

IX. Baba Premananda Bharati (1858-1914) and the Vedanta Society

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Surendranath Mukherjee (or Mukherji) the man later known as Baba Premananda Bharati was born into a Brahmin family in Dacca in January 1858. After attending the University of Calcutta, Surendranath became a journalist, writer and editorial staff member of the *Lahore Tribune* and the *Punjab Times*. He then traveled to Calcutta and founded his own newspaper, the *Gup and Gossip*. The following statement was made by professor Gerald T. Carney the leading authority on Baba Bharati in the West. Carney received this information from a Bengali source, "In Calcutta Mukherjee [or Mukherji] formed part of the cadre of young Bengali intellectuals who gathered around Ramakrishna, a group that included the playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh, Narendra Datta (later famous as Swami Vivekananda), and Amritlal Roy. In this company he attended a performance of the *Chaitanya Lila*, staged by Girish Chandra Ghosh at Calcutta's Star Theater from August 1884. This experience brought about the religious conversion of the young journalist. No exact date is given for this conversion experience."¹

It must be cautioned that this statement must be considered to be tentative until further evidence comes forth. According to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Ramakrishna attended the *Chaitanya Lila* at the Star Theatre on Sunday, September 21, 1884. "He was accompanied by M. Baburam, Mahendra [Mukherji], and two or three others."²

What has been verified is Bharati's wonderful conversion experience discovered by professor Carney in an old newspaper. It is too the credit of Girish Ghosh that this life transforming event occurred when Bharati was viewing one of his powerful devotional plays. In Bharati's own words from the *New York Herald* of November 23, 1902:

But just at this time my religious instinct started to assert itself, and very soon it overcame my passion for journalism. I was witnessing a performance of "Chaitanya Lila" at the Star Theatre. Chaitanya was an

incarnation of Krishna, the Form Manifestation of the Hindoo's absolute deity.

He [Sri Chaitanya] was born a little more than 400 years ago, in Bengal, at Nuddia on the Ganges, about 100 miles above Calcutta. He preached Krishna, the seed and the soul of the purest love, and of the universe, and while preaching he would burst forth into song in praise of Krishna, his Master, Friend, Father, and Lover. Thus singing, he would be filled with ecstasy and in the fullness of joy within him perform the most graceful dance the world has ever seen, his arms and whole-body waving and quivering with the heaving billows, as it were, within his heart. He was like an ocean of divine love and streams of water from many fountains would flow from his eyes in the shape of tears. And in those tears, streaming straight from his eyes to the ground, all those who sang and danced around him in ecstatic motion would be liberally bathed.

This indescribable, wondrous scene made a profound impression upon me. I had at last found my religion of love so hazily understood in boyhood, and resolved to give my life to it. With this awakening all attraction for things material left me, and in the depth of my heart flowed a stream of nectar which every moment thrilled through my being. "Krishna, my beloved!" I exclaimed to myself, 'I am thine forever. Thou art the mystery of love, the universe is its expression, and Chaitanya their most merciful explanation. Merciful, O Lord, because thou art thy Chaitanya thyself, thou comest again as thy own devotee to teach us the way to thee.'³

As a result of this experience, Baba Bharati became a Vaishnava sannyasin in 1890, being a disciple of Srimad Brahmananda Bharati and a devotee of a young Prabhu Jagadbandhu (1871-1921). He tells us, "I then proceeded to the holy land of Brindaban, about a thousand miles from there, on foot. It took me about two months ... After preaching and singing the praises of Krishna and Chaitanya for ten years I retired to live for good in Radhakund in the forests of Brindaban.... They were the holiest men I have ever seen." His brother wrote that Baba Bharati "got a command from Sree Chaitanya in a dream to proceed to America to help Swami Abhayananda in her mission to spread Vaishnavism in the world."

