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Vedantic variations in the presence of Europe: establishing the Hindu *dharma* in late nineteenth century Bengal

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Abstract

We will offer in this essay an analytic overview of four texts from the second half of the nineteenth century which elaborated different variations on the Hindu *dharma*. These are Rajnarayan Basu's Hindu Dharmera Sresthata ('The Superiority of the Hindu dharma', 1879), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Dharmatattva (1888, 'Principles of Dharma'), Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's Sāmājika Prabandha ('Essays on Society', 1892), and Chandranath Basu's Hindutva ('Hinduness', 1892). These textual constructions of Hindu identity sometimes have different argumentative goals, employ different rhetorical strategies, and draw upon different scriptural resources. Notwithstanding these distinctive variations relating to aims, methods, and styles, they seek to engage Europe as the Other both as a conceptual toolbox whose instruments can be appropriated for reconfiguring the Hindu *dharma* and as a dialectical foil which highlights the superiority of the Hindu *dharma* to its diverse critics. For Rajnarayan Basu, Chatterjee, Mukhopadhyay, and Chandranath Basu, the Hindu *dharma* is the hermeneutic site for evaluating specific aspects of European modernities and for re-asserting Vedic norms, ideas, and practices through a critical engagement with European modernities. These texts are multi-faceted vignettes into the Bengali Hindu appropriations of European concepts in late nineteenth century Bengal, and also the anxieties about the stability of the Hindu *dharma* in an age of rapid socio-cultural transformations.

An intensely debated theme in several academic circles over the last three decades or so relates to the characterisation of the types of Hindu identities that gradually emerged from around the turn of the last century. On some analyses, the institutions of colonial modernities not merely decisively restructured indigeneous socio-cultural sensibilities but even forged for the first time the sets of notions, values, and practices categorized under 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism'. According to other accounts, 'Hinduism' signifies a spiritual way of living which is rooted in the ancient Vedic texts and which has remained invariant across historical transformations, such that while the colonial interventions may have modified certain peripheral adjuncts they could not touch its essence. However, as various scholars have pointed, these two depictions, the first suggesting a modernist Europe inventing Hinduism *de novo*, and the second proposing a transhistorical Hinduism gloriously resisting European incursions, are too coarse-grained to capture the complex negotiations on the ground through which some thinkers began to critically appropriate specific aspects of European modernities even as they sought to reconfigure their own socio-religious identities. The literature on

Bengali Hindu figures such as Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, and others has highlighted the point that in their English works they negotiated distinctive pathways through the worlds of ‘scriptural tradition’ and ‘western modernity’, as they configured forms of Hinduisms at the shifting intersections between European representations of ‘religion’ and indigenous Hindu *dhārmika* sensibilities.

A theme that remains relatively underexplored is how Hindu thinkers writing in the vernaculars such as Bengali, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, and others sought to receive as well as interrogate European discourses. Unlike writings in English where one unavoidably had to use terms such as ‘religion’, ‘society’, and ‘individualism’, which were freighted with some distinctively European or Christian connotations, texts in the vernaculars could more freely draw upon indigeneous terminologies, idioms, and metaphors as they articulated responses to the presence, and the circulation, of European modernities. We will offer in this essay an analytic overview of four Bengali texts which elaborated different variations on the *dharma* of the Hindus. These are Rajnarayan Basu’s *Hindu Dharmera Śreṣṭhatā* (‘The Superiority of the Hindu *dharma*’, 1879), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Dharmatattva* (1888, ‘Principles of *Dharma*’), Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay’s *Sāmājika Prabandha* (‘Essays on Society’, 1892), and Chandranath Basu’s *Hindutva* (‘Hinduness’, 1892). As we will see, these early textual constructions of Hindu identity, partly through the conceptual lens of *dharma*, sometimes have different argumentative goals, employ different rhetorical strategies, and draw upon different scriptural resources. Thus, for Rajnarayan Basu and Chatterjee, the basis of the Hindu *dharma* is the Brahmo *dharma* and devotion to Kṛṣṇa respectively, while both Chandranath Basu and Mukhopadhyay elaborate the Hindu *dharma* through the vocabularies of Advaita Vedānta. Notwithstanding these distinctive variations relating to aims, methods, and styles, they seek to engage Europe as the Other both as a conceptual toolbox whose instruments can be appropriated for reconfiguring the Hindu *dharma* and as a dialectical foil which highlights the superiority of the Hindu *dharma* to its diverse critics. Consequently, these texts can frustrate attempts to classify them in a modular fashion as either ‘revivalist’ or ‘reformist’, for different sections of the same text can alternately seek to retrieve Vedic themes and apply them to contemporary problems (a ‘revivalist’ moment) or reformulate Vedic heritages in the light of European ideals after these have first been interrogated through Vedic lenses (a ‘reformist’ moment). As we will see, they can selectively interweave ‘reformist’ themes into a ‘revivalist’ backdrop, or selectively foreground ‘revivalist’ concerns even while emphasising ‘reformist’ goals.

Negotiating the Hindu *dharma* between ‘reform’ and ‘revival’

The concept of *dharma*, during the second half of the nineteenth century in Bengal, became a hermeneutic site where specific aspects of indigenous cultures were variously rejected, restored, or reconfigured. There were at least 13 periodicals between 1840 and 1890 with the term *dharma* in their titles (Sen 2010: 130), where some of its significances received from the classical texts such as the *Dharma-śāstras* were re-envisioned by members of the Hindu intelligentsia, who engaged with diverse themes such as the self-identity of Hindus, the location of the Brahmos in wider Hindu contexts, the nature of caste (*barṇa* or *jāti*), female education, the relation of the individual to social wholes, and others. The four contemporaries whose texts we will study here – Rajnarayan Basu (1826–1899) (Basu 1879), Bhudeb

Mukhopadhyay (1827–1894) (Mukhopadhyay 1879 [1892]), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894) (Chatterjee 1956 [1888]), and Chandranath Basu (1844–1910) (Basu 1892) – worked out distinctive, and sometimes partly overlapping, trajectories of *dhārmika* responses to the presence of Europe in colonial Bengal. Rajnarayan went through a tumultuous and highly Anglicized youth in the company of friends who belonged to the iconoclastic group of Young Bengal, and even lost his fluency in his own Bengali (Kopf 1979: 167–82). Later, however, he joined the Brahma Samaj in 1846 and remained highly critical of westernised Bengalis, while, on a different front, he began to minimise the differences between the Brahma *dharma* and the Hindu *dharma*. Basu succeeded Debendranath Tagore as the president of the Adi Brahma Samaj, the section that was averse to Keshab Chandra Sen’s more Christianity-inflected Brahma Samaj of India, and his *Dharmatattvadīpikā* (1866) contains several themes that reflect the Brahma response to Christian missionary critiques of the Hindu worship of images. The true *dharma*, argues Basu (1866: 105–106), can be summarised in four propositions – the infinitude of God (*īśvara*), the Fatherhood of God, the freewill of human beings, and our love (*prīti*) of God. This perfect *dharma* is, in fact, the Brahma *dharma* which resides in the purity of the heart, and is not encumbered by any specific scriptural text, ritual practice, place of worship, sacrificial offering, or clerical authority. Bankim too seems to have moved from a critical stance on traditional Hindu beliefs, partly shaped by his enthusiasm for Auguste Comte, to a more apologetic position. Some of these complex receptions of western learning are reflected in his *Kṛṣṇacaritra* which is his attempt to retrieve the ‘Kṛṣṇa of history’ from layers of Vaiṣṇava mythic narratives, and present Kṛṣṇa as the ideal human being. Positivist ideas were indeed in the air that many of the Bengali ‘free-thinkers’ breathed, and Bankim was once accused by Rajnarayan of following the ‘hateful doctrines of Comte’ (Datta 2000: 9). While Bankim is today most well-known outside Bengal as the author of the song ‘Vande Mātaram,’ from his patriotic novel *Ānandamatha*, his ‘nationalism’ was expressed primarily not through the political vocabulary of the nation-state but through the idioms of ‘the cultural self-discovery of a people’ (Sen 2008: 94). However, his researches into the history, culture, and religious thought of the ancient Hindus remained deeply influenced by western thought, and his *Dharmatattva*, where he freely quotes from classical Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, and others, also contains references to a galaxy of European thinkers such as Kant, Fichte, Comte, and others.

