, it could not satisfy his spiritual enquiry and he was growing desperate for a *sadguru* who was *Brahmagya* (one who had acquired cognizance of *Brahman*). In 1894, he and his wife were initiated under *108 Ramdas Kathiya Baba* of *Vrindavan*, who was then the *Mahant* of the 4 primary Vaishnav sects. Soon after, he started mastering the *Sastras* and his faith in

nomena are illusory and reality is transcendent”). His disciples included prominent Swadeshi activists and nationalist leaders like Bipinchandra Pal (also a former Brahmo and friend of Choudhury). Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 148.

¹⁵ Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, *SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 28-34.

¹⁶ Tarakishore Choudhury, “*Srijukto Babaji Maharaj kortrik lakhito sadharon Brahmo Samajer ‘Tattvakoumudi’ Patrikar 1804 soker poila ashin sonkhyay prokashito potro*” in Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, “*Porishishto*” in *SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: *Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar*, 2008), 281.

¹⁷ Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872-1905: some essays in Interpretation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 34.

¹⁸ Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of My life and Times*, 321 cited in Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, *SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: *Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar*, 2008), 66.

¹⁹ The cult Choudhury had joined comprised of congregational practice of yoga (certain pranayams) to control one’s breath and open the 6 energy layers (*śatchakra*) within the body through transmission of cosmic energy from the guru and co-practitioners to one another. Choudhury and his guru realized that he had mastered his breath and his chakras within a very short time and with little practice. Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, *SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 27.

the *Sastric* word was fully restored. Pal recollects: “From an aggressive and radical *brahmo*, Tarakishore became in later life a sincere Hindu, strictly following all the disciplines, physical and psychological as well as social and ethical, enjoined upon every devout Brahmin by ancient Hindu law and scripture.”²⁰ Finally he took *Sanyas* (renunciation) a few years after his guru’s death and was eventually elected as the *Mahant* of the *Nimbarka* sect as well as other saints in *Vrindavan* and was renamed *108 Swami Santadas Kāthiya Bābā*. It is noteworthy that these marked tremendous intellectual shifts in Tarakishore, since prior to joining the Yogic cult, he had, while engaging in debates with a renowned Bengali Pundit at Kasi in 1880, refused to accept the *Sastric* word as axiomatic without any logical explanation.²¹ Amiya Sen’s declaration that “A fellow-student of [Bipin Chandra] Pal, Tarakishore Choudhury, who was once an active member of the Brahmo Samaj later renounced it to obtain the status of a great Vaishnav saint”, however, fails to take into account the historical intricacies involved in such a transformation.²² Choudhury himself attributes his gradual tilt towards *gurubad* (doctrine of the necessity of an enlightened guru for spiritual advancement) to a particular article from the *Australian Times* published in *The Statesman* about the owner of the Chiarini Circus who had managed to calm down and control his tigers, distraught by sea-voyage by maintaining a firm gaze and eye-contact. On reflecting, he ascertained that the owner “had transmitted his intrinsic hypnotic abilities through his gaze thereby subduing the animal instincts of the tigers.”²³ With this realization, he admits that he underwent a series of intellectual shifts:

I felt that the prevalent tradition of taking refuge in a powerful guru whereby the bestial inclinations within the disciple are purified through the Guru’s powers, which I have so far considered as fraudulent and ill-founded, might not be unscientific...and with these strands of thought, whatever I had read on physics and psychology came to my mind. I realized that the human body was a machine run by the internal electrical energy of the individual and current particular to an individual’s personality is always being emitted from his body to his external surroundings. With the enhancement of will-power he can transmit such electricity towards a person to a greater extent at will. The fingers in our body resemble a Point in an electrical device through which the internal current is conducted from the body into

²⁰ Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of My life and Times*, 320-321 cited in *Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar, 2008), 77.

²¹ Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, *SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar, 2008), 19.

²² Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872-1905: some essays in Interpretation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 34.

²³ Translation mine. Tarakishore Choudhury cited in *Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar, 2008), 24.

other bodies. I felt that presumably due to this reason, the Rsis have described the effects of touch by the fingers (Sparsha) in the Sastras. Probably the distinctions of caste (Jatibhed) have also been premised upon individual traits. Within a few hours, all these epiphanies transformed me into a new individual...the more I reflected, the more my faith on the codes of conduct mentioned in the Hindu sastras increased.²⁴

Later in the text under consideration, he engages with these concepts with intertextual allusions to certain pseudoscientific texts, which will be discussed shortly. Nevertheless, what is evident from the above autobiographical passage is that news of an event from across the globe, circulated through an interconnected web of newspaper economy spread throughout the British colonial Empire, played a decisive role in triggering a cascade of hermeneutic exercises involving the interpretation of Hindu *Sastras* through Western scientific categories, a methodology which he applies in our text as well.

Nevertheless, Choudhury is certainly not an isolated example among the colonial Bengali elite of nineteenth century Bengal. As Tapan Roychoudhury has pointed out, even while the “weak and dependent intelligentsia”’s ideological attraction to selective intellectual strands from the “master race” were underpinned by an ambivalent admiration yet revulsion for the imperial project, the appropriation from what comprised a wide “stratum” was also informed by “the specific experience of encounter with the alien civilization”.²⁵ Thus, even while post-Enlightenment rationalism, the basis of Western education provided by the colonial curriculum, emerged as the key hermeneutic tool for the Bengal intelligentsia, the gradual strengthening of the national ethos and critiques of colonialism required that forms of cultural servility came to be disapproved, especially in what Partha Chatterjee calls “the so-called spiritual domain of culture”, the ‘inner’ space for articulation of “sovereignty” and colonial difference.²⁶ Bolstered by a national pride and self-respect reinforced by the sympathetic assertions of Colonel Olcott and the Theosophical Society, as well as Max Müller’s discourses on Indo-European racio-linguistic commonality, there were several attempts to assert that Hindu practices “were based on higher reasoning”, as exemplified in figures like *Sasadhar Tadkachudamani*.²⁷ One can trace here the reconfiguration of an Indian hieropraxy in terms of reason, an universalized Indic spirituality shorn of the so-called allegations of superstition which could stand at par with Christianity (for, as Chakrabarty points out, “reason...was grounded in a Christian conception of

²⁴ Tarakishore Choudhury cited in *Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: *Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar*, 2008), 23-25.