Abhayananda was the former Marie Louise a devotee of Swami Vivekananda who was then preaching in Chicago.⁴

After traveling to Suez, Paris, and London, on October 15, 1902, Bharati arrived in New York City and soon became a popular spokesman for Indian religion in the West. Bharati greatly benefited from Vivekananda's success in the West and he was aided in his mission by a number of devotees of Vivekananda. His biographer Carney wrote, "There are reports that Baba Bharati had met with Swami Vivekananda in India, and may have received the names of some contacts [in the West] from him." The *New York Herald* of November 23, 1902 described him this way. "As Baba [Bharati] speaks and writes English with skill and frequency, he has great advantages over many Hindoos visiting this country. His personality is pleasing, fascinating, and picturesque. He is a handsome man, tall, statuesque, dignified, with dark, sparkling eyes." The following day an article from the *New York Times* mentioned that Swami Abhedananda and Baba Bharati were among 200 hundred guests who attended the reception of Countess Zampini Salazar in New York City. A six-column feature article followed in the *New York Herald* of February 23, 1903 subtitled "Growing Interest Among New York Christians in the Philosophy Taught by Two Indian Priests." It deals entirely with Baba Bharati and Swami Abhedananda with their photographs included, but does not mention if they made contact with one another. Bharati is pictured with his most important disciple Rose Reinhardt Anthon (d. 1951). Eight years previously, on the last day of February 1895, Miss Anthon sang a song at a gathering held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Amzi Barber. On that occasion Swami Vivekananda lectured on "The Vedanta Philosophy: Soul." Three of Bharati's sponsors were the Episcopal Reverend R. Heber Newton (1840-1914) a great admirer of Swami Abhedananda; Charles Lanman (1850-1941) of Harvard University who aided in publishing Vivekananda's book *The Vedanta Philosophy*, and as a friend of Abhedananda was an honorary member of his Vedanta Society in New York; and German born Dr. Felix Adler (1851-1933) founder of the Ethical Cultural Society, previously visited years earlier by Swami Saradananda who was scheduled to speak there. Adler and Vivekananda were two of three guest speakers at the Convention of the Free Religious Society held on August 13, 1894.⁵ Ella Wheeler Wilcox the famous poet and a great admirer of Swami

Vivekananda attended the classes of Baba Bharati in New York City. Concerning his book on *Sree Krishna* (1904) she wrote, "It is most interesting. I find it most clearly and simply told... It broadens and interests, and so I enjoy your most exhaustive work on Creation" In 1910 or 1911 she published a short article in Bharati's journal praising Swami Vivekananda.⁶

At Greenacre owned by Sarah Farmer (1847-1916), Bharati shared the stage with Swami Rama Tirtha (1873-1906) during July and August 1904. Miss Farmer had invited Vivekananda whom she greatly admired to the Greenacre Summer Conferences ten years previously. Swami Rama Tirtha a former University professor at Lahore, in 1897 was motivated by Swami Vivekananda to renounce the world and become a monastic. The director of the Monsalvat School for the Comparative Study of Religion at Greenacre who selected the speakers at that time was Myron Phelps (1856-1916). He had invited Vivekananda to his home in New York City on more than one occasion conversing on the subject of education in India. These conversations brought about a radical change in Mr. Phelps who renounced his successful career as a lawyer and devoted his life to the betterment of India where he passed away in 1916. From October 1904 until June 1905, Bharati engaged in a series of lectures in the city of Boston.⁷

Bharati Comes to Los Angeles

Reverend Benjamin Fay Mills (1857-1916) an extremely successful evangelist organized a two-month long parliament of religions called the "Venice Assembly." He invited Baba Bharati, whom he advertised as "The holy man of India" and "The distinguished sage and mystic from India," to give a series of lectures at the large Venice Auditorium near Los Angeles in August 1905. Two years later Bharati "paid a warm tribute to Mr. Mills, whom he said brought him here from Boston and has been a brother to him." Five years earlier it was Rev. B. F. Mills who was responsible for bringing Swami Vivekananda to Northern California. Mills invited Vivekananda to come there, paid for his train ticket and offered him large audiences to speak to at his Unitarian Church.⁸ Bharati soon realized that Los Angeles was the ideal city for him to teach his religious ideas and

gather a following. At Blanchard Hall in September 1905, he offered a number of lectures, where Vivekananda had formally addressed the public. He established the first Krishna Home in the United States at 730 West 16th Street in Los Angeles. It included an ashram, temple and publication facilities for his new journal the *Light of India* (later renamed in 1910-11 as *East and West*) created in October 1906 to spread his message, with Rose Anthon serving as editor. In that year she published the book *Stories of India*, which was reprinted in New Delhi in 2001. Bharati attracted a great deal of public attention with his outspoken teachings that criticized Western materialism and colonialism, along with a missionary critique of Hinduism.⁹