Like Bankim, Chandranath could write in English fluently, and an essay of his published in 1864 was positively reviewed by the *Englishman*, which doubted whether it was written by a ‘native pen’. Notwithstanding an early phase of social radicalism, Chandranath was a person of ‘conservative instincts’, and he emerged a few decades later as a champion of the traditional Hindu view regarding early marriage for women (Sen 1993: 212–215). While both Bankim and Chandranath attended the lectures on *dharma* given by Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani (1851–1902), a Sanskrit scholar and a pillar of Hindu traditionalism, Chandranath responded more warmly to them than Bankim (Sen 2010: 131). He dedicated to Bankim his *Śakuntalā-tattva* (1881), where the king is shown as forsaking his wife Śakuntalā to fulfil his religious obligations, and Śakuntalā herself is presented as a model of a chaste Hindu wife (Sen 1993: 214). Chandranath’s emphasis on *dharma* as an all-encompassing framework was shared by Bhudeb whose life was structured by a Brahmanical discipline that was rooted in the *smṛtis* and extended to various aspects of daily living. He took pride in his Brahman

identity, and throughout a career that saw him rise to the position of a Class I inspector of schools in the racial hierarchies of the colonial civil service, he insisted on maintaining restrictions on commensality in his contacts with Europeans (Raychaudhuri 2002: 30). Bhudeb seems to have never departed from traditional Brahmanical ritual purity, even though, like Rajnarayan, he had come under the spell of the radicalism of Young Bengal when he was a student of Hindu College. His deep immersion in Brahmanical orthodoxy was, however, only one aspect of his complexly-layered personality: he was widely read in various aspects of western philosophy, he maintained a diary where he put down some of his intimate thoughts in English, and he cultivated friendships with various Muslims and Europeans (Sen 1993: 156–69).

These distinctive psycho-biographical routes of Rajnarayan, Bhudeb, Chandranath, and Bankim through the colonial spaces of mid-nineteenth century Bengal, informed their textual responses, through the prism of *dharma*, to western norms, values, and institutions. The questions ‘What is the *dharma*?’ and ‘Who is a Hindu?’ were deeply interrelated for these members of the intelligentsia: for them *dharma* was the basic concept with which to define the boundaries of the Hindu self even as they sought to modulate, alter, or recalibrate certain *dhārmika* sensibilities. Thus Rajnarayan’s *Hindu Dharmera Śreṣṭhatā* begins with responses to various Christian missionary critiques of Hinduism, defends the Brahmo *dharma* as the quintessence of ancient Hindu wisdom, and ends with a rousing call to Hindus to maintain their independence in their customs, beliefs, and practices. Bankim’s *Dharmatattva* presents a form of Vaiṣṇavism which has strong this-worldly emphases, and which promotes the flourishing of our humanity in which all natural propensities are perfectly harmonised. These themes also run throughout Bhudeb’s *Sāmājika Prabandha* and Chandranath’s *Hindutva* which defend certain Advaitically-tinged forms of Hindu *dharma* which are said to be superior to western religions such as Christianity, promote this-worldly modes of living, and provide integrative frameworks for diverse aspects of Hindu thought and practice.

As we will see, the terms ‘reform’ and ‘revival,’ which are sometimes applied in a monolithic fashion to an individual (across different phases in a lifetime) or a social movement do not quite stick to our authors. For a few samples of this conceptual slipperiness, consider the following set of reflections on the Hindu *dharma* by Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay and Chandranath Basu, both of whom express anxieties about Hindu imitativeness *vis-à-vis* European standards. Mukhopadhyay insists in *Sāmājika Prabandha* [henceforth SP] that rashness should be avoided in matters of social reform (*samājsaṃskāra*), and one should first try to understand India’s fallen state (*hināvasthā*), the causes of this degeneration, and the ways of amelioration (SP, 225). He is critical of English-educated Hindus who, he says, have minimal creativity. This is because creation (*udbhāvana*) is more difficult than imitation (*anukaraṇa*), so that people who can readily imitate others are usually lacking in creativity (SP, 228–29). However, Mukhopadhyay does not advocate that ancient ideals should be retained in an undiluted manner, only that they should not be unreflectively abandoned. Rather, when new ideals emerge, these should be held up in comparison with the earlier ones, and if the earlier ones, when fused with the newer, shine even more brightly, the newer should be accepted (SP, 80). Mukhopadhyay writes in glowing terms about the vitality of Hindu society, with its great antiquity, unique social structure, pure ideals, and internal strength so that while peoples such as the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, and others have disappeared, it has remained unbroken and stable (SP, 30). The need of the hour, he

argues, is to gain the technological expertise with which the English have established their supremacy, so that with this proficiency, the Hindus would be able to overcome their slavish devotion to the English. He cautions his readers that while Hindus seek to blindly imitate the ways of the English, in an attempt to convert India into England, European philosophers have, in fact, repeatedly sounded the warning that Europe has become intensely disaffected, and stands on the brink of a fearsome social revolution. Yet, English writers are engaged in singing their own glories – they constantly remind the Indians that they have educated them and raised them to the stature of being human, and that the Indians have become developed through the adoption of the western ideas (*pāścātya bhāba*) that they have instituted (SP, 66–67). The key point, then, is not *whether* social transformations were required in the presence of Europe but *what type* of conceptual structure would inform these transformations. For many of the ‘English-educated Hindus’ of Mukhopadhyay’s day, the concepts of religion, individuality, social existence, and so on would be drawn from Mill, Spencer, Comte, and others, whereas Mukhopadhyay’s own reflections on these matters were shaped by the overarching theme of Advaitic unity as the basis of the Hindu *dharma*.

A dense intermeshing of assertions of Hindu spiritual and cultural autonomy, and a call for reorienting certain aspects of the Hindu *dharma* through an interrogation of European concepts also shapes several chapters of Basu’s *Hindutva*. On the one hand, *Hindutva* [henceforth H] sometimes glorifies the ancient land of the Hindus as the font of human civilization. While the Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and others, all of whom arrived after the Hindus, have disappeared, the Hindus have maintained their *dharma*, rituals, and culture throughout numerous turbulences. Even though the splendour of the Hindus has suffered diminution in recent times, there are not many European nations who can vie with them in terms of *dhārmika*, intellectual, and physical strength (H, 107). Basu often cautions his readers against too hasty assimilations of European notions and institutions – the Hindus are shaped in a certain mould, and their education, hopes, and aspirations should be in accordance with it, for therein lies their distinctiveness and their national culture (*jāṭiyatā*) (H, 137). For instance, the authors of the Hindu texts have established Hindu society on the foundation of *dharma*, and not on the transient worldly bases of love of wealth, lordship or warfare. While the latter are composed of *rajas* or *tamas*, the former is invested with the power of *sattva*, since the Hindus are oriented towards the eternal, and reject the path of constant transformations and revolutions (H, 109–110). On the other hand, Basu minutely analyses various European concepts, and often transvaluates them from the perspective of the Hindu *dharma*. For instance, after noting that some people view the emergence of self-reliance and individual liberty (*byaktigata-svādhīnatā*) in Europe as a sign of intellectual development, he claims that these developments are, in fact, a consequence of the weakening of a social sense (*sāmājika bhāba*) (H, 122). On occasion, however, such reassessments may be valid even for Hindu institutions. He argues that while some people claim that the age of following *brahmacārya* has passed, the discipline of *brahmacārya* is geared to the cultivation of virtues such as self-control, purification of the mind, and others, and these virtues are necessary in all times. Perhaps some people object to the specific requirements noted in the scriptures, for instance, that a student living through *brahmacārya* has to procure wood every day for the teacher. However, it is possible, Basu argues, to alter the regulations while keeping intact their proper aim – in this case, one can adopt different means to express one’s devotion to the

teacher. Distinctions in methods in accordance with distinctions in time, Basu notes, are not against scriptural teachings (*kālabhede paddhatibheda aśāstrīya nayā*) (H, 158–59).

Hindu Dharmera Śreṣṭhatā

Of the texts we analyse here, Rajnarayan Basu's *Hindu Dharmera Śreṣṭhatā* [henceforth HDS] is the most systematically formulated attempt to demonstrate the superiority of the Hindu *dharma*. Basu's biographical shifts from an Anglicized youth to the Brahmo Samaj seem to have left their imprint in the three parts of the text, which was originally delivered as a lecture to a packed hall. First, it provides a long catalogue of western critiques of the Hindu *dharma* and methodically responds to them, before highlighting the respects in which the Hindu *dharma* is, in fact, superior to the other *dharmas* in the world; second, it indicates that the most excellent form of this Hindu *dharma* is the Brahmo *dharma* which, however, is not a recent arrival for it is contained in the *Upaniṣads*; and third, it ends with a clarion call to the Hindus to rise to the spiritual heights of the *Upaniṣads* and establish a glorious civilization on *dhārmika* foundations. Therefore, Basu has to negotiate two distinct targets in different parts of the text – first, the non-Hindu *dharmas* such as Christianity over which the superiority of the Hindu *dharma* is to be established, and second, Hindu traditions such as Advaita Vedānta which are to be distinguished from the Brahmo readings of the scriptures. As we will see, some of the contrasts across spiritual traditions that Basu sketches – the Hindu *dharma* is universal, teaches the divine intimacy to the world, and institutes distinctions between the spiritually mature and the spiritually immature without excluding anyone, while Christianity and Islam are insular, speak of messengers who mediate the distant divinity to human beings, and fail to include all individuals within their doctrinal horizons – would later appear, in different formulations, in Chatterjee, Mukhopadhyay, and Chandranath Basu. Again, Basu's theme that the Hindu *dharma* has life-affirming dimensions and encompasses every aspect of human existence is a recurring theme in these other writers as well.

