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Bhaktivedanta Swami's Rhetoric of Violence

Introduction

The Bhaktivedanta VedaBase is a database containing all the recorded words of Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896–1977), the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a modern form of Gaudiya or Bengali Vaishnavism, the devotional Hindu movement started by Sri Krishna Chaitanya in the sixteenth century. The VedaBase naturally contains electronic versions of Bhaktivedanta Swami's books, articles and letters, but also much more. Bhaktivedanta Swami himself started recording his lectures as early as in 1966, right after his arrival in the USA, and his disciples quickly took over. As time went by, disciples also started recording less formal talks, such as his meetings with important persons. Towards the end of his life, they endeavoured to record every word he spoke. Eventually, all of this material was transcribed and published, and also entered into the database. Since the first DOS edition in 1991, new editions have been continually produced and, given their low price and active pirating, the Bhaktivedanta VedaBase is widely available within ISKCON.

Having such a massive and easily accessible record of Bhaktivedanta Swami's words is of course a boon to his followers. Apart from simply collecting all of his works onto a single CD, the database is also easy to navigate and search. Given the massive amount of material it includes, it is possible to find answers to practically any question, as well as quotations from Bhaktivedanta Swami to support almost any viewpoint in current theological debates within ISKCON.

While the VedaBase has been compiled for members of ISKCON (<http://www.vedabase.com/index.php?main=home&content=reason>), it has to some extent also been used by academic scholars (e.g. Ketola 2002; Madsen 2001). For ISKCON, this may prove to be a mixed blessing, the effects of which have yet to be fully felt. Because of the unique status Bhaktivedanta Swami and his teachings enjoy within the movement, the database is completely uncensored: every single recorded word of his

has been included (except for when he speaks in Hindi or Bengali), even the words of seemingly very casual conversations. Not everything found in the VedaBase corresponds to the image of Bhaktivedanta Swami that ISKCON strives to promote.

In two closely related articles, Ekkehardt Lorenz (2004a and b) has used the VedaBase to examine some of the more controversial viewpoints of Bhaktivedanta Swami. One of the topics he focuses on is violence. Speaking about the role of *kshatriyas* (the administrative class) in his ideal society, Bhaktivedanta Swami says:

You can kill one boar. Some disturbing elements, you can kill. You can kill some tiger. Like that. Learn to kill. No non-violence. Learn to kill. Here also, as soon as you'll find, the *kshatriya*, a thief, a rogue, unwanted element in the society, kill him. That's all. Finish. Kill him. Bas. Finished. (426912¹)

It is not that because the Kshatriyas were killing by bows and arrows formerly, you have to continue that. That is another foolishness. If you have got ... If you can kill easily by guns, take that gun. (324206)

So the killing art is there. You cannot make it null and void by advocating non-violence. No. That is required. Violence is also a part of the society. (344572)

Combining this with statements indicating the superiority of the Aryan race, contempt for democracy ('demoncracy'), doubts about the truth concerning Hitler and the Jews, etc., Lorenz (2004b) paints a picture of a not very pleasant man, one far removed from the Gaudiya Vaishnava ideals described in the classical texts of the tradition.

It need come as no surprise that ISKCON members have been displeased with these articles. In reviewing the book the articles appeared in, the reactions have been total silence, stating that Lorenz, as an ex-ISKCON devotee, suffers from a blinding, negative bias towards Bhaktivedanta Swami, and that he takes phrases out of context. However, on the subject of Bhaktivedanta Swami's statements on Hitler, one ISKCON reviewer also mentions something else:

1 These numbers refer to the catalogue number of the entry in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase 4.11 where the particular quotation is found.

Even as his disciple, I have reservations about how “absolute” his historical perspective actually is. About spiritual matters, yes, I willingly and fully defer to him. But on material matters, a disciple has a right to question.²

What this disciple implies, then, is that some of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s teachings are relative to the circumstances and times in which he grew up and lived his life before coming to the US and therefore may or may not be true, in contrast to his absolute spiritual teachings. Bhaktivedanta Swami has to be seen in his proper context. A truism, but as Frederick M. Smith, while reviewing the same book, writes,

It is no longer viable to isolate Bhaktivedanta from [his] contexts and view him only within the context of his Gaudiya Vaishnava predecessors. It is this very problem of context that has led a growing number of scholars, beginning with Sheldon Pollock, to criticize the entire field of religious studies. The field, Pollock and others assert, has remained bumblingly but studiously detached from these contexts. (Smith 2004: 188.)