The Krishna Home received a visit from the distinguished Maharaja and Maharani of Baroda in June 1906. They came on a tour of the United States in order to study the industrial methods of the country for the purpose of improving the standard of living in Baroda. One month earlier, the couple attended the farewell reception in New York held for Swami Abhedananda upon his return to India. The Maharaja “spoke in high terms of praise of the work which Swami Abhedananda had accomplished in the United States, both in spreading the great teachings of Vedanta and in awakening a true sympathy and love for India.”¹⁰

Bharati mailed a copy of his book *Sree Krishna* to Leo Tolstoy in Russia. In an affectionate letter of response dated 16 February 1907, Tolstoy emphasized, “The metaphysical religious ideas of the doctrine of Krishna so well exposed in your book,—is the eternal and universal foundation of all true philosophies and all religions.... Humanity must unite in one and the same faith, because the soul of every man—as you know it—only seems to be multiple and different in every individual, but is one in all beings. And therefore dear brother, I think that you ought to put aside your national traditions and likings and expose only the great universal truth of your religion.” Though Tolstoy far preferred the writings of Vivekananda, he had Bharati’s anti-colonial article “The White Peril” translated into Russian.”¹¹

One of the Baba’s followers in Los Angeles, Adelia Bee Adams informs us that his followers “had daily, almost hourly, privilege to know what manner of life he lived. The uniform sweetness of his character, his almost childlike candor in all his dealings with friends, united to a giant intellect

and profound wisdom with a very human sympathy for the frailties of mankind, together with his untiring efforts to lead them into the changeless joys of a spiritual life, compel unqualified devotion in those who know him intimately.”¹²

In the summer of 1907 Bharati prepared to return to India accompanied by six American disciples including Rose Anthon. At his farewell reception in Los Angeles Reverend Benjamin Fay Mills made the following statement, “[As] the hour of your departure draws near, we, your American students, find ourselves viewing with heavy, yet grateful hearts the rich harvest which your sojourn in our midst has left in your trail ... You have given to the Western world a spiritual consciousness whose atmosphere must envelop the very heart of life and penetrate the strata of its soul.... Nigh unto five years you have been with us, an ascetic in the midst of householders, living a life of simplicity when luxury might have been yours had commercialism been your forte. Without purse or scrip you came to us, and without money or material reward you labored here.”

Several hundred friends attended the farewell reception for Bharati, including Swami Sachchidananda II (the younger) who offered him praise. Sachchidananda a disciple of Swami Vivekananda received training from Swami Trigunatita in Northern California, and then took over the leadership of the Vedanta Society in Los Angeles, commencing on December 31, 1904. After Bharati’s departure services were held at the Krishna Home for a couple of months, under the supervision of Elizabeth King and Charles P. Neilson. It was Neilson an artist and good friend of Vivekananda, who took two photographs of Vivekananda in Alameda, California during April 1900 that are now part of the Vivekananda collection.¹³

Baba Bharati described his meeting with Swamis Trigunatita and Prakashananda in San Francisco while he was en route to Seattle on a return trip to India in July 1907, “We were sandwiched between two Swamis and they pressed us into sweet jelly. My, the warmth of the reception! We had Hindoo dinners, a dozen courses cooked in right orthodox Hindoo style by the younger Swami himself—Swami Prakashananda, the young man who speaks so little but loves so much to serve one with all his ascetic heart and soul. He snatched away from me all the laurels I had gathered in Los Angeles as a first class Hindoo chef. But the daintiness of his dishes took away all pang of their loss. And dear, old