Many of the critiques that Basu outlines at the beginning of the text are from Christian missionary standpoints – for instance, (i) that the Hindu *dharma* is centred around the worship of idols; (ii) that the Hindu *dharma* does not know that true expiation (*prāyaścitta*) is repentance (*anutāpa*) for wrong doing, (iii) that in the Hindu *dharma* the divine is not addressed as 'father' or 'mother,' and so on. Basu responds to these representations by arguing (i) that various scriptures such as the *Upaniṣads* speak of the formless divine, and the worship of the supreme in the form of images has been prescribed only for the simple-minded and the ignorant so as to take them towards the ultimate reality which is beyond all distinctions (HDS, 7–10); (ii) that the *Manusmṛti* informs us that those who feel remorse for their evil deeds, and resolve not to commit them again, are purified; (iii) that various scriptures, such as the Rg Veda, address the divine as the mother and the father of the world, and so on. Basu also seeks to counter the proposed equivalence between the Hindu *dharma* and the doctrines of Advaita, arguing that while Advaita is supported by some texts from the *Upaniṣads*, many others highlight the distinction of the world and the finite self from the divine reality. Further, when Hindus worship the supreme Brahman, they do not regard it as identical with the world, or with themselves (*samasta hindurā bibidha prakāre sei parabrahmera upāsanā kariṣyā thākena, yini*

upāsya tini abaśya-i upāsaka haite bhinna) (HDS, 10–12). Again, he could have such an equivalence in mind when he claims that it is not the case that the Hindu *dharma* is the *dharma* of dry knowledge (*suśka jñāna*), for it is filled with emotions of love towards the divine reality.

Basu then provides a detailed catalogue of the characteristics that elevate the Hindu *dharma* above all the other *dharmas* in the world. First, the Hindu *dharma* is not associated with a specific individual such as the Buddha, Christ, and others. This is because the Hindu *dharma* is the eternal *dharma*, and it is proper that it does not derive its origin from a particular individual. Second, the Hindu *dharma* does not accept the notion of an incarnate divine. The Hindu *dharma* indeed speaks of multiple deities such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, and others, but they are not to be understood as the birth into a human form of the supreme reality which is without beginning and end, and is unchangeable (HDS, 23). Third, unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Hindu *dharma* does not accept any mediator (*madhyabartti*) or messenger (*peyagambara*) between the divine and the human (HDS, 24–25). Fourth, the Hindu *dharma* teaches us to worship the divine who is situated in our hearts. No other scriptural text, such as the Bible, the Quran and others, contains such teaching (*ki bāibela, ki korāṇa, ki āra kona dharma śāstra, kothāo erūpa upadeśa prāpta haoyā jāya nā*) (HDS, 25). Fifth, the Hindu *dharma* lays down, in careful detail, forms of yogic practice through which individuals, even while remaining in the world, can attain union with the divine. Sixth, while the other *dharmas* speak of worshipping the divine in order to gain heavenly goods, only the Hindu treatises on the *dharma* teach us that the worship (*upāsanā*) of the divine in a disinterested manner (*nişkāma*), without seeking anything in return, is the highest form of worship (*hinduśāstra nişkāma upāsanāke śreṣṭha upāsanā baliyāchena*) (HDS, 27). Seventh, the Hindu *dharma* teaches us to practise kindness (*dayā*) towards all living beings, unlike the Bible and the Quran which instruct us to be kind only towards human beings. Eighth, while Christianity and Islam speak of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell, the Hindu *dharma* gives hope (*āśā*) to sinful human beings (*pāpī manuṣya*) that through the cycles of rebirth they may return to the path of *dhārmika* progress. This view of the Hindus is more in accordance with the lawfulness and the mercy of the divine (*iśvarera nyāya o karuṇābhābera saṅge adhika saṅgata*) than the former view according to which the damnation of sinners is eternal (HDS, 29–30). Ninth, the magnanimity (*audārya*) of the Hindu *dharma* is the greatest among all the *dharmas*, for unlike Christianity and Islam which claim that those who do not follow their paths will suffer eternal damnation, the former states that all individuals, by meticulously following their specific *dharma*, may be delivered (*yāhāra ye dharma se byakti sei dharma sarbba prakāre pālana karilei uddhāra haibe*). While the knowers of Brahman do not themselves worship deities or perform sacrifices, they regard even those who are engaged in these activities as belonging to their own *dharma*, and do not expel them. This is because in the case of those who have not progressed to the perfect knowledge of Brahman, the worship of images is not an evil deed, merely an error (*pāpa karma nahe, kebala bhrama mātra*). Since through gradual progress all human beings can rise to the proper understanding of the inexpressible and infinite Brahman, the worship of various deities is a bridge (*sopāna*) towards the knowledge of the formless Brahman. Tenth, according to the Hindu *dharma* one must keep the divine reality in mind (*smaraṇa*) in every action throughout one's life (HDS, 31–33). Eleventh, all actions are performed in

accordance with the commands of *dharma*, which encompass the mental, physical, and social aspects of human existence. For instance, no other *dharma* provides such careful teachings and instructions relating to the care of the body and the maintenance of health. A healthy body leads to a healthy mind, and such an healthy individual can move on the path of *dhārmika* progress. Unlike other civilized (*sabhya*) nations, Hindus therefore do not differentiate between two domains of the sacred (*sāttvika*) and the profane (*vaiśayika*) (HDS, 34–35). Twelfth, in comparison to other *dharms* such as Christianity and Islam, the Hindu *dharma* is extremely ancient (*prācīna*), and is like an ancient banyan tree, each of whose branches has become a new tree. Although ancient, the Hindu *dharma* is not weak or dull, but has an internal substantiality (*ābhyantarika sārabbattā*) such that it can regenerate itself, like the banyan (HDS, 36–37).

Basu ultimately aims to demonstrate the superiority of what he states is the essence (*sāra*) of the Hindu *dharma*, namely, the knowledge of Brahman and the worship (*upāsana*) of Brahman that is indicated in the knowledge section (*jñāna-kāṇḍa*) of the scriptures. The Hindus speak of the knowledge and the worship of Brahman as the *dharma* of those with the higher eligibility, and the worship of gods and goddesses as the *dharma* of those with the lower eligibility (*kaniṣṭhādhikārī*) (HDS, 37–38). The wise sages (*jñānī*) at the higher reaches of the spiritual journey can, in an uninterrupted manner, have the vision (*darśana*) of the divine without needing a mediator. For them, there is no need for pilgrimages (*jñānīra sambandhe tīrtha paryāṇera āśāyakaṭā nāi*), for the pure mind (*viśuddhacitta*) itself is the best pilgrimage (HDS, 44). The principal aim of the *dharma*, then, is our co-dwelling (*sahabāsa*) with the divine, and the way to this state is meditation (*dhyāna*), which is itself the main form of worship (*upāsana*) of the divine. The sages whose minds have been purified through knowledge (*jñāna*) are able to see, through deep meditation, the divine that is beyond the realm of the empirical senses (HDS, 42–43). This is the Brahmo *dharma*, which is based on the *Upaniṣads*, and which is the most advanced form of the Hindu *dharma*. The Brahmo *dharma* is a universal *dharma* which is not restricted to any tradition (*sampradāya*) since its truths can be found in all the *dharms* and are accessible to all people. The fact that the Hindu *dharma* of the Ṛg Veda, after having become developed (*unnata*) and purified (*saṃśodhita*), has culminated into the Brahmo *dharma* does not imply that the latter is completely distinct from the former. The Brahmo *dharma* is, in fact, the unity (*aikya sthala*) of all the *dharms*, and the most purified form of the knowledge of Brahman that is recorded in the ancient Hindu scriptures. The knowledge and the worship of Brahman which had remained confined since ancient times to the wise people of Bhārata is the very knowledge and worship of Brahman that is now being spread, in a purified form, among the common people (*ye brahmajñāna o brahmopāsana atyanta prācīna kāla haite bhāratavarṣe jñānī lokadigera madhye ābaddha chila, sei brahmajñāna o brahmopāsanaī ekhana biśuddha ākāre sādharma lokadigera madhye prācārīta haiteche*). When society was enveloped in ancient times by the darkness of ignorance, the sages were anxious that the knowledge of the formless Brahman might become distorted if it were introduced to the wider society. However, with the spread of education, there are greater opportunities for raising those with the lesser eligibility (*kaniṣṭhādhikārī*) to the status of those with the perfect eligibility (*samarthādhikārī*), and the knowers of Brahman should therefore today impart teachings about Brahman to the people (HDS, 49–50).