²⁵ Tapan Roychoudhury, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4-5.

²⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 26.

²⁷ Roychoudhury, *Europe Reconsidered*, 34.

God”²⁸) and the construction of a ‘hyperreal’ rationalist India which could be shown to inhabit a position on par with Europe, which in colonial metanarratives, represented the apex of the rationalist scale of progress. Thus, the very project of constructing a hyperreal India, with due respect to its indigenous creative flows, was conditioned by the presence of ‘Europe’ or the ‘West’, which in its ‘hyperreal form’, came to stand for reason, progress and modernity.

Just as Rammohan and his contemporaries derived their Sastric sources from an “indigenous tradition of Sansritic scholarship” rather than “Western Orientology”²⁹, so too did Tarakishore. According to Ashutosh Bhattacharya, a relative of Choudhury, he mastered the *Mugdhabodh Vyakaran* from a Pundit in Calcutta and subsequently completed the *Nyaysastra*, *Purnachandra Vedantachanchu*’s exegesis on the *Patanjal* and *Sankhya* doctrines, Upanishads and Puranas by himself in 1890s.³⁰ However, despite his auto didactical engagement with the doxographies on the *Sastras* made possible albeit by the thriving culture of print capitalism in colonial Calcutta, in the prefatory part of the first volume of the Darshanic Brahmanvidya series, he confesses that instead of following the existent exegesis on *Sankhya*, he would proceed to interpret the *Sutras*, as he understood them by his Guru’s grace.³¹ It is worth remarking that even while the *Sastras* were to be interpreted individually by exercising the faculties of logic and reason, the very process was perceived as inspired and facilitated by the divine intervention of the Guru. It is here, that we can perceive a break from both precolonial Sanskritic scholarship and other colonial literati; if the rationale of the *Sastras* were to be grasped, the engagement with the *Sastric* text was to be direct and individual, without the didactic mediation of a Pundit and bypassing layers of existent exegetical corpus, except in infrequent allusions to register similarity or difference of opinion. However, unlike Rammohan and the Brahma principles, for Choudhury such a theosophic enterprise could not succeed without the extra-rational intuition provided by the intervention of the *sadguru*, of whose mediating powers he had no doubt left.

As mentioned by Tarakishore Choudhury himself, the book *Brahmavadi Rsi o Brahmanvidya* was conceptualized while he was teaching the *Yogasutras* composed by *Patanjali* to Asutosh Bhattacharya and later he expanded it into a book including other *Darshanic* traditions, considering the significance of the subject.³² Bhattacharya recollects that the book, along with its three successive volumes,

²⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 235.

²⁹ Roychoudhury, *Europe Reconsidered*, 21.

³⁰ *Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, Sri Sri 108 Swami Sri Santadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar; 2008), 100.

³¹ Tarakishore Choudhury, “Preface”, in *Darshanic Brahmanvidya, Vol. 1* (Sukchor: Kathiya Baba Ashram, 2008).

³² Tarakishore Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya* (Kolkata: Swami Santadas Institute of Culture, 2004), 17.

“*Darshanic Brahmanvidya*”³³ which contain Bengali translations and exegesis of the *Vaisheshika*, *Nyaya*, *Purvamimangsha* and *Sankhya* schools, was published in 1911(b. 1318).³⁴ In fact, Choudhury describes the former as “a prologue to the *Darshanic Brahmanvidya* series”³⁵ and states that his purpose would be served “if this book can generate some amount of veneration for the Aryan *Rsis*, the Dharma propounded by them and faith in the Sastric injunctions”.³⁶

Choudhury makes it evident that his target readership is the Western educated sections of Hindu society who had grown sceptical of *Sanatana Hindu Dharma*,³⁷ having judged its ineffectuality through sheer argumentation and from the supposedly contemporary pathetic social condition of Hindus.³⁸ Choudhury’s statement affirms that a major section of Bengal intelligentsia perceived the contemporary social conditions in terms of decadence, a response to which ranged from socio-religious reform to revival of what was perceived as a pristine society modelled on Sastric prescriptions, though as Amiya Sen had suggested, the categories of reform and revival often overlapped.³⁹ However, the colonial elite’s self-critical glance towards present society that was perceived to be steeped in idol-worship, superstition, moral corruption, etc. were structured to a great extent by colonial discourses, especially William Jones’ notion of a classical Indian ‘golden age’ lost in distant antiquity as well as later Utilitarian claims like that of James Mill who attributed to India a “hideous state of society”.⁴⁰ Such an embeddedness of the colonial elite’s world-view within pedagogically communicated colonial ideologies also explains his confession about his earlier agnosticism and hesitation

³³ *Darshanic Brahmanvidya* translates roughly as the Philosophy of Brahman as delineated by the six Darshanic systems. Acknowledging that there are differences of opinion among the schools and the proponents on the nature of Brahman, in the series, he attempts to show the underlying harmony of the apparently contradictory stances of the different schools since all the proponents, occupying highest echelons of spiritual consciousness, were infallible.

³⁴ Ashutosh Bhattacharya quoted in Srisri 108 Swami Sri Dhananjaydas Kathiya Babaji Maharaj, *SriSri 108 Swami SriSantadash Kathiya Babaji Maharajer Jibon-chorit*, 5th Edition (Kolkata: *Kathiyababar Ashrom, Sukhchar*, 2008), 111.

³⁵ Tarakishore Choudhury, “*Bhumika*” in *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya* (Kolkata: Swami Santadas Institute of Culture, 2004), 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ As Wilhelm Halbfass has shown, the term *Sanatana Dharma* had, from its traditional scriptural connotation of an “unshakeable, venerable order” and particular norms of life, come to denote Hinduism as an ahistorical “eternal religion” synonymous with *Vaidikadharma* (Vedic dharma) in tracts of Neo-Hindus like Vivekananda, Reformists and their traditionalist opponents alike as a means of self-assertion and restorative discourse, while the Theosophists appropriated the expression to articulate Hinduism as a “universal religion” serving as a common denominator of all religions. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 343-346. Choudhury, however, uses it in the former sense of *Vaidikadharma* prescribed by the *Sastras*, about which he claimed, the educated sections of Hindu society, had grown sceptical.