Smith goes on to call for a measured analysis of the intellectual and, especially, political contexts of Bengal in the mid-twentieth century. In this article, that is exactly what I wish to do: put Bhaktivedanta Swami in a political context, to help understand his rhetoric of violence.

Bengal in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

Bhaktivedanta Swami was born Abhay Charan De in Calcutta in 1896, the only son of a relatively well-to-do Gaudiya Vaishnava cloth merchant. He attended Scottish Church College, a prestigious British school, and eventually became a chemist. Even though he lived for many years outside of

2 Hari-dhama Das, director of ISKCON Communications, UK, <http://www.gaudiya-discussions.com/index.php?showtopic=1585&st=15>; Braja Sevaki Devi Dasi, <http://www.surrealist.org/norimuster/postcharismatic1.html> and Lakshmi Nrisimha Das, <http://www.gaudiya-discussions.com/index.php?showtopic=1585&st=30>; Lakshmi Nrisimha Das, <http://www.gaudiya-discussions.com/index.php?showtopic=1585&st=30>; Lakshmi Nrisimha Das, <http://www.gaudiya-discussions.com/index.php?showtopic=1585&st=30>. All webpages accessed 29 July 2005.

Bengal (in Allahabad and Bombay), he remained a part of middle-class³ Bengali society (535389; Dasa Goswami 1993).

Politically, the first half of the twentieth century was a tumultuous time in Bengal. Gone was the time of the 'Bengali renaissance', characterized by a symbiotic relationship between the emerging, western educated Bengali middle class and the British colonialists. With the emergence of the second generation of Indian politicians and the Swadeshi ('own country') movement, political life and interest slowly filtered down to the rank-and-file Bengalis. Headed by luminaries such as M. K. Gandhi, C. R. Das and Subhas Chandra Bose, the goal for Bengali politicians was no longer slow improvements through loyal subservience to the British crown, but independence. At the same time, Bengal was plagued by ever-increasing political infighting and religious communalism (for a classic study, see Gordon 1974).

What do we know about the political leanings of Abhay Charan De? According to his own words, when in 1922 he first met his future guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874–1937), the charismatic founder of the Gaudiya Math, he was 'addicted to Gandhi's movement'. Following Gandhi's call, he had shortly before refused his B.A. diploma from Scottish Church College. He mentions having argued that India first needs to become independent before anyone would take the message of Sri Chaitanya seriously, an argument that Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati 'defeated' (313962). Abhay Charan De did not become an initiated disciple of Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati's until 1933, but he started supporting his movement well before that (401941).

As I have shown elsewhere (Broo 1999: 26–8), politically the Gaudiya Math was loyalist, something that was recognized and publicly appreciated by the British, but that at times also got the movement and its founder into trouble with nationalist Indian politicians. Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945) accused Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati of diverting young Bengalis from the nationalist cause, to which Bhaktisiddhanta jokingly replied that these men were too skinny and weak to be of any use to Bose anyway (Dasa Goswami 1993: 76).

3 I have purposely avoided the term *bhadralok*, 'gentlemen', often used to describe the new, Western-educated and influenced Bengali middle class that grew up in the nineteenth century. As Leonard A. Gordon (1974: 7) points out, using the term is complicated on many levels. It is very imprecise: those included were often political adversaries, and it does not correlate closely enough with economic indicators. Most importantly, it is used to explain so much that it in actual fact explains little.

Gandhi was by far the most popular of the nationalist politicians all over India, but not in Bengal after the mid-1920s whereas Bose was. Even Rabindranath Tagore tried to get the Bengalis to rally around Bose in 1939 (Gordon 1974: 287–8), and he had his admirers amongst Bhaktisiddhanta's disciples as well. B. H. Bon Maharaja (1901–82), for example, one of the leading preachers of the Gaudiya Math, mentions being 'greatly elated' when hearing that Bose would come to one of his lectures (Maharaj 1981: 98).

Bose was a complex character (for a balanced picture, see Gordon 1974: 223–63). Like many of his Indian contemporaries (see e.g. Gordon 1974: 273), he openly admired Hitler and Mussolini⁴ (though, in all fairness, it must be added that his admiration was by no means blind) and tried to create a synthesis between socialism and fascism tailored especially for India. Although he started out within the Congress party, Bose always had a difficult time with Gandhi's non-violence, and eventually literally went his own way. During World War II, he escaped house arrest and travelled to Germany where he founded the Indian National Army (INA) which was made up of Indian prisoners of war and whose aim was to fight the British. He journeyed to Japan by submarine, fought the Allies with INA troops in Burma with little success, and finally died in a plane crash in 1945.