Finally, Basu exhorts Hindus to recover the ancient civilization which was the true (*prakṛta*) civilization because it was based on *dharma*, and all aspects of life then were enveloped by *dhārmika* rules. What we see today, however, is a civilization that is unsubstantial (*asāra*) and artificial (*kṛtrima*) (HDS, 34). Yet, Basu is confident that the Hindus possess abundant resources to bring about their own regeneration. Just as in the oceans of Bhārata there are innumerable jewels, so too in the Hindu *dharma* there are countless jewels of truths (*satyaratna*). Therefore, in the matters of *dharma* Hindus do not have to go anywhere else (HDS, 50–51). There is no doubt, he states, that as long as there is Bhārata, the Hindu *dharma* will endure. The claim that the Hindu *dharma* will be destroyed is baseless – the Buddhists, and later the Muslims and the Christian missionaries, have tried but failed to wipe out the *dharma* of the Hindus. As long as Hindus continue to live by scriptural statements such as ‘Brahman is reality, consciousness, infinite’, continue to delight in the self, and see all beings in the true self, the Hindu *dharma* will not suffer destruction (HDS, 53–54). The true civilization (*sabhyatā*) is one that is born out of *dharma*, and the Hindus will seek not only to recover the ancient *dhārmika* civilization but also to achieve a superior degree of civilization as compared to their ancient roots, and become regarded as the greatest people (*sarvaśreṣṭha jāti*) in the world. Though Hindus have lost their political independence (*svādhīnatā*), they should ensure that they do not lose their independence in matters of social customs and rules. Rather, and this is Basu’s hope, they will once again be famous across the world for their learning, civilization, and *dharma*, as they had been in ancient times (*āmāra ei rūpa āsā haiteche, pūrbbe yemana hindujāti bidyā buddhi sabhyatā janya bikhyāta haiṅāchila, temani punarāya se bidyā buddhi sabhyatā dharma janya samasta pṛthibīte bikhyāta haibe*) (HDS, 57–58).

Dharmatattva

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Dharmatattva* [henceforth D] shares one of the primary concerns of Basu’s *Hindu Dharmera Śreṣṭhatā* – to establish the superiority of the Hindu *dharma* as a form of worship and a way of living that does not reject worldly existence but shows the way towards its transcendental fulfilment. We encounter one of Basu’s fundamental distinctions between the Hindu *dharma* and other *dharmas* – all aspects of human life are regulated by the Hindu *dharma*, unlike other *dharmas* which cover only matters relating to divinity and the afterlife. Thus the Hindu *dharma*, argues Chatterjee, is the only complete *dharma*, unlike the incomplete *dharma* of other people (*anya dharma tāhā haṅā nā, ejanya anya dharma asampurna; kebala hindudharma sampurna dharma. anya jātira biśvāsa ye kebala iśvara o parakāla laiṅāi dharma. hindura kāche, ihakāla parakāla, iśvara, manuṣya, samasta jība samasta jagat – sakala laiṅā dharma*) (D, 24). However, while for Basu this complete *dharma* is ultimately the Brahmo *dharma*, where the *avatāras* of the divine are only a preliminary object of worship on the path to the *jñāna-kāṇḍa*, for Chatterjee the fullness of the Hindu *dharma* is the devotional love taught by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The scriptural foundation of the *Bhagavad-gītā* provides Chatterjee with the tools for the form of religious humanism that he develops in the *Dharmatattva*, according to which the essence of the Hindu *dharma* is a form of culture (*anuśilana*) which is the foundation of the four *āśramas*, and of the diverse vows, austerities, and rituals of Hindu life (D, 5).

The text is written in the form of a dialogue between master and student, where the master gradually leads the student towards the conclusion that the offering to the divine of all the human faculties, bodily as well as mental, leads to the perfection of humanity (*manuṣyatva*), the only permanent happiness, and the true *dharma* (D, 66–67). Happiness depends on the cultivation of our humanity, which requires the proper development of our faculties and maintaining a balance between them (D, 21). Therefore, true culture lies not in the eradication (*uccheda*) but in the restraining (*damana*) of sensual impulses (D, 26). Since *dharma* is the proper development of all the faculties (*vṛtti*) and the maintenance of a harmony (*sāmañjasya*) between them, the attempt to completely eradicate some of these faculties is not *dharma* (D, 27). By teaching the pre-eminence of worldly action, Lord Kṛṣṇa has shown that renunciation (*sannyāsa*) is an incomplete *dharma* (D, 30). For Chatterjee, the culmination of this process of harmonising all of one's faculties is the *bhakti* of ideal devotees such as Prahlāda, which is the greatest (*śreṣṭha*) of all the *dharmas* in the world and their quintessence. Christianity and Brahmoism are included within this perfect *dharma*. A Vaiṣṇava, and a Hindu are they who have apprehended, in the manner of Prahlāda, the eternal spirit that indwells all beings as their inner self, and see themselves in all beings. However, those who forever bear enmity towards others, harm them, and quarrel with them are not true Hindus, but are in fact outsiders (*mlecchas*) such that even contact with such individuals would rob a Hindu of one's Hinduness (*se mlecchara adhika mleccha, tāhāra samsparṣe thākileo hindura hinduṣyāni yāya*) (D, 103–104). The distinctiveness of this Hindu *bhakti* is highlighted by Chatterjee through a contrast between the Christian God and the Hindu deity. While the Christian God is distinct (*prthaka*) from the universe which is ruled as a temporal monarch, the God (*īśvara*) of the Hindus, in contrast, is the inner self (*antarātmā*) of all beings, and though God is distinct from the universe, it is in God that the universe dwells, just as a necklace is strung on a thread and the winds are in the skies. The divine is present in all human beings, so that if I love the divine reality, I love all humanity as well, and if I do not love all humanity, I cannot love the divine reality. As long as I have not understood that I and the world are not different, I have not gained either knowledge, *dharma*, devotion, or love (*yata kṣaṇa nā bujhite pariba ye, sakala jagat-i āmi, yata kṣaṇa nā bujhiba ye, sarbbaloke āra āmāte abheda, tata kṣaṇa āmāra jñāna haṣya nāi, bhakti haṣya nāi, priti haṣya nāi*). This universal love (*prīti*) lies at the root (*mūla*) of the Hindu *dharma*, and there can be no *hindutva* without this inalienable and indivisible love. Thus when Prahlāda claims that one cannot distinguish between friend and foe because the Lord dwells in all beings, these words contain the quintessence of the philosophy of love (*prītitattva*), and indicate the superiority (*śreṣṭhatā*) of the Hindu *dharma* in the world (D, 114–15).

Chatterjee wrote and published in English as well as Bengali, and therefore it is not surprising that we find him directly addressing in *Dharmatattva* the question of whether *dharma* can be translated into English as 'religion'. At one stage, the master notes that if one speaks of Christian *dharma*, Buddhist *dharma*, and so on, one is using the term *dharma* as an equivalent of 'religion'. However, one should speak of *dharma* as the eternal laws that apply to all human beings, whether they are Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and others (D, 12). Later, Chatterjee outlines in the first appendix to *Dharmatattva* six different meanings of *dharma*. First, *dharma* is used to translate the English word 'religion' when we employ locutions such as Hindu *dharma*,

Buddhist *dharma*, Christian *dharma*, and so on. Secondly, in scriptures such as the *dharma-śāstras*, the term indicates what is understood in English as morality. Thirdly, *dharma* can mean virtue, which refers to qualities that are developed by following moral codes. Fourthly, *dharma* is what is approved by a religious faith or a moral code. Fifthly, *dharma* refers to the functional characteristic of a certain entity, for instance, the *dharma* of magnets is to attract. Sixthly, *dharma* denotes custom (*ācāra*), which is different across nations, peoples, and clans (D, 152). Notwithstanding this conceptual variation, Chatterjee's concluding statement is in the second appendix to *Dharmatattva*, where the master first outlines the various understandings of 'religion' which have been developed by western thinkers such as Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Mill, Comte, and others, and indicates that just as one individual cannot see the whole world, the totality of *dharma* cannot be grasped by an individual's intelligence. However, the master asserts that if the *dharma* has been expressed anywhere in its fullness, it is in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the scriptural text of the Hindus (D, 160), that we may find this perfection.

Sāmājika Prabandha

Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's deep concern that Hindus should cease to indiscriminately absorb western templates informs his perceptive analyses of European societies, which are resonant with the east–west contrasts of Chandranath Basu and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. For instance, he argues that while by nature Hindu society is marked by peace and contentment (*śāntipraṇatā*), the English are efficient in the pursuit of worldly happiness. The English are work-oriented, skilful, arrogant, and greedy, while the Hindus are hardworking, gentle, and contented. Therefore, all that the Hindus can learn from the English is their efficiency (*kāryakuśalatā*) in practical matters, and it is better that they do not learn anything else (SP, 63–64). However, through their contact with the English, the Hindus have abandoned their native gentleness (*namratā*), and instead acquired the egotism (*svārthaparātā*) of their masters. Therefore, it would have been better if through the mutual contact between the Hindus and the English, the changes had taken place in the natures not of the former but of the latter (SP, 64). Again, like Basu and Chatterjee, Mukhopadhyay emphasises the this-worldly dimensions of the fulfilment of the *dharma*. A society does not truly progress through technological advances, commercial enterprises, financial gains, and so on, but becomes highly civilized, established in *dharma*, and progressive to the extent that the people have high ideals, and aspire to wholeheartedly follow them (SP, 84). Just as through the contraction and the expansion of the heart, blood circulates throughout the body, the spiritual life too is composed of worldly engagement (*pravṛtti*) and renunciation (*nivṛtti*) as two opposing forces. The Hindu scriptures have indicated that of these two it is worldly activity that is usually the more powerful motivational force, and have therefore provided extensive teachings about how to strengthen the dispositions towards renunciation. As a result, some have mistakenly concluded that these scriptures are concerned solely with renunciation, and are opposed to worldly matters (*aihikatā*). However, a proper understanding of these scriptures shows that they are concerned with both the material and the spiritual welfare of people (SP, 92–93). The teachings relating to self-control, restraint, and others indeed have a spiritual goal, but these virtues

also contribute to worldly happiness. Thus, the scriptures have sought to establish the harmony between worldly activity and renunciation (SP, 94).

