Dayānanda Sarasvatī: The Light of Truth
(India, 1884)

Introduction

Dayānanda Sarasvatī (1825–1883) came from a region remote from the centres of British power. He was a wandering holy man, steeped in Sanskrit literature but with little knowledge of English. Nevertheless, his writings show an awareness of the political situation of India, and of the criticisms of Hindu society made by missionaries and by Indian social reformers. He had a distinctive programme for reform which was at the same time an affirmation of the greatness of India.

The Encounter of India with European Ideas

British rule in India originated with the East India Company, founded in 1600, which established trading stations, mainly on the coast. During the late seventeenth century the Company expanded its territories, becoming a military and political as well as a commercial power; and in the eighteenth century it became the effective ruler of Bengal and other parts of northern India, nominally as an agent of the declining Mughal empire. Calcutta (now Kolkata), a town that had grown around British power, became the colonial capital of India, inhabited not only by the Company's employees but by independent entrepreneurs, both Indian and foreign, together with the professional, commercial, clerical and manual workers who depended on them for employment. From 1773 the Company came increasingly under the control of the British Parliament; in 1858 it was wound up and the government of British India was transferred to the Crown. During the same period, most of India came gradually under British rule, either directly or in the form of ‘princely states,’ bound by treaties. A few enclaves remained under Portuguese, French, Dutch or Danish rule.

The Company traditionally opposed interference with Indian society and religious institutions, fearing that this would lead to unrest. This policy was contested in the early nineteenth century, both in Parliament and among the Company’s employees in India. Opposition to it came from two main sources: Christian missionaries and their sympathisers, and Utilitarians of the school of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill—the latter an influential member of the
Company’s London staff, and author of a *History of British India*, which was scathing about Indian culture. The Company excluded missionaries from its territory until 1813, when the ban was rescinded by Parliament; at the same time, men who shared the missionaries’ aims, and others with Utilitarian ideas, were rising in the ranks of the colonial government.

Though there had been Christian missionaries in India before, both Protestant and Catholic, a new phase of Protestant activity began in 1793, when the Baptist Missionary Society was founded. One of its founders, William Carey, arrived in Bengal later that year; he evaded the Company’s ban by operating from the Danish enclave of Serampore, near Calcutta. Despite official hostility, the government came to depend on the missionaries for their educational work, their printing facilities and their knowledge of Bengali language and culture. The Christianity which Carey and other missionaries brought was based on a particular interpretation of the Bible, emphasizing original sin, from which people can only be saved by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. While missionaries made few converts, they established schools which met a growing demand for education, especially providing the knowledge of English which was needed for the employment opportunities opened by the British presence.¹ These schools were very effective in bringing European ideas and literature to India: not only Christian ideas, but also, as Bhandarkar points out (see Chapter 3.04 in this volume) scepticism and atheism. They also equipped Indians to participate with Europeans in the study of India’s history and literature. Such study had been a spare-time activity of some of the Company’s staff from the late eighteenth century; it was gradually professionalised in the missionary and government colleges founded during the nineteenth century; in 1857, universities were founded in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Another missionary activity was printing,² in English and in Indian languages, which revolutionised the distribution of knowledge.

About a fifth of the people of India were Muslim. The Muslim population was unevenly distributed; in Bombay it was a fifth, but in Calcutta it was a much smaller proportion, as most Bengali Muslims were rural and poor.³ There was a much smaller number of indigenous Christians, mostly Catholics, and in the commercial centres of Calcutta and Bombay there were Jews, Parsis and Armenians. The great majority were Hindu, and the urban middle class that

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