Immediately after the war, several leading members of the INA were tried by the British, but the trials aroused massive Bengali protests, something that many Bengalis see as the critical factor that made the British determine to leave India. According to this view, it was thus Subhas Bose, not Gandhi who won independence for India (Gordon 1974: 292). Writing in the early seventies, Leonard A. Gordon (1974: 368) points out that at that time Bose had achieved fame of almost mythological proportions: quite a few Bengalis believed that he was still alive, and that he would shortly return to India and set everything right. I have myself heard Bengalis comment that he probably is dead by now, since he would after all be over a hundred, but you never know ...

Bhaktivedanta Swami had been in the year below Bose at Scottish Church College (535389), and considering the way 'old boy' ties among graduates often led to political ties as well (Gordon 1974: 175), it is hardly surprising that Bhaktivedanta Swami also appreciated Bose. While not holding any eschatological views of Bose, he agreed with the view that

4 It is easy to understand that Indians admired Hitler until the end of the war, after all, they had a common enemy. Why he still seems to be so popular (just observe the proliferation of *Mein Kampf* in Indian bookstalls!) is more of a puzzle.

Bose was the real liberator of India as mentioned above (444328, 486608, 535389, 594734), and appreciated his opposition towards Gandhi's non-violence (569469).

But why this fascination with a – to put it in less flattering terms – failed fascist? Apart from Bose's individual charisma, there are several underlying factors that have to be taken into account. First of all, there was a steadily growing opposition to the way Bengalis were portrayed by British sources. The English divided the peoples of India into 'martial races', such as the Gurkhas, Jats and Sikhs, and 'non-martial races'. Among the non-martial races, they were particularly scornful towards Bengalis. The humid climate had made them soft, effete and oily 'babus', good for nothing but talking (Gordon 1974: 6–7). These ideas were well-known amongst Bengalis – indeed Bhaktivedanta Swami uses the term 'martial races' several times (372205, 562510, 594734) – and they were keen to show that these ideas were wrong.

The British saw themselves, of course, as a martial race, and that was carried over into religion as well. Until the First World War, Christianity combined with an ideal of physical, chivalrous and moral manliness to form what is generally known as 'muscular Christianity' (for a general study, see Vance 1985). Propagated by authors and intellectuals such as Charles Kingsley (1819–79) and Thomas Hughes (1822–96), this idea originated with liberal, incarnational theology, but was later taken up by evangelical Christians as well. Since the world comes from God, it is good, and a proper Christian life is thus one in which one works to improve oneself and the world. Sports, household life and an active social life were all seen as good, while fasting, celibacy and the like were seen as leading to weakness and effeminacy.

As Joseph S. Alter (2004: 502) and others have pointed out, muscular Christianity was intimately and subtly linked to colonialism, through race, but also through ideas about the muscular nature of masculinity manifest in physical fitness and body building. While muscular Christianity was by no means unopposed in Britain (Vance 1985), to justify their rule, British men in India during the early twentieth century behaved in an ultra-masculine way (Collingham 2001). Mrinalini Sinha (1999: 448) argues that Gandhi's profound challenge to British colonialism was that he refused to accept the inherent superiority of a 'masculinity' that was increasingly equated with rationality, materialism and physical strength. That may be true, but it should be stressed that most other Indian politicians accepted it with enthusiasm. All over India movements promoting physical fitness kept growing. This was the time of Professor Ram Murti Naidu's mass

drill exercises; Rajratan Manikrao's revolutionary gymnasiums in Baroda with paramilitary drill regiments; the Raja of Aundh popularising *Surya Namaskara*; the invention of yoga as an indigenous form of physical culture, and so on (Alter 2004).

Not only did the British regard the Bengali 'race' as weak and effeminate, they saw the Hindu religion in a similar light, and of all Hindu gods, Krishna was deemed the worst:

... there has been no more potent source of degradation in the whole Hindu religious history than the vile legends concerning Krishna in the Puranas. They have corrupted the imaginations of millions of the human race, and their evil influence is still potent in India at the present time (C. F. Andrews, quoted in Sharpe 1998: 87.)

There were different responses to this challenge (for a general review, see Chand 1974: 391–429). Ram Mohan Roy rejected epic and Puranic Hinduism altogether, while Bankim Chandra Chatterjee attempted to clean away 'unwholesome' parts of the mythology, making Krishna into a sublimated representation of masculinity defined by the love of action and rational self-control (Sinha 1999: 447). The Gaudiya Math did not leave out any parts of the legends, but insisted that if understood correctly, they were not at all immoral, and that the moral standards of his true devotees were unimpeachable (e.g. Sanyal [n.d.], 1984, 2002).