However, unlike Chatterjee, Mukhopadhyay frames his interrogations of European notions and his articulations of the Hindu *dharma* with the vocabulary not of modernised configurations of Hindu devotionism but of Advaita Vedānta. He argues that there are two types of *dharma*: the naturalistic (*prakṛtimūlaka*) and the emotive (*bhāvamūlaka*). According to the former *prakṛtika dharma*, such as the Hindu *dharma*, the supreme reality is without any qualities (*nirguṇa*), knowledge is the only path to liberation (*mokṣapatha*), the discipline is stern (*kāṭhōra*), and the attainment of future happiness or misery is necessarily linked through *karmic* causality to one's present actions. According to the latter, such as Christianity and Islam, the divine reality has qualities such as kindness, compassion, and anger; devotion (*bhakti*) is the means to liberation; the spiritual way is tender (*komala*); and the attainment of happiness or misery in the afterlife is dependent on the grace of God (*prakṛtika dharma kāṭhōra, bhābamūlaka dharma komala. prakṛtika dharme ekamātra kāryakāraṇa-śrīṅkhālāra upara nirbhara kariyā sukhaprāptira ebaṃ duḥkhanibṛttira patha dekhite haṅga*) (SP, 84–85). Mukhopadhyay acknowledges that the naturalistic *dharms* too speak of *avatāras* of the divine, but he claims that these only seek to provide illustrations to human beings regarding how to follow the *dharma* in their lives. However, to the extent that the adherents of these *dharms* become devoted to the *avatāras* their mental powers become weakened. Conversely, Mukhopadhyay makes the intriguing claim that Advaitic thought has spread, in the form of Sufism, among some Muslims, and, in the form of Augustinianism, with its doctrine of a 'qualityless God' (*nirguṇavāda*), among some Christians, and these followers too of the emotive *dharms* have developed mental strength (*cittera bala*). However, in general, abandoning the path of knowledge and moving over to the path of devotion is never a sign of progress (*unnati*), only of decline (*jñānamarga tyāga kariyā bhaktimārgē yāoṅgā kimbā prakṛtika dharmapraṅālī cāriyā bhābika dharmapraṅālīte padārpaṅga karā, ihā unnatira cihṅga naṅga, abanatira lakṣaṅga*) (SP, 85–86).

Advaitic wisdom, a naturalistic *dharma*, is the basis of the universality of the Hindu vision. According to the Hindu scriptures, the I should be progressively enlarged, so that the others are included within it, and there is no distinction (*bheda*) between self-interest (*svārtha*) and other-interest (*parārtha*). Thus the self-interest of the Hindus is extensive (*suvistrta*), as Hindus, who believe in the one universal self (*ekātmavādī*), accept the scriptural teaching, 'all this is verily the self'. The self-interest of the English, in contrast, is constricted (*saṅkīrṅga*) – while the worldly-wise English travel to different countries, observe different societies, and dwell in different circumstances, they can never become one of others, nor they can make others their own (SP, 69). Crucially, however, Mukhopadhyay acknowledges that though the scriptures urge the Hindus to be self-sacrificing and develop selflessness, they have become extremely self-centred (*svārthapara*) in spiritual matters. According to these scriptures, the self is beginningless, immutable, and universal, such that it is not the case that the merits or demerits of one individual do not touch another individual. Once we accept the universality of the self, we have to conclude that everyone else is connected to the moral or immoral deeds of one individual. This doctrine of the single self (*ekajīvavāda*), which implies the interrelationality of all individuals, was accepted by the extremely wise sages of the

land, who believed that without the liberation (*mukti*) of all, no individual could be liberated. However, this teaching was gradually almost lost, so that individuals who pursue the *dharma* have become indifferent to the spiritual welfare of others and seek only their own spiritual progress. Because our scriptural understanding has become polluted and our minds constricted, we have developed an indifference that is sin (*pāpa*). The ancient Hindu *dharma* has gradually suffered degeneration, mutual sympathy among the people has diminished, and the power of unification too has declined (*seijanya āryadharmā kramaśaḥ nimnatara sopāne abarohaṇa kariteche, deśa madhye saḥānubhūti dina dina svalpatara haiteche, ebaṃ sammilana-śakti kramaśaḥ nyūna haiṅyā yāiteche*) (SP, 236–37).

The theme that the Hindu *dharma* has moved away from its spiritual foundations recurs throughout *Sāmājika Prabandha*. Mukhopadhyay notes that while there are no people in the world who are more devoted to *dharma* than the people of Bhārata, they have, in fact, neglected their *dharma* which is why they suffer from various ills (*eka pakṣe, bhāratabāsira sakala doṣera mūla dharmahāni; pakṣāntare, bhāratabāsira mana apara jātira apekṣā samadhika dharmānurakta*) (SP, 235). While in ancient times all aspects of life were pervaded by *dharma*, such that all actions starting from the time people would wake up to the time they would sleep were undertaken with the Lord in mind, this pervasion of the life of Hindus by the *dharma* has been almost lost, and fulfilling the *dharma* has become limited to performing a specific set of actions rather than engaging in a life-long enterprise (SP, 238–39). Against this backdrop of gradual decline, Mukhopadhyay has to grapple with the question of whether distinctions based on caste (*barṇa*) can be accommodated within visions of equality in Hindu social universes. Mukhopadhyay offers three types of responses to this sensitive matter in defending the Hindu *dharma* against criticisms from European writers and some members of the English-educated Bengali intelligentsia. First, he claims that some form or the other of ‘caste’ can be found in all cultures. According to the adherents of the emotive religions, there are certain social advantages to the doctrine of equality – because of the spread of the view that all human beings are equal (*mānuṣe mānuṣe samāna*), there has been a decline in atrocities committed on others, people have become concerned with the general welfare, and so on. While Mukhopadhyay concedes that these are some beneficial aspects of the doctrine, he notes that while human beings might speak of equality, they also usually seek to establish themselves as superior to others. Consequently, there is no harmony (*sāmañjasya*) between the opposing pulls of establishing equality, and demonstrating one’s superiority over others (*ataeva ekapakṣe sāmyadharmā pālana, pakṣāntare anya mānuṣa apekṣā āpani bara haibāra prayāsa, ei duijera sāmañjasya ghaṭiyā uṭhe nā*) (SP, 87). Mukhopadhyay argues that we should, in fact, accept that in all social systems there will be distinctions of higher and lower. All societies accept five measures of social hierarchy – learning, practical efficiency, seniority, high birth, and wealth. Whereas among the Europeans, wealth is the primary criterion, the followers of the naturalistic religions believe that social differences (*sāmājika vaiśamya*) should be passed down in terms not of wealth but of family prestige (*baṃsamaryādānusārīṇi*). While inequality based on wealth might stimulate enterprise, it is also a source of evils such as greed, envy, deceit, and so on (SP, 89). Second, he suggests that the European defenders of equality are going against the grain of the universe for there is, in fact, no equality (*sāmya*) anywhere – even two leaves from a

branch of the same tree are not equal, nor are two specks of dust or drops of rain equal. There is indeed similarity across things in the world, but there is no equality, and it is from perceptions of things that are similar (*sādrśya*) that there arises the assumptions of equality (SP, 86). Third, more positively, he argues that the naturalistic religions such as the Hindu *dharma* also know of an equality, though this is based on a fundamental sense of spiritual unity (*ekatvabodha*) across all beings. The wise perceive in their hearts no distinction (*pārthakya*) between individuals born in high families and a dog, for in all beings there is present the same underlying power (*śakti*). The distinctions that are outlined in the Hindu scriptures pertain only to worldly matters (byāvahārika bhinnatā) and are relevant for everyday purposes, but they are not transcendentally (*pāramārthika*) valid. According to the true understanding of equality in Hindu *dharma*, all human beings are fundamentally one (*mulataḥ eka*) but are distinguished in accordance with their different *karmic* actions. Therefore, the attempt to abolish these distinctions through means such as the application of force is prohibited (*prākṛtika dharma ye bhinnatā dekhe tāhā karma prasūta baliyā jāne ebaṃ bala chalādi praṃyoga dvārā tāhāra uccheda ceṣṭā abidheya baliyā mane kare*). (SP, 88).