³⁸ Choudhury, “*Bhumika*”, 17.

³⁹ Amiya P. Sen, “Introduction”, in *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872-1905: some essays in Interpretation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

⁴⁰ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

about narrating certain miraculous experiences that had restored his faith in the supernatural powers of the *Rsis* and the effectuality of Dharma, “since it is impossible to convince those educated by the English pedagogical tradition of their veracity.”⁴¹ Such a hesitation seems to emerge from a self-conscious identification with his intended readership, trapped within what Chatterjee calls the ‘unhappy consciousness’ generated by the “prison house of reason”.⁴² “Post-enlightenment rationalism [which] was at the heart of the intellectual tradition encountered by the [contemporary] Bengali intelligentsia”, according to Tapan Roychoudhury, necessitated that “efforts to restore... faith [in received tradition] had to be in terms of rational thought, not unquestioning acceptance” since “[r]eason was the foundation of scientific enquiry [and] [e]xploration of matters pertaining to human society and even the norms of personal life were within the latter’s purview.”⁴³

If the *Ramkrishna Kathāmṛta* attempts to register the subordination of “skeptical rationalism” to Indic spiritual wisdom by appending the colloquial religious idiom of *Ramkrishna Paramhansa* - the rustic village priest and godman with Sanskrit quotations from the Upanishads and the Gita⁴⁴ - Tarakishore indulges in a paradoxical exercise of defeating reason through reason, establishing the infallibility of the scriptures through “logic and deliberation”⁴⁵; once the axiomatic quality of the Sastric word has been scientifically established, faith in the sages and their supra-rational powers would automatically be restored; till then, delineation of extra-rational experiences could jeopardise his chances of convincing a skeptic colonial elite of the credulity of his claims.

Though the text, written in Bengali, specifically targeted the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia and the circulation of the text has so far remained restricted within this category of readership, Choudhury does address the colonial masters in the Introduction and entreats them not to treat the Indians with racial contempt since imperial glory can be achieved only by executing the welfare of subjects. He also informs them that “just as England and other Western lands have been enriched materially having acquired control of India, similarly by virtue of their inhabitation in India, the English stood to augment their spiritual knowledge as well and if they learn to display cordiality towards Indians, both would be able to reap the fruits of the happy days that [he] had heard, would arrive soon” in the form of the revelation of *Brahmanvidya*.⁴⁶ However, the expressed intent of addressing the British audience must not be overestimated, since the “Introduction” (*Bhumika*) is written in Bengali, even while throughout the text we find traces of bilinguality as he extensively quotes from Arthur Wallace and William Jones, etc. Therefore,

⁴¹ Choudhury, “*Bhumika*”, 18.

⁴² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 55.

⁴³ Roychoudhury, *Europe Reconsidered*, 20-21.

⁴⁴ Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 53.

⁴⁵ Choudhury, “*Bhumika*”, 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

one might infer that the address is rhetorical, iterating a rationale for colonial rule that could be fitted within Indian aspirations for a global spiritual future of India, that had been fuelled by the growing admiration for Indian spiritual wisdom in the West.

Thus, it becomes evident that the readership primarily targeted by the author was the social category of the colonized Bengali educated elite that shared the author's own intellectual space shaped by colonial pedagogy that ensured the hegemony of scientific rationalism and empiricism among their hermeneutic mechanisms over other forms of knowledge-production like supernatural experiences (which he mentions but maintains an overt silence), which Chakrabarty's postcolonial work identifies as a symbol of the persistence of post-Enlightenment 'hyperreal' Europe within the universe of the colonized intelligentsia. Moreover, his address to the colonial masters, certainly marks another "global" moment within the text, which is again, not free from inflections since there is both recognition of subordination and a tacit call for a readjustment of existing power-relations in favour of a more equitable partnership, that *Bharatbashis* (primarily indicating the inhabitants of a glorious ancient India), whose ancient spiritual and material achievements and the merits of whose social structures he would be delineating in subsequent chapters with extensive citations from the Asiatick Researches and a comparativist approach to political economies in ancient caste-based India and the contemporary capitalist Western world, deserve.

Engagements with "the West"

This brings us to where Choudhury situates his book within a global teleological framework, suggesting that he has learnt from an undisclosed source that the sacred doctrine of Indian *Brahmanvidya* will soon spread to all humanity around the globe. He incorporates the colonial circumstances within this teleology, proclaiming that a *Rsi* (whose name remains undisclosed) has stated that the British occupation of India was not coincidental but the effect of Sita's boon to *Trijata*, a relative of *Ravana*, the demon who had kidnapped her, that she would gain control of *Bharatvarsha* in Kaliyuga.⁴⁷ He further claims, "[t]he advent of the British will lead to universal good as the *Rsis* have designed the universal dissemination of *Brahmanvidya* using this pretext."⁴⁸ In order to bolster this claim, he refers to contemporary events like the heightened interest among European and American scholars about Indic knowledge-systems as well as the reception of Swami Vivekananda's delineation on the Vedanta at the Parliament of World Religions as steps towards the resurgence of *Brahmanvidya*.⁴⁹ One can trace an ambivalence here as Choudhury takes the attribution of colonial rule by a particular sage to

⁴⁷ Choudhury, "*Bhumika*", 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

the Ramayana as authoritative but refrains from naming him. Instead, he hastily moves over to citing contemporary events to prove the veracity of the divine design of globally disseminating *Brahmanvidya* through colonial rule.