Perhaps the most important reformer was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), disciple of the equally famed mystic Ramakrishna (1836–86). Based on a neo-Vedantic philosophy, Swami Vivekananda created in the Ramakrishna Order and Mission his own brand of a strongly masculine and militant Hinduism. In one of his talks, he told some schoolboys, 'You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the Gita' (Gordon 1974: 79). As Mrinalini Sinha (1999: 448) states, he wanted to create a superior Indian/Hindu spiritual masculinity, and in this, he was followed by countless Bengalis. While both the Ramakrishna Order and Mission stayed outside politics, they did provide inspiration for political activity. Gordon (1974: 80) points out that the route from the selfless, autonomous, energy-generating *sannyasin* to the resourceful political worker was not a long one. The ideals of conduct for Brahmo Samaj preachers and for members of the Ramakrishna Mission were taken over as role models for the political or nationalist worker (Gordon 1974: 121).

Not only Vivekananda preached a militant Hindu gospel. During his brief political career, the would-be Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose 1872–

1950) represented some of the most radical views in Bengali politics. He argued that for Indians, loving other races – especially their foreign rulers – was against nature (Gordon 1974: 118). He justified the use of violence in the struggle for independence partly by a literal reading of the Gita (Gordon 1974: 118–21). As Bhaktivedanta Swami does in the quotations given at the beginning – and indeed Hinduism always has – Aurobindo holds that different classes of men have different standards of morality:

The morality of the Kshatriya justifies violence in times of war ... the sword of the warrior is as necessary to the fulfillment of justice and righteousness as the holiness of the saint (quoted in Gordon 1974: 120).

While Bhaktivedanta Swami in his recorded talks rejected Aurobindo and lumped him together with other 'bogus rascals' such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Mahesh Yogi (443082, 509574), in his earlier writings, he showed some appreciation for his 'spiritual realizations' (327379, 327419). He himself often invoked a literal reading of the Gita against ideas of complete non-violence (1248, 423925, 441018). In opposing the idea of non-violence, Bhaktivedanta Swami is, of course, like Aurobindo and many Bengali politicians, taking a stand against Gandhi.

But let us return to Vivekananda. Theologically, he and Bhaktivedanta Swami were at loggerheads: Vivekananda was one of the 'mayavadins' whom Bhaktivedanta Swami was so vehemently opposed to (see Lorenz 2004a). When Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati instituted saffron-clad *sannyasa* for himself and his disciples – a radical innovation which is still contested within Gaudiya Vaishnavism – he borrowed many of the details from the Sri Vaishnavas of South India, but the whole organisational set-up is taken from Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Order. As in the Ramakrishna Order, the asceticism of the sannyasins of the Gaudiya Math was largely inner-worldly. While they did not engage in the philanthropic activities of the Ramakrishna Movement, they were not supposed to turn away from the world but to act within it, travel around as 'living drums' of Sri Chaitanya's message, in the words of Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati himself (Saraswati 1989: 384). Similarly, he used to call his way of propagation 'aggressive mercy' (Eidlitz 1998: 123).

As mentioned previously, celibacy was seen as effeminate by the early British ideologists of muscular Christianity, but in India the picture is partly different. The celibate Vivekananda is a pan-Indian hero, strong and fearless. As Alter (2004: 525) has shown, an important factor behind not only religious teachings but also the health movement in India in the first

decades of the twentieth century, was the idea (based both on Tantric and Western health movement sources) that moral character, celibacy and self-control are the basics of a strong, healthy life. This is particularly evident in the life and teachings of Gandhi, who saw celibacy as essential for gaining the strength needed to carry out the struggle for independence (Alter 1996). Similarly, in the Gaudiya Math, the *sannyasins* were the big heroes. While Abhay Charan did not become the *sannyasin* Bhaktivedanta Swami until his late fifties, and was much more accommodating towards women than his own guru had been, his own movement did become increasingly masculinised during his last few years (Knott 2004).

To sum up: Bhaktivedanta Swami's rhetoric of violence is representative of the new, aggressively 'male' Hinduism that grew up in Bengal in response to the British challenge towards Hinduism, and Gaudiya Vaishnavism in particular. As has been many times pointed out, Gandhi's extreme pacifism is not representative of all Hinduism, no matter what many Hindus today would have us believe, and many of Bhaktivedanta Swami's statements against non-violence are aimed directly at Gandhi. As for many of Bhaktivedanta Swami's seemingly extremist political views, they were shared by a majority in pre-1945 Bengal.