Hindutva

Chandranath Basu begins his *Hindutva* by noting that he is following in the footsteps of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay in writing about the *dharma* of the Hindus. While, as we will see, Basu echoes some of the themes of Chatterjee and Mukhopadhyay, the distinctiveness of *Hindutva* lies in its attempt to present diverse aspects of Hindu life and practice as conceptual unfoldings of Advaitic non-distinction between the finite and the eternal. A leitmotif of *Hindutva* is that the *Hindutva* which marks out the Hindus as distinct from, and superior to, the followers of the other *dharmas* such as Christianity is that the Hindus, unlike all the other peoples of the world, are able to apprehend themselves as not substantially different from the divine reality. The Hindus alone have been able to rise to the spiritual heights of the realisation that humanity is essentially divine. Basu draws various substantive conclusions from this basic theme – because the Hindus alone perceive through the eye of knowledge the divine unity, they alone are truly magnanimous, they alone have an all-comprehensive love of all beings in the world, they alone have the inner vigour to undertake a spiritual journey that stretches across countless aeons, they alone can truly delight in the physical beauties of the world that is enveloped by the divine, and they alone see all empirical realities as structured by *dharma* and oriented towards the eternal reality. More precisely, they alone comprehend the subtle meaning of the scriptural dictum ‘I am He’ (so ‘*ham*’), which is true knowledge of the self, unlimited courage (*sāhasa*), and the harmony (*sāmañjasya*), greatness (*mahatva*) and unity (*ekatva*) of everything (H, 14). Reflecting some of the standard idioms, themes, and imageries of classical Advaita Vedānta, Basu argues that individuals who are able to overcome the sway of the gross senses, and perceive the subtle essences underlying the physical objects, see the world as of the form of consciousness (*caitanya*). Though there is no real distinction within Brahman, there is indeed a kind of distinction between Brahman and the world, which is the gross state (*sthūla avasthā*) of Brahman. However, this state is not an eternal attribute (*nityaguṇa*) or state of Brahman, but only a momentary

condition, and has no real existence (*prakṛta astitva*) (H, 8). Therefore, although the impermanent gross state of the world, which is of the form of *māyā*, is born out of (*udbhūta*) or projected (*prakṣipta*) from Brahman, it cannot touch the perfection of Brahman which is not dependent on (*adhīna*) that which is not eternal (H, 9).

Against this metaphysical backdrop, Basu carries on a ongoing dialogue with Christianity, where the *Hindutva* ('Hinduness') of the Hindus and the Hindu *dharma* emerges through a series of fine-grained contrasts with various Christian doctrines. Basu states that there are two views regarding the relation between Brahman, the producer of the world, and the world. According to the first, which is held by the Hindus, the two are substantially one (*eka-i padārtha*). Brahman is the substantial cause (*upādāna*) of the world, just as clay is that of pots, and the two are not substantially different. According to the second, which is held by the Christians, the two are completely different (*prthak*) – the world is not substantially based in God, and at the moment of creation (*srṣṭi*) it is produced by God entirely through the infinite divine power (H, 1–2). After setting out this contrast in some detail, however, Basu goes on to argue that there is, in fact, no real difference between the Hindu view that the world is the form, development or transformation (*rūpa, vikāśa vā vivarta*) of God, and the Christian view that the world is the creation of God. While Hamlet is, in one sense, substantially distinct from Shakespeare, for Hamlet's characteristics are not those of Shakespeare, in another sense they are not utterly distinct, for the distinctiveness of Hamlet is to be attributed to the productive activity of no author other than Shakespeare. Therefore, something of the essence of a producer remains in what has been produced, and it is in this sense that regarding the relation between Brahman and the world one can state 'I am He'. Basu holds that the doctrine that the effect (*kārya*), while it is distinct from the cause (*kāraṇa*), is yet present in the cause is accepted even by Christians and European philosophers. Therefore, God must be accepted as at least the partial substantial cause (*āṃśika upādāna*) of the world, and it is with respect to this cause that one can state 'I am He' (H, 4–5). Quoting J.F. Ferrier's statement 'The only absolute existence is an eternal Mind in permanent synthesis with matter', Basu notes that although it is proper to view the world as distinct (*bhinna*) from God in a certain sense, one must refer everything in the world to the divine, with the statement 'I am He'. Therefore, both the Hindu theory that the world is a development out of Brahman (*bkāśabāda*) and the Christian understanding of the creation of the world definitely affirm the oneness between the world and its creator (*ubhayabādei srṣṭi ebaṃ srṣṭikartāra ekatva niścita*) (H, 5–6).

If Basu seeks to incorporate, in this manner, the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* within the Vedantic understanding of divine causality, he elsewhere systematically distances Christian understandings, perceptions, and experiences from the *dhārmika* life-worlds of the Hindus. First, he argues that the attainment of the goal of Brahman requires a self-control and spiritual discipline which is so arduous that only the Hindus, because they have unlimited strength, courage, and patience, can embark on this path. The other peoples of the world, in comparison to the Hindus, are but children in the matters of spirituality and mental strength (*ādhyātmikatāṃ o mānasika bale pṛṭhibīte tāhāra samāna keha nāi – tāhāra tulanāṃ sakalei bālaka*). Europeans and Americans, for instance, are overcome with fear when they hear about the harsh (*kāṭhōra*) spiritual path of the Hindus (H, 24). The inner sternness (*kāṭhinatā*) with

which the Hindus are able to endure great difficulties as they advance spiritually is indeed one of the characteristics of *Hindutva* (H, 26). Basu concedes that the fatalism that some Europeans have attributed to Hindus is not completely misplaced; however, even this 'fatalistic' resignation should be properly understood as a mark of the deep spirituality of the Hindus. While in the acquisition of worldly goods Hindus indeed often resign themselves to the operations of their *karmic* deserts, they do not adopt such an attitude in matters relating to their spiritual welfare (H, 71–73). Thus, *Hindutva* provides an early elaboration of the 'spiritual East' versus 'materialistic Europe' binary. Basu argues that the Europeans have not progressed far on the road of spiritual progress (*ādhyātmika unnati*), whereas the Hindus have, in contrast, made little progress in worldly matters. Whereas even an ordinary individual in Europe is materially wealthier than a landlord in India, an ordinary Hindu is equal to great Europeans in the matters of knowing *dharma* and following *dharma* (H, 85). A natural love of the eternal (*prakṛta nityapriyatā*), Basu writes, is a characteristic of the *dharma* of the Hindus (H, 113).

Second, because the Hindus do not in general view the world as completely distinct from God, they do not regard as wrong the use of physical objects as images (*mūrti*) of the divine. Basu critiques the Christian prohibition on the use of images by arguing that just as we do not view Macbeth, simply because he is a product of Shakespeare's creativity, as an inferior substance (*apakṛṣṭa padārtha*), we should not regard the world, simply because it is produced by God (*jagadīśvara*), as an inferior substance in which the divine cannot be manifested. The created world is indeed insignificant (*kṣudra*) in comparison to God; however, it is erroneous to think that this relative inferiority renders it incapable of expressing the divine presence (*kintu jagat sṛṣṭa padārtha baśataḥ sraṣṭā jagadīśvarera sahita tāhāra tulanā haḥya nā bolīyā jagat ye adhama jiniṣa erūpa bibecanā karibāra kāraṇa ki?*) (H, 197–98). God is, in fact, expressed in the world in ways that are unending, infinite, and countless, which is why one needs to produce an infinite number of images (*mūrti*) of God (*jagatera jagadīśvarera rūpa ebaṃ guṇa yakhana asaṃkhyā haiteche, takhana jagadīśvarera mūrti nirmāṇa karite haile asaṃkhyā mūrti nirmāṇa karite haibe*) (H, 201). Therefore, Basu emphatically asserts that the Hindus alone truly love the world, and only their intelligence, vision, and affection encompasses the whole world (H, 227–28). At the same time, he observes that Christian poets such as Coleridge, notwithstanding the theological proscription of bowing to created objects in an attitude of worship, are intent on bringing down the divine to the earth and experiencing the divine presence in diverse worldly phenomena (H, 202–203). Third, because the Hindu scriptures lay down distinctions relating to eligibility (*adhikāra-bheda*), they do not prescribe a single mode of worship for all human beings. While Europeans seek to bring everyone to their own path, Hindus understand that given the differences (*tāratmya*) in mental capacities across human beings, not everyone can begin to meditate straightaway on the formless ultimate. They know that there will always be such differences among human beings (*tini jānena ye maṇṣya madhye mānasika śaktira tāratmya cirakāla āche ebaṃ cirakāla thākibe*). Therefore, devotion to images of the divine (*īśvara-pratimā*) is prescribed for such individuals (H, 229–30). The encompassment of everyone in this manner is another characteristic of Hindus, Hindu *dharma*, and *Hindutva*. There are specific institutions of *dharma* prescribed for individuals with different eligibilities (*adhikāra*), and nobody is left out of the *dhārmika* structures (H, 247).