He embeds the teleology he constructs within the general schema of the cosmic Yuga cycle. He claims that even within *Kaliyuga*, characterized by the proliferation of *Tamaguna*, *Brahmanvidya* can manifest itself since *Satya* and *Raja gunas* also remain enmeshed in comparatively lower proportions within it.⁵⁰ He cites an anecdote from one of the 18 Puranas that since parts of *Satyayuga* were encroached upon by *KaliyugaI*, manifest in the emergence of demons like *Hiranyakashipu*, it was compensated by being allowed to periodically encroach upon *Kaliyuga*, so that the excessive suffering of mankind under *Kali's* influence can be mitigated from time to time. He argues that the current dismal conditions of Indians as well as the Western populations' skepticism about their religious tenets due to the spread of scientific rationality signified that the spread of "Knowledge of the Brahma"⁵¹ (*Brahmanvidya*) has become essential for mitigating the worldwide theological quest. However, since "the Indian body is most suited to receive and possess this knowledge and by divine will, Westerners have assembled here in India, Western rule in India will become a pretext for the dissemination of *Brahmanvidya* among people of other countries".⁵² Romila Thapar forwarded the notion that Puranic yugas were not perceived as enclosed units and could be dialectically acted upon through human action (karma).⁵³ It is therefore noteworthy that Choudhury here employs a rarely cited Puranic discourse on the fragmentary and transferable quality of cosmic time to reconstitute and subvert the colonial discourse on progress along the lines of European Enlightenment. Colonial rule was, indeed, providential for Choudhury, as to quite a few colonial elites and reformers from an earlier generation in mid-nineteenth century, like Gosto Behary Mullick, secretary of a literary club in Calcutta, to whom, "the 'Joneses and Wilsons and Bethunes' had been necessary to raise India from 'the depths of ignorance and superstition'".⁵⁴ However, in Choudhury's discourse, colonial rule was an occasion for India not merely to recover its ancient glories but also to become the agent of a global moral and spiritual progress brought about by the worldwide spread of the Indic knowledge of *Brahman*. Thus, *Brahmanvidya* which com-

⁵⁰ Puranic time comprises of infinite cycles of the 4 Yugas or cosmic periods, namely Satya, Treta, Dwapar and Kali which are usually characterized by gradual decline in moral, social and religious life. The condition characterizing the yugas are perceived in terms of the three gunas or dispensations: Satya (propensity to dharma), Raja (propensity to action) and Tama (propensity for vices). Romila Thapar forwarded the notion that Puranic yugas were not enclosed units and capable of being dialectically acted upon through human action (karma).

⁵¹ Choudhury, "Bhumika", 6-8.

⁵² Choudhury, "Bhumika", 8.

⁵³ Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 24.

⁵⁴ Gyan Prakash, "Civil Society, Community, and the Nation in Colonial India", *Etnogrāphica*, VI, 1 (2002), 32.

prised of scattered strands within the mystical traditions of the Upanishads, is universalized in the process of imagining a global career for a regenerated Bharat, that does not quite fall short of spiritual hegemony.

It is evident that Choudhury sees his work as inaugurating if not facilitating the moment of global diffusion of Indic spiritual knowledge, the occasion for which has been provided by European and American Orientalist and Theosophical enterprises. One can be tempted to read in this diffusionist discourse with India as the epicenter, an echo of Vivekananda's identification of his times as opportune for "the spiritual oneness of the whole universe"⁵⁵. Although Choudhury identifies the enthusiastic reception of Vivekananda's Vedantic discourse at Chicago as symptomatic of the phenomenon, there are differences in their conception of the nature of cross-cultural encounter.⁵⁶ Even as Tarakishore interwove *Brahmanvidya* from the various *darśanas* in contrast to Vivekananda's sole reliance on the Vedanta, he shares the latter's stress on the bilaterality of the encounter.⁵⁷

Realizing that he was writing at a time when extremist nationalist politics as well as the anti-partition agitation was at its height in Bengal during the first decade of the twentieth century, he was aware that his contention that the British advent had made a positive impact on India required more qualification. Thus in the footnotes, he argues, "It is true that some people feel that the advent of the British has been disadvantageous for India, but those deliberating carefully will find that a powerful foreign rule has brought all the sects of India to a common state of colonial dependence which is educating them to move beyond mutual prejudices and due to greater disciplining of lifestyle, there has arisen opportunities for social reform. Engagement with foreign histories has enhanced the consciousness of Indians, they are showing interest in worldly affairs inspired by the Western sciences and aspiring to forge a national unity in wake of the nationalism exhibited by the foreigners. The efforts of the Western Theosophists and scholars like Max Müller have reminded the Indians of the glory of their ancient knowledges so that the word *Aryan* is resonating with happiness among many educated individuals. However, there is no entity in this world that has unlimited advantages. One must admit that foreign rule has also occasioned a lot of unfortunate consequences as well."⁵⁸

Choudhury doubted that, considering the moral degeneration of Indians and public recalcitrance towards independence in comparison to European nations, political independence would be successful in effecting welfare and emancipation of the nation, and urged the youth of India to give up political agitation in

⁵⁵ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 231.

⁵⁶ Choudhury, "Bhumika", 5.

⁵⁷ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 231-233.

⁵⁸ Choudhury, "Bhumika", 3.

favour of the *Dharmic* code prescribed by the Sastras which would ensure moral refinement of the Hindu nation and earn them the favour of Divinity.⁵⁹ He writes, “it is worth remembering that the path which yields success in one country need not prove fruitful in another and *Dharmic* conduct being the characteristic trait of Indians, whoever has accomplished a great deed since the earliest times, has managed to do so by force of Dharma”.⁶⁰ Having provided the instances of Arjun and Rama defeating their adversaries after acquiring divine favour through penance, he infers, “[t]he effect of this is that despite accomplishing a great task, one remains devoid of pride and executes Karma in social life without pride; this is the genuine Aryan and *Sura* (divine) quality, the Indian idealism. One who discards this quality will never be able to attain the best for this country through *Asuric* (demonic) attitudes” (by which refers to the excesses of political agitation).⁶¹ In the conclusion to his book, he reiterates that instead of mimicry of foreign attitudes, the revitalization of Dharmic attitudes would automatically bring about social and political regeneration, a process which would be universally beneficial since *Bharatbhashis* have always been the spiritual preceptor of the world.⁶²