Other Factors Behind the Rhetoric of Violence

Apart from his cultural and political background, there are some other factors behind Bhaktivedanta Swami's statements on violence mentioned above. One is his (perhaps rather Bengali) flair for drama and overstatement. For example (502004, 502400, 502591), he loved to speak about different classes of men to reporters, well-aware of how politically incorrect it was. It is difficult to decide how seriously any single remark is meant to be taken from a transcript. This is why I call these statements Bhaktivedanta Swami's 'rhetoric of violence'.

The immediate contexts of Bhaktivedanta Swami's statements mentioned above are discussions about *Varnashrama-dharma*. Bhaktivedanta Swami was convinced that the ideal society should be made up of self-sufficient agrarian communities (this is perhaps the most obvious remnant of his early Gandhian leanings), where mankind would be divided into four *varnas* and four *ashramas*, based not on hereditary but on individual qualifications. He had inherited this idea from his guru, but while Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati used it to create an alternative society for his disciples within Bengali society, Bhaktivedanta Swami took on a much

larger task when trying to implement these ideas in a completely new context. While encouraging his disciples to start farm communities along these lines, he never fully developed these ideas. It should also be noted that these are theoretical discussions: Bhaktivedanta Swami certainly never had anyone killed, and the only case when one of his disciples ever did kill an 'unwanted element in society' was connected with New Vrindavan, a wayward farm community in West Virginia that was subsequently expelled from ISKCON (for a racy exposé of this and other crimes in and around ISKCON, see Hubner and Gruson 1988).

Bhaktivedanta Swami's conviction about the need for strong and if necessary violent Kshatriyas was also based on his very literal reading of the Bhagavata-Purana, where an evil but strong ruler is often portrayed as being better than none at all (e.g. BhP 4.14). Just as he accepted, for example, the cosmological statements of the Bhagavata at face value, giving quite a challenge to those of his disciples wishing to prove him and the scripture right on everything (see e.g. Thompson 1991, 2000; Goswami 2003), he read the Bhagavata as a description of the perfect 'Vedic' society.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to put part of Bhaktivedanta Swami's rhetoric of violence into a larger context that has previously been neglected: that of early- to mid-twentieth century Bengali politics. I have also pinpointed some other factors behind them, such as his literal reading of the Gaudiya Vaishnava scriptures and his flair for drama. In this, I have not tried to exonerate Bhaktivedanta Swami for his more radically politically incorrect opinions. There is no reason why in the 1970s even an Indian could believe, for example, that Hitler killed Jews because they financed his enemies (589820). Rather, I have tried to begin broadening the picture of Bhaktivedanta Swami by looking at him as a product both of his spiritual predecessors and of his more worldly background.

As mentioned above, seeing Bhaktivedanta Swami not only as the great 'transcendental' founder-acharya of ISKCON, but also as an elderly gentleman, at times erring on relative, human issues, is a viewpoint shared by many ISKCON intellectuals today. For some apologists within the movement, however, taking this path is seen as exceedingly risky, and they fight it vehemently, claiming that the entire future of the movement hinges on being faithful to all the words of its founder. After all, if one set of statements of Bhaktivedanta Swami's is relativized, who is to judge what is and

what is not absolute in his teaching? The traditional answer would be to say his successor, but since none of his disciples within ISKCON has come even close to his authority, this is a conflict that is not likely to be resolved soon.⁵

I began this article by describing the VedaBase, the database of Bhaktivedanta Swami's works and talks that Lorenz used to find the rhetoric of violence that served as the catalyst for this article. It is somewhat surprising that it has been so little used by scholars. Because of its uniquely uncensored nature, it is an extremely useful tool when used with care and complemented with other sources. However, for the same reason, it may just as well, quoting Jan Brzezinski, prove to be the 'permanent Achilles heel' of ISKCON (<http://www.gaudiya-discussions.com/index.php?showtopic=1585&st=15>). For those of us interested in the canonization of religious teachings, it will be interesting to see how ISKCON will deal with this threat. Will future editions of the VedaBase be censored, footnoted or left as they are now? I hope to return to this question in the future.

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5 This conflict is illustrated well on the Web, with www.chakra.org often giving a voice to the 'liberal' side of ISKCON, and www.siddhanta.com to the conservative.

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