Fourth, Basu claims that the root of the true doctrine of equality (*samatvavāda*) is to be found only in the Hindu scriptures (*prakṛta samatvabādera mūla ekamātra hinduśāstre āche*) (H, 258). Basu is aware that he is arguing against the grain of various western as well as some Hindu critiques of the notions and practices of caste (*barṇa*), and he resolutely seeks to demonstrate either that these critiques apply to Europeans systems as well or that these critiques are misplaced when applied to Hindus. He argues that we need to enquire into whether impartiality (*samadarśitā*) in itself can generate love for all beings. Even if we regard two things as equal, it does not necessarily follow that we must love both of them. We will, in fact, be able to love everyone only if everyone possesses something in common. Only the Hindu scriptures teach us that all human beings indeed have something which is lovable, and something which is indeed the best among all that is lovable, namely, the supreme Brahman which is present in everything (*ekamātra hindui balena ye sakala lokei emana ekti padārtha āche yāhā bhāla bāsīte pārā yāya yāhā bhāla nā bāsīyā thākā yāya nā yāhā bhāla bāsībāra padārthera madhye sarbbāpekṣā sreṣṭha*). Because Hindus truly understand the significance of the statement 'I am He', only they are able to love everything because everything is constituted of Brahman (H, 254–56). Everyone is, in fact, rooted in Brahman which is beyond all empirical differences (*vaiśamya*), and since Brahman is their natural substance (*prakṛta padārtha*), they are all equal (*ataeva sakala loke ye eka vaiśamya śūnya brahma padārtha āche, tāhāi tāhādera prakṛta padārtha ebam sei prakṛta padārtha sakala loke eka baliyāi sakala loka samāna*) (H, 258). Therefore, while the Hindu scriptures speak of developing friendship (*maitrī*) towards all living beings, the Christian and the Islamic scriptures, which do not know the true doctrine of equality, do not speak of such friendship (H, 263). Basu is attentive to the charges levelled by Europeans and English-educated Bengalis that there is, in fact, not a trace of equality (*sāmya*) in Hindu social structures. He responds defiantly that if they were to examine properly the basis of the *barṇa* distinctions they would understand that the Hindus affirm equality more strongly than do the Europeans (H, 264). He points out that the distinctions of rank, status, and so on which are associated with the *barṇas* are to be found even in Europe, which is viewed by many as the abode of equality. Such distinctions are, in fact, proper and the true basis of equality, because depending on their different capacities, people engage in different types of activities, which are associated with different social rankings (H, 265). However, there is a key difference in that in India, unlike in Europe, these distinctions are hereditary. Basu speculates that in the early stages of humanity, when people did not possess extensive knowledge, individuals had no inclination to abandon one profession and adopt another, and would usually stick to their father's occupations. If several generations in a family stick to the same profession, they progressively acquire greater expertise. Therefore, all societies, in their early development have hereditary occupations. Before the Hindu authors had laid down distinctions relating to the *barṇas*, such hereditary occupations had already emerged (H, 271). However, after the occupations had acquired a hereditary shape, the authors of the Hindu scriptures codified the institutions relating to the *barṇas* for two reasons. Firstly, they believed that human beings have distinct natures (*prakṛti*), which is why they are engaged in specific types of occupations. Secondly, they believed that the distinctions of the *barṇas* are not ultimately real, for the whole world is constituted of Brahman (*bāstabika barṇabheda balitā kichui nāi, kena nā samasta jagat brahmanmaya*). However, the specific conditions, such as the *barṇa*, of an individual's life are a product of their *karmic* deserts. Though all human

beings are indeed constituted of the one Brahman, they have different natures (*svabhāva*) in accordance with their actions (*karma*) and qualities (*guṇa*). Therefore, in accordance with the nature that corresponds to the actions of individuals in one lifetime, they receive a subsequent state and a field of action that are suitable for that nature (*svabhāvopayogī*) (H, 272–73).

Through the course of these dialectical contrasts with Christian doctrines and aspects of European culture, Basu presents the Hindu *dharma* as the vital breath of every dimension of Hindu existence, individual as well as social (H, 163). He seeks to respond to the European critiques of Advaita as promoting forms of world-negation through his repeated emphases on *dhārmika* social existence as a moral stage which prepares individuals for the spiritual end of dissolution into Brahman. He argues that the true significance of the declaration ‘I am He’ is that human beings can learn to expand the horizons of their empirical self through the cultivation of *dharma* in social contexts, till they attain the summit of the dissolution of their worldly individualities. The differences in eligibility (*adhikāri-bheda*) of different types of individuals are therefore crucial: while every dimension of human existence, whether temporal or spiritual, is saturated by *dhārmika* principles, the specific *dharma* of renunciation applies only to those individuals who have traversed social existence and are qualified for the knowledge of the self. On the one hand, Basu argues that according to the Hindus all types of action are encompassed by *dhārmika* regulations (*manuṣyera sakala kājera sahitai dharmera sambandha āche*), which is why the *Dharmaśāstras* lay down in minute detail the rules that need to be followed in different aspects of life (H, 115). The classification in the *Bhagavad-gītā* of food into the categories of *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmasika*, such that they are correlated with different kinds of mental and spiritual dispositions, is to be found in no scriptures other than the Hindu. The detailed outline of the types of food that can be consumed is an indication of the incomparable spirituality (*ādhyātmikatā*) of the Hindus (H, 118–19). While there are people who follow the path of *dharma* also among the Europeans, only the Hindus believe that all worldly goods can be attained through the fulfilment of their *dhārmika* existence. If they engage in agriculture, arts, and commerce in ways that are regulated through *dhārmika* codes, they are certain to be successful (H, 74–75). On the other hand, not everyone is properly qualified for undertaking the spiritual quest. The Hindu scriptures exalt the *dharma* of the householder and social life, and note that if human beings are not able, through education and discipline, to purify and control their empirical natures they are not equipped to progress towards the super-personal divine. Therefore, they prohibit individuals from embarking on the path of detachment before their worldly desires have been fulfilled (*ebam pāṛthiba prabr̥tti caritārtha karibāra purbbe bairāgya patha abalambana karite niṣedha kariyā gi āchena*). This is why if a young man were to approach a yogī for initiation (*dīkṣā*), the yogī might advise him to return to the world and take on the *dharma* of a householder (H, 29–31). However, even as they are immersed in the minutiae of worldly *dhārmika* existence, Hindus have to remain engaged in great spiritual discipline (*sādhana*) to overcome the distinction between the empirical selfhood of the finite self and the true Brahman, and this path could involve countless lives, centuries, and aeons (*se birāṭa sādhanāya kata janma, kata śatābdī, kata yuga atibāhita haiyā yaṣā, tāhāra ṭhikānā nāi*) (H, 20–21). The Hindus seek

longevity not solely for worldly purposes but so that they can fulfil the *dhārmika* path, by distinguishing between the world that is not eternal and the eternal Brahman. For them the world is thus a ladder (*sopāna*) through which they seek to realise Brahman (H, 101).

However, the attainment of Brahman, that is, the dissolution of the narrowness (*saṃkīrṇatā*) associated with *māyā* and the gaining of the vastness of Brahman, requires the development of altruism (*parārthaparātā*). For this process of expansion of the self (*ātmasaṃprasāraṇa*), immersion in social exchanges is necessary. This is why Manu states that the *āśrama* of the householder is superior to the other three. Through their social interactions, individuals can transform their self-seeking nature into love and kindness, and ultimately into a universal friendship (*maitrī*) (H, 32–34). That is, the institution of the *āśrama* of the householder is directed towards the cultivation of altruism (*paropākara*), and this is its primary *dharma*, primary duty, and primary characteristic (*paropākara gr̥hasthāśramera sarbbapradhāna dharma, sarbbapradhāna karma, sarbbapradhāna lakṣaṇa*) (H, 164). However, even as one progresses towards the goal of dissolution into Brahman on a path which is regulated by strict rules pertaining to *brahmacārya*, one is not required to abandon along the way an appreciation of worldly beauty. Indeed, the enchanting aspects of the world can be truly enjoyed only by individuals practising *brahmacārya* who seek to attain Brahman, for they experience the pure beauty which is not touched by illusion (*moha*) (H, 40–41). This experience is not an obstacle to *brahmacārya*, rather it fortifies *brahmacārya* since it leads to the dissolution of self-love and generates a love (*ādara*) for the world. Therefore, through their immersion in Brahman, the devotees of Brahman and the seekers of Brahman are able to perceive the beauty of the world with a subtlety, purity, holiness, intimacy, and truthfulness that are not available to other individuals (*brahma-priya brahmaprārthī brahmacārī brahmera saṃyoge brahmera sandhāne biśva dekhiyā biśvera saundarye yata suksmatā, yata biśuddhatā, yata pabitrātā, yata ekaprāṇatā, yata ekātmatā, yata mohapariśūnyatā dekhiyā thākena, āra keha tata dekhite pāna nā*) (H, 157).

Hindu Dharma at the crossroads

For Rajnarayan Basu, Chatterjee, Mukhopadhyay, and Chandranath Basu, the Hindu *dharma* is the hermeneutic site for evaluating, and sometimes transvaluating, specific aspects of European modernities and for re-asserting Vedic norms, ideas, and practices through a critical engagement with European modernities. While ‘religion’, characterised as a set of beliefs and practices that deal exclusively with the transcendental domain, becomes metonymic of the divisive, limited, and partial understanding of Europeans, *dharma* is presented as the basis of the unitive, all-encompassing, and universal vision of Hindus. These texts, which span a period of around 13 years (1879 to 1892), are multi-faceted vignettes into the Bengali Hindu appropriations of European concepts, and also the anxieties about the stability of the Hindu *dharma* in an age of rapid socio-cultural transformations. As T. Raychaudhuri notes, ‘The Bengali Hindu intelligentsia in the latter half of the nineteenth century developed an almost obsessive preoccupation with the West’ (Raychaudhuri 2002: 331). While they all sought to establish the equality, if not the superiority, of Vedic norms to European ideals, there were significant variations across their styles, rhetorics, and vocabularies of cultural self-assertion regarding precisely which foundations, figurations, and formulations of the Hindu *dharma* they wished to retrieve, reshape, and sustain. Mukhopadhyay remained firmly rooted in Brahmanical universes, and he criticised the English-educated Hindus for accepting the English as their ideal heroes.