Indeed Choudhury’s view resonates the opinion of several literatis before him, like Bhudev Mukhopadhyay (a conservative Brahman and a colonial bureaucrat), Nabagopal Mitra (a Brahmo founding member of the Hindu Mela in the 1860s emphasizing cultural nationhood rather than the associational politics of the Indian National Congress), Krishnakumar Mitra (editor of a journal *Sadharani*) and most notably Bankimchandra Chatterjee (a prominent litterateur of the Bengal renaissance and one of the key progenitors of Hindu nationalist thought and composer of the hymn *Vande Mataram* and the novel *Anandamath*, which became key components of a surging Hindu nationalism in the early twentieth century) who, as Swarupa Gupta points out, “considered society [*samaj*] rather than the state to be the proper arena for national regeneration” by restoring the “ideological centrality of *dharma* in *samaj*”.⁶³ However, it is to be remembered that Choudhury wrote three to four decades after them, in the agitated political circumstances of early twentieth century when animosity against the colonial state apparatus had reached a height and Hindu religious symbolism, revivalist discourses and notions of Dharma came to be articulated and appropriated by a flourishing militant Hindu nationalism against the colonial regime, most notably under the extremist nationalist leader Aurobindo Ghose.

If Choudhury’s polemic on Dharma shifts emphasis from contemporary political economy to the realm of the theological and moral unlike those like Ghose,

⁵⁹ Choudhury, “*Bhumika*”, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Tarakishore Choudhury, “*Uposomhar*” in *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya* (Kolkata: Swami Santadas Institute of Culture, 2004), 321.

⁶³ Swarupa Gupta, *Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, c1867-1905* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2009), 62.

it seems to come close to Bankimchandra Chatterjee's constructs of Hinduism. However, Choudhury primarily talks of Dharma as *tapasya* along Sastric lines which stands at a *difference* from Bankim's notion of *Anusilan* or "holistic self-cultivation" and "desireless" karma (*Niskama Karma*) which entertains "neither ritual nor worship" and leads to "union with god that at the same time involves the expansion of human powers in this world"⁶⁴, Choudhury talks of a theopractical exercise that leads to negation of individual and national agency into Divine Providence, so that individual and national will are subsumed within divine will. He is overtly critical of what he sees as the Western liberal socio-political ideology of equality of all labour-producing selves (*adhikargoto somotwo*): "This world has been created through diversity in manifestation of energy (*sakti*) [...] hence owing to the divergences in the inherent powers, differences in the quality and competence among various beings are inevitable though all are alike in respect of humanity and some other (general) characteristics [...] owing to this inequality of capacities, differences in their eligibility for certain actions are unavoidable. *Adhikara* [the term has *Sastric* connotations which somewhat incommensurably can be translated as both rights to certain forms of *karma or labour* and as rights emerging from *karma or past actions*] is a product of *karma*, hence differences in it are also inevitable. Even in those nations where the socio-political ideal of equal rights and aptitudes is prevalent, this equality of capacities exists only in name; in actual practice, it is only a few powerful people who obtain high privileges, others only follow their orders."⁶⁵

Even though he shares his friend Bipinchandra Pal's⁶⁶ aversion to "the atomizing principle of 'competition' which, "economic or otherwise, was a sin against God and man"⁶⁷, unlike Pal who sought to counter it by stressing on the Vaishnava principle of divinity of Man, Choudhury located the solution in the caste-society. Thus he writes, "the dependency of various castes, on each other for the daily necessary commodities ensured mutual co-operation and poverty, and misery had been limited to an extent. However, due to the competitiveness generated by current economic policies, grains are being exported to other countries causing depletion in the stock which, along with other reasons, have made India a land of perpetual famine. The import of daily necessities from other countries and their dissemination across the nation have caused Indian traders who deal in these com-

⁶⁴ Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, 120.

⁶⁵ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 80-81.

⁶⁶ Bipin Chandra Pal was a prominent Swadeshi and later extremist activist during the anti-partition agitation and thereafter. A close friend of Choudhury, he was also a Brahmo in earlier life but later became a disciple of Bijoy Krishna Goswami. While Pal saw every nation as "the manifestation and revelation of a Divine Ideal" and the highest purpose of man as realizing his essential divinity, for Choudhury, such a realization and regeneration of the Divine Ideal manifested in the nation was contingent upon return to Dharmic action. Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 149.

⁶⁷ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 80-81.

munities to have become derelict [...] and most of them are now immersed in misery [...] The present division of caste-system in India therefore, though unscientific, cannot be said to have produced only evil effects [...]"⁶⁸

"Therefore," the author feels, "it is the caste system of ancient India, in which the Aryan *Rsis* divided people into special categories on basis of their capacity for action and determined their *Adhikaras* [specific rights produced from labour] is the best means of social organization."⁶⁹ Though this is similar to Bankim's notion of caste as "a coordinated form of the division of labor, with the special activity of each caste correlating to the different classes of action that mankind undertook in society"⁷⁰, Choudhury elaborates further, with citations from *Yudhistira's* dialogue with *Nahusha* in *Banparba* (Forest episode) of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, that the four-fold division of *jati* (which Choudhury conflates with the category of *Chaturvarna* that, according to the Bhagavatgita, has divine origins) was based on *guna* (aptitude) and *karma* (types of action) so that one who does not show the behavioral characteristics of a Brahmin i.e, a greater propensity towards *Satyaguna*, must be deemed to be a Sudra. He further illustrates this position by alluding to the *Chandogya Upanishad* which mentions the ranking of *Satyakam*, unsure about his paternal identity, as a Brahman due to his truthfulness and innocence.⁷¹ The notion of *adhikarbheda*, as Choudhury articulates it, thus, negates the notion of "generalization of 'human labour'" which comprises the very premise of the "value" of the liberal humanist self, the source of Western categories of "equality and freedom" that, according to Sartori, mediates "capitalist social relations"⁷², which Choudhury brings under vehement attack. It is also noteworthy that Choudhury's connotation of *Dharma* is polysemic, drawing from a range of meanings already in circulation in neo-Hindu literature, including Bankim's "*niti*" (morality), evident from his delineation of political agitation as "*nitibiruddho*" and ethical conduct that characterizes the Aryan.⁷³

This becomes the basis of his apologetic discourse on Sastric prescription of Brahmins as the ideal recipient of donation (*daan*), as he posits his rhetorical question within a global framework of comparison: "Is a person," he asks, one "who eschews wealth and savings, trade and warfare except in dire circumstances, sleeps on a grass-mat, maintains frugality in food and clothing and pursues knowledge which he disseminates among deserving disciples, not considered worthy of respect and patronage in other countries as well?"⁷⁴ Again citing the

⁶⁸ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 79-80.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁰ Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, 122.

⁷¹ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 65-69.

⁷² Andrew Sartori, "Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy" in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn & Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁷³ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 334-348.

⁷⁴ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 63.

Mahabharata, he constructs a trajectory of degradation from the *Satyayuga*, when *Satyaguna* predominated and division of labour was the basis of *Jati* division, up to present *kaliyuga* where birth had become the determinant of *Jati*.⁷⁵ He inserts this trajectory of moral decline within a wider devolutionist teleology even as he uses this progressive degeneration of the caste structure to refute Darwinism as unscientific: “That with passage of time, all animals including flora become enfeebled and smaller is evident everywhere... Even in Europe, few nowadays can carry the armors used by warriors five hundred years ago... The theory of evolution that is now becoming prominent in the western world is unacceptable to our Hindu Sastras and may be termed fictitious. The same is true of the theory which states that human race has evolved from inferior creatures like the apes; there is no evidence to prove this.”⁷⁶

To sum up, this section has shown how Choudhury conceives of colonial rule as a transnational moment occasioned by cosmic design for the global dissemination of Indic theosophical knowledge and proceeds to opine that agitational politics pursued in blind imitation of foreign political practices without proper Dharmic regeneration in India, would fall short of serving the welfare of the nation and the world. Employing a comparative historicist approach, and citing the Upanishads to counter the Darwinist notion of social evolution, Choudhury establishes that though the caste system had undergone corruption from an aptitude-based system to a birth-based one, a burgeoning capitalist political economy both in the West and in colonial India had brought about ruptures and inequalities, disrupting the mutual cohesion of a caste-based political economy which, according to him, characterized pre-colonial India. It is thus evident that across the text, whether in providing the context, through colonialism, for the diffusion of Indic spiritual knowledge, or as an element of comparative engagement aimed at establishing the superiority of what was conceived as the Indian, an exercise which sometimes included the refutation of dominant Western scientific notions in terms of Indian textual evidence, the conjecture of the West or *Pashchatyo* as a hyperreal entity remains a constant presence. However, unlike Chakrabarty who suggests that postcolonial intelligentsia came to perceive Indian postcolonial trajectory in terms of a “lack” - the failure of postcolonial Indian history to traverse the scale of ‘progress’ and completely replicate the hyperreal universal Europe in its national life,⁷⁷ Tarakishore subverts the colonial historicist narrative of progress into an Indo-centric one, relegating Europe to the “waiting-room” within a scale of global spiritual awakening with India at its apex. Indian national life was to be reconstructed through Sastric caste-based Dharma and divine favour, not as a replica of ‘Western’ capitalist modernity. Again, though pitted against the notion of *Paschatyo*, the conceptualization of authentic Indian socio-moral structures

⁷⁵ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 70.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 32.

in terms of scriptural authority of the Upanishads and *brahmanvidya* as a “textualist, salvationist and universalistic” theosophy, was ironically shaped by the early Orientalist discourses, which according to Richard King, located the “core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts” in consonance with the “Protestant emphasis upon the text as the locus of religion”⁷⁸ and the Western idea of “World religion”, which was underpinned by “an overarching Christian paradigm”, respectively.⁷⁹ However, as the next section will show, Choudhury’s intertextuality with Orientalist as well as Western scientific discourses was selective, apologetic and embellished with supplementary evidence, wherever available.

Author as the Actor

Choudhury in his quasi-nationalist discourse, accedes that “once the kings of India lost their prowess, series of alien warriors belonging to other denominations invaded India, looted her wealth, acquired control of this land and destroyed texts and achievements of Indians which was enjoined by their religious tenets, leading to steady impoverishment of India and such a fragmentation of the social fabric, that Indians today are skeptical of the fact that they had a prestigious past ever.”⁸⁰ As Roychoudhury suggests, such occasional references to Muslim tyranny had become common refrain among the Hindu intelligentsia, trained in British Indo-Muslim historiography.⁸¹ However, Tarakishore dedicates an entire chapter to assert that ancient Indians were accomplished in every sphere including science and technology, and reasons that “since, one cannot grasp knowledge of the self as long as knowledge of the world has been mastered, the author of *Sankhya* has focused on the phenomenal world in Sankhya philosophy.”⁸² However, for this romantic discourse, he heavily depends on intertextual references to Western Orientalist discourses, especially on William Jones’ Third Anniversary Discourse published in the *Asiatik Researches* in 1788. Nevertheless, when he claims, “Western linguists who have compared every language on the earth, have reached the conclusion that Sanskrit is superior to every other language”⁸³, one cannot discern if he is citing Jones who considers Sanskrit to be “more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either...” because his discourse does not address the affinities Jones traces between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, he does borrow from the Third Discourse, especially

⁷⁸ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and ‘the Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999), 101.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁰ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 31.

⁸¹ Roychoudhury, *Europe Reconsidered*, 12.