He lamented that even the author of *The Superiority of the Hindu Dharma* had accepted the *dharma* of the English as the measuring standard (*mānadaṇḍa*), before pointing out the similarities of the Hindu *dharma* with the former (SP, 66). Bankim, in contrast, was heavily influenced by various European thinkers such as Bentham, Mill, and Matthew Arnold, even if he sought to minimise such borrowing by describing them as ‘European Hindus’ (Raychaudhuri 2002: 340–41). Thus, Sen argues that what is distinctive about Chatterjee’s *Dharmatattva* is not his originality but his ‘ability to weave together in the form of an ethical and social theory, random thoughts and reflections that had grown both from tradition and through the constructive play of ideas in modern times’ (Sen 2010: 124). While he was engaged in reformulating the figure of Kṛṣṇa for modernist Bengali sensibilities, Chatterjee was yet opposed to attempts to revitalize Hindu traditions entirely through Hindu resources (Sen 2008: 76). An author’s characteristic temperament could also shape their responses to the socio-political exclusions instituted by the colonial state, and their assessments of European socio-political domination. Sen describes the distinction between Chatterjee’s occasional irreverence towards the Hindu *dharma* and Chandranath Basu’s energetic defence of the Hindu *dharma* in these terms: ‘Even at the stage when he was producing his major religious treatises (*Dharmatattva*, *Krishnacharitra*) Bankim still retained the engaging frankness and sense of humour that could shock orthodox Hindu opinion. Chandranath, more in the mould of Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, gravitated towards the dark and sombre side of life’ (1993: 210). Moreover, an author’s views on a topic could undergo subtle, though significant, shifts across different stages. For instance, Chatterjee’s *Sāmya* (1879), with references to Rousseau, Fourier, Proudhon and others, and severe criticisms of the exploitation of the Bengali peasants by the land-owners, was republished (1892) without the section on equality which he regarded as erroneous, though his descriptions of the abject conditions of the peasants were retained (Raychaudhuri 2002: 142).

Notwithstanding the distinctive personalities of the authors and their differential locations in the colonial machineries, a set of similar themes recur throughout their texts, even as they variously seek to trace aspects of Hindu worship and social existence to the conceptual foundations of *bhakti*, the *Upaniṣads*, or Advaita Vedānta. First, the Hindu mind is said to have a universal reach whereas European consciousnesses are constricted. Chandranath Basu provides a string of contrasts that highlights this theme: in all matters, the vision of the Hindus encompasses the whole (*byāpakadarśi*), while that of Europeans is partial; Hindus seek the whole, while Europeans accept a part; and Hindus are unitive (*saṃyojaka*), while Europeans are divisive (*biyojaka*) (H, 229). Second, Hindu universality is structured by the notion of distinctions of eligibility (*adhikāra-bheda*) for different types of individuals. The master in *Dharmatattva* argues that while there is indeed only one shortest path to the one God, not everybody can take this path. For those who are not spiritually trained, the winding route is the best. There are different types of people in the world, with varying levels of learning and different natures, and for them, the compassionate (*karuṇāmaya*) Lord has laid down different spiritual pathways (D, 90). Mukhopadhyay echoes this view and states that the magnanimity (*udāratā*) of the Hindus can be noted in their *dhārmika* principles. The Hindu scriptures condemn any feelings of animosity regarding the divine, and through the distinctions of eligibility ensure that there can be no confusion in *dhārmika* matters (SP, 7). Criticisms levelled against caste, which gain momentum towards the end of the

nineteenth century, too are sought to be deflected through this gradualism, by arguing that people are placed in a system of distinct groups (*barṇas*) in accordance with their individual natures which are shaped by *karmic* inheritances. Third, the authors lament that the Hindus have undergone a decline, even though this degeneration does not imply that the former glory of the Hindus has been eclipsed completely. Chandranath Basu states that through contact with Europe the mental vigour of the Hindus has been somewhat weakened, and he urges Hindus to maintain their sternness (H, 27). Rajnarayan Basu too emphasises the inner vitality of the Hindu people which has survived through the long centuries. Hindus can never discard the name 'Hindu' which continues to exercise a magical influence over them, and through which all Hindus will be united in bonds of fraternity and together seek all forms of independence (*svādhinatā*) (HDS, 56).

Conclusion

While our focus in this essay has been on the textual moves through which the Hindu *dharma* is positioned alongside the *dharmas* of Europe, or often configured as superior to the latter, these conceptual exercises were carried out by their authors from within a dense socio-cultural milieu of debates relating to the Brahmo Marriage Bill (1868–72) and the Age of Consent Bill (1890–92). These debates are occasionally reflected in their works, which contain their distinctive responses to the themes of widow remarriage, the distinctions of caste (*barṇa*), and so on, which were sometimes defended from the traditional perspectives of Hindu *dharma*. The questions of marriage, community, and social existence would later become imbricated, during the protests against the partition of Bengal in 1905, in the emerging consciousnesses of national identity. Figures such as Chatterjee believed that the resources for responding to western notions of liberty, polity, culture, and so on had to be supplied by the Sanskritic tradition, which would raise the issue of whether segments of the population – such as women, Muslims, Christians, and so on – who did not have access to this tradition were to be excluded from the process of forming self-identities against the backdrop of the empire (Lipner 2005: 11–12).

At the same time, it would be incorrect to characterise the texts that we have discussed as 'revivalist', if the term implies a wholesale retrieval of the ancient Hindu *dharma* and the classical *Dharma-sāstras* and the *smṛti* commentaries, and a rejection of all western influences, for they adopted varying stances regarding the restoration of specific dimensions of the Vedic heritages. Even Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani, the champion of traditional Hindu views on marriage during the controversy over the Age of Consent Bill, was familiar with some aspects of western thought, and his 1883 lectures on *dharma* were, in fact, criticised for teaching 'Anglo Vernacular religion' (Sen 2010: 133). Therefore, Sen (1993: 405) points out that 'Hindu revivalism was a fragmented body of thought partly because the contemporaneity of older ideas and institutions was understood and explained in diverse ways. While at one level there remained a broad consensus about the fact that the past *per se* could not be brought back to life, there was evidently no such agreement on what elements within that past could be reinvigorated and to what extent'. The reason why these texts often have a 'revivalist' tone is because of the systematic nature in which they envision, interrogate, and re-evaluate both Europe and the Hindu *dharma* through the lenses of Hindu devotionalism

and Advaita Vedānta, with the result that often sweeping conclusions are drawn from their scriptural-theological premises. Thus, for both Mukhopadhyay and Chandranath Basu, the Advaitic basis of the Hindu *dharma* is presented as the conceptual foundation for the whole gamut of Hindu values, ranging across universality, tolerance, hospitality, peace, harmony, compassion, inner strength, and spirituality, all of which are inflected by an emphasis on social conservatism and *karmic* gradualism. All the standard western Orientalist and Christian missionary critiques of Hindu polytheism, ritual idolatry, servile weakness, gross immorality, cultural degradation, cosmic pessimism, life-negating apathy, and social insularity are received and interrogated, and occasionally reversed, through *dhārmika* prisms. While Basu is perhaps the first Bengali author of a book with the term *hindutva* in its title, Chatterjee too, as we have seen, could employ it to encapsulate the distinctive qualities, modes of thought, and ways of living of the Hindus. Their *hindutva*, configured in the second half of the nineteenth century, has not yet become entangled with the colonial politics of electoral representation (Thapar 1989), and is primarily a mode of cultural assertiveness which seeks to stem the inflow of certain kinds of European norms through, among other routes, the writings of the English-educated Bengalis. The values of their *hindutva* also support the idealised configurations of *barṇa* as an organic system of interdependent groups, consisting of individuals whose natures (*prakṛti*) have been *karmically* structured. These values would continue to be presented in subsequent decades as the core of the Hindu *dharma* which is posited in distinction to ‘religions’ such as Christianity, Islam, and others (Halbfass 1988: 334–48). Unlike these ‘religions’ which are characterised as sectarian, dogmatic, and intolerant, the Hindu *dharma* is presented not as *a* religion but as the deepest significance of religion itself, understood as the quest for the spiritual reality that encompasses all humanity. *Hindu Dharmera Śreṣṭhatā, Dharmatattva, Sāmājika Prabandha, and Hindutva* can be read as four distinctive moments in the formation, at the dynamic intersections of east and west in the volatile crucibles of colonial Bengal, of the Hindu *dharma*, whose contested genealogies continue to inform its ongoing receptions, rejections, and reconfigurations.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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