⁸² Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 33.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁴ William Jones, “The Third Anniversary Discourse delivered 2 February, 1786” in *The Works of Sir William Jones: with the Life of the Author by Lord Teignmouth*, Vol III (London: T. Davison, Whitefrairs, 1807), 34.

when he refers to the festival of *Ramasitua* celebrated by Peruvians and their claims of descent from the Sun god in order to suggest that Indians due to their superior navigation techniques had established contacts and colonized parts of South America and Southeast Asia (one must remember this was well before the members of the Greater India Society popularized this discourse of ancient India's colonial career in the 1920s). However, he refutes both the Mosaic ethnology of Jones and his contention that "South America was peopled by the same race, who imported into the farthest parts of Asia the rites and fabulous history of Rama"⁸⁵, claiming that "there is no reason to believe that Ramchandra was not born in Ayodhyapradesh in India as Dandakaranya and other areas where he left marks of his achievements can be found across India."⁸⁶ Again, it is noteworthy that even though Jones mentions Manu's views on the limited rates of legal interest except in "regard to adventures at sea" in order to argue that "Hindus were in early ages a commercial people"⁸⁷, Choudhury in the same paragraph where he discusses the Third Discourse prefers to cite the original *Manusamhita* and the precise *slokas* (806, 808-809 of the eighth chapter) which allow the king to determine the custom duties on vessels to establish the same. Moreover, when he does refer to Pliny's Natural History and Strabo in order to establish that ancient Indian ships carried merchandise to parts of Asia and Europe, he self-consciously justifies his dependence on "histories produced in other countries" on grounds of "scarcity of information in Indian texts on Indian navigation since many ancient texts do not survive"⁸⁸.

One can locate another "global" moment in the text here, as selective intertextuality with ancient Greco-Roman as well as comparatively recent Orientalist discourses become a medium for establishing the global imprint left by ancient Indian science, technology and culture though such appropriation of Western texts, sounding almost apologetic and needing to be explained by citing the lack of indigenous evidences. This can be attributed to the irony that the intent of the chapter is to establish the superiority of the ancient Indian world to that of Europe. Thus, Western scientific progress was again evoked as a comparative referent in the discussion of the *Sankhya* principle of creation. While he suggests that the *Akash-tattva* which *Kapil* (the author of *Sankhya*) describes as the origin of *Marut* (electrical energy) "has not yet been revealed to the Occident since it is unintelligible to the methods of Western science," Choudhury interprets the Biblical statement "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with god, and the word was God" [John 1:1] as referring to *anāhata śabda*, the pure sound that does not originate from striking any substance, is the source of the phenomenal world and has been described by the Aryan *rsis* as "*śabda-brahma*". However, the presence

⁸⁵ Jones, "The Third Anniversary Discourse delivered 2 February, 1786", 39.

⁸⁶ Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 56.

⁸⁷ Jones, "The Third Anniversary Discourse delivered 2 February, 1786", 42-43.

⁸⁸ Tarakishore Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 55.

of this concept within the Bible, according to him, was either on account of the fact that “Jesus Christ had come in contact with exalted spiritual personalities and saints of India” or because “Jesus had come to know something of the knowledge of yoga from *yogis* of Asia Minor region who had been from an earlier age acquainted with *yogis* from India”⁸⁹.

Now, if failure to acknowledge the colonial context which generated the relations of power that informed the presence of England and Europe as a constant referent, leaves our scope of enquiry open to the risk of overestimating authorial intent and advocating a “mythical notion of a humanist subject who enjoys sovereign control over his own self-expressive utterances”⁹⁰, an exhaustive focus on movement and containment of ideas tends to shift focus from the agency of the author as an active determinant of the nature of discursive engagement with alien intellectual traditions. Thus, it is noteworthy that Choudhury, who heavily cites the authority of the Western Orientalists while discussing the material success of Ancient India, directly quotes from the Sanskrit texts while deliberating on questions of Indian philosophy, eschewing Orientalist discourses on the Indian philosophical traditions by those like H.T. Colebrooke, Hegel, Schopenhauer, etc. Such eschewal is perhaps better understood by the hesitation of the European academic philosophers of the post-Schopenhauer-Deussen generation towards Indian philosophy, due to the hermeneutical constraints highlighted by H.G Gadamer: “Although in the meantime the research in Eastern philosophy has made further advances, we believe today that we are further removed from its philosophical understanding... What can be considered established is only the negative insight that our own basic concepts, which were coined by the Greeks, alter the essence of what is foreign.”⁹¹

Nevertheless, the intervention of the author in the mediation and slippages entailed in the process of translation of ideas across contexts becomes evident from the following example. Earlier it was mentioned how a piece of news from the Australian Times induced Choudhury into realizing the possibility of transmission of electrical energy from a person to external objects; this discourse is developed further in his book:

The Western scientists have ascertained that silk and wool resist the conduction of electricity as they are non-conductors. The rsis had for this reason, recommended the use of woolen or silk clothes during meditation, for it was necessary to stop not only inflow of external energy into the body but also the outflow of tranquil energy

⁸⁹ Tarakishore Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmanvidya*, 54.

⁹⁰ Peter E. Gordon, “Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas” in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, eds. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014), 41.

⁹¹ H.G. Gadamer cited in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 164.

accumulated within the body...the places or objects which have been touched by such Mahatmas have been sanctified and are capable of sanctifying others. All this is science; there is nothing superstitious about it.⁹²

The complexity of this process remains somewhat unaddressed by Roychoudhury's notion of "ill-understood applications of modern physical theories" and distortion of Sastric texts.⁹³ It is difficult to explain away Choudhury, who had undergone formal pedagogical training in Chemistry, as mentioned earlier, in terms of conceptual error. However, in order to substantiate the fact that man can channelize his energy into objects close to them, he cites a case from Alfred Russel Wallace's "Miracles and Modern Spiritualism" which Wallace himself extracts from Baring Gould's "Curious Myths of the Middle Ages". The case alludes to Jacques Aymar, a diviner who with the aid of his divining rod, had intercepted a murderer who could not be caught otherwise and the series of tests conducted on him by a Physician from the Medical College of Montpellier which showed that he was not an imposter. Apart from the several layers through which the account is mediated before it reaches Wallace which renders the authenticity of the account problematic, Choudhury's quotation of the case is selective and partial, for he carefully ignores the part where Wallace admits, "when brought to Paris to satisfy the curiosity of the great and learned, his power left him, and he seems to have either had totally false impressions or to have told lies to conceal his want of powers."⁹⁴ Again it is noteworthy that in order to establish the scientificity of his claim, Choudhury cites a reputed Western scientist like Wallace but Wallace himself confides that "the subject of Animal Magnetism is still so much a disputed one among scientific men, and many of its alleged phenomena, so closely border on [...] what is classed as supernatural."⁹⁵ Therefore, both Choudhury's attempt to fuse a *Sastric* concept of *Sparshadosha* into Mesmer's notion of Animal Magnetism as well as his choice of a discourse which was marginal and disputed among the Western scientific authorities, provide significant insights on how authorial selection and appropriation intervenes in the global movement of ideas and also negotiates the *difference*, which Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified as the product of translation⁹⁶, overlapping it through a Barthesian "second-order semiological system".⁹⁷

⁹² Choudhury, *Brahmavadi rsi o Brahmnavidya*, 51.

⁹³ Roychoudhury, *Europe Reconsidered*, 34.

⁹⁴ A. R. Wallace, "Od-Force, Animal Magnetism and Clairvoyance" in *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism: Three Essays* (London: James Burns, 1875), 59.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 59.

⁹⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Introduction", in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

⁹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang (New York: N/a, 1984), 3.

Even while the immediacy of colonial experience rendered an imaginary construction of a global India without the ‘West’ as a comparative referent implausible, a growing sense of cultural pride engendered an intellectual confidence among the late colonial elite to implicitly claim from the Orientalists, the right to construct their nation, its past, present and future, through direct engagement with indigenous sources and determine the terms in which knowledge produced in and by the ‘West’, would, if at all, be employed within the discursive project.

Conclusion

As can be seen, this essay comprises of three sections. In the first section, the biography, especially the educational and changing theosophical orientation of the historical actor in question, Tarakishore Choudhury, has been charted out and situated within the historical context of late nineteenth century colonial Bengal. In fact, without examining his biography and early intellectual training, it is difficult to grasp the subtle shifts in his position from sceptic to champion of *Sastras* brought about by the dual forces of information disseminated through global networks as well as extra-rational experiences like interactions with godmen that had long been an indigenous hermeneutic and knowledge-producing device in Indian theo-spiritual engagements. Again, situating Choudhury within the social and historical context, namely, a late colonial middle-class society trying to meld Europe-derived rationalism with a national ethos cathected with received traditions, as well as his own lifestyle where he inter-traversed between the professional requirements of a lawyer at the Calcutta High Court, embedded within the rationalist framework of the colonial judiciary, and his domestic and spiritual routine shaped in rigid conformity to Sastric injunctions as well as the instructions of his guru, help us understand the ambivalences that underscore his attempts to relieve the group he self-identifies with, from the skeptical tyranny of the “prison house of reason” by instilling their faith in the *Sastras* by endowing the latter with a rational basis.

The second section focuses on the multi-textured and layered nature of Choudhury’s engagement with ‘the West’. While on one hand, he subverts the colonial narrative of progress, to discursively construct a parallel narrative of global spiritual progress with India as epicenter and colonial rule as instrument, embedding it within a Puranic cosmic teleology of the *Yuga* cycle and in the process transforming *brahmanvidya* from a particular strain of thought within Indian philosophical traditions to an universalized theosophy, on the other hand, he situates what he perceives to be the European capitalist political economy and India’s caste-based economy within the comparative framework to establish the superiority of the latter even while he charts a devolutionist teleology of historical moral decline and corruption of the caste-system on the basis of the Mahabharata and the Upa-

nishads, using it to refute the Darwinist theory of evolution, both in its biological and social implications. If the two earlier sections reveal the dominance of ‘the West’, whether in terms of the supremacy of reason or as a constant referent within the intellectual universe of the late colonial elite in Bengal, the third section focuses on the creative agency of the colonial elite, in determining the terms of appropriation, translation and selective intertextual allusion to Orientalist or Western scientific and religious discourses, which reveal the subtle shades of ambivalence that characterized such ‘presence of the hyperreal West’, entailed by pedagogies and scholarship informed by the colonial experience.

Thus, this essay has highlighted how much Tarakishore Choudhury’s text is foregrounded in the intellectual climate generated by the colonial Orientalist knowledge-production across the nineteenth century. However, within the text, one can note an ambivalence as even while frequent allusions to Europe and England as elements of reference or comparison and the substantiation of certain Sastric concepts in terms of Western scientific and quasi-scientific discourses underscore the centrality of the ‘hyperreal’ *Paschatyajagat* (the West) within the intellectual universe of the author and his intended audience, there is also disapproval of a “weak and dependent intelligentsia [...] [who] perceived [the master race] as the source of the [...] models they sought to emulate”⁹⁸. A slight discursive inversion of existing power relations can be detected in the appropriation of the West for establishing the superiority of ancient Indian material and spiritual culture and its knowledge-systems and the reduction of colonial imperial presence in India to an instrument subservient to a cosmic design for the universalist drift of an essentially Indo-centric spiritual tradition.

It is worth remarking that the globalisms identified within the intellectual discourse primarily refer to societies, scholars and ideas produced in the West which can be explained by the “modes of circulations” produced by the colonial moment. Nevertheless, it reveals the peculiarity of the ambivalent “intellectual history” of the “colonized world” with its nuances, inflections, contradictions that characterize the hybridity of the intellectual universes at the interstices of the global and the national and most importantly, recovers the intervention and agency of the colonized actor/author who (over)determines the fusions entailed by the transnational drift of ideas, to construct an indigenous ‘spiritual global career of an Indic theosophy’ with colonized India as epicenter that both subverts and appropriates globalist discourses produced by Western colonial rule and represents a multi-layered hermeneutic engagement of Sastric texts, Orientalist discourses and Western scientific reason, so that the omnipresent ‘hyperreal’ West becomes instrumental in cathecting a ‘hyperreal’ theosophical India (*Bharatbhoomi Punyabhoomi*).

⁹⁸ Roychoudhury, *Europe Reconsidered*, 22.