Trigunatita was amiability itself. He wears still the heart of the rambler of the Holy Road, despite his American dress. His old-world goodwill, the merry twinkle of his eye are still twinkling in our memory.”¹⁴

Bharati Returns to India

Bharati then revisited India for a three-year stays, 1907-10. In Calcutta during April 1909, he was invited to participate as a representative of Vaishnavism in a Convention of Religions under the sponsorship of the Ramakrishna Mission. There he shared the platform with Girish Chandra Ghosh whom Bharati’s biographer describes as a “friend” of his. He formed the Indo-American Zenana Society to educate high-caste Indian women along Hindu lines rather than attempting to Westernize them. This work was undertaken by Rose Anthon who remained in India until 1914, and Christina Albers (1866-1948). The German born Miss Alber’s heard Swami Vivekananda speak on many occasions in Northern California in 1900 and later wrote a tribute to him that appeared in the *Prabuddha Bharata* of August 1938. She lived for a long time in India and was active with the Maha Bodhi Society who reprinted one of her books on India in 1949. Bharati was the chairman of a convention held in December 1910 comprising the Vaishnavas of Orissa and the Northern Telugu country. After making the decision to return to America, many noted countrymen gathered in Madras to attend his farewell.¹⁵

Baba Bharati returned to the West during the 1910-12 period. First, in July he established a new Krishna Temple at 1240 Dana Street in Southeast Los Angeles. In the temple he enshrined Krishna, Radha and Chaitanya, while performing an evening arati accompanied by the waving of lights. He taught his American disciples to participate in kirtans and to sing bhajans. The following April he left for a speaking tour of the East Coast that lasted for several months. Among other locations he lectured at the New York Sanskrit College. Bharati claimed, “About five thousand persons, without renouncing their creeds, believed in his interpretation of the Hindu faith. The underlying principle of his creed, he said, was to know God by knowing the inner Self.” He then on June 29, 1911 sailed for London with his friend Robert Todd an English railway builder, and then later proceeded

to Paris France. In Europe he received far less newspaper coverage than he had in America.¹⁶

In poor health by late November 1912, Bharati returned to Bombay. During April 1913 he engaged in a series of lectures given to the Madras public, under his sponsorship of Justice P. S. Sivaswami Iyer. Notice of Baba Bharati's passing appeared in many American newspapers. Among other things Rose Reinhardt Anthon wrote for G. A. Natesan's *Indian Review* (February 1914), "A bigger heart, a greater spirit coupled with as gigantic an intellect and as broad a humanity as lodged in the frame of Baba Bharati will not come our way again" and in the *Los Angeles Times* (March 2, 1914) she stated, "The Baba was a good friend to me, and a man of bigger heart, broader sympathies and greater soul it has never been my fortune to meet." On June 30, 1914, Miss Anthon in a letter to the American poet Edwin Markham (1852-1940) wrote of Bharati's passing, "No doubt you have heard of our dear Baba's passing on Jan 24th 1914. I had the wonderful privilege and deep sorrow of being present when he made the Great Change. He went as do the Big Ones of the world, fully conscious, every sense alert and clean and foretelling his going to the half hour. He went forth from here to there with a chant on his lips, triumphantly and joyously as one who has found and conquered much. It was a wonderful experience to have been there in that hour—quite worth having been born for." Markham, known as the "Dean of American Poets" had previously published a poem in Abhedananda's journal (and the *Prabuddha Bharata*) and had spoken at his Vedanta Society.¹⁷

The Yogi Publication Society in Chicago who originally published books written by Yogi Ramacharaka, many decades later wrote, "In the closing years of the 1800s, Baba Bharata (Bharati sometime went by this name) became acquainted with William Walker Atkinson ... The men collaborated and with Bharata providing the material and Atkinson the writing talent, they wrote the books which they attributed to Yogi Ramacharaka." The Yogi Publication Society business admitted "We can't account for archives and record-keeping dating back to the early years when the authors were living and collaborating.... Therefore we are not able to vouch for its authenticity." There is no doubt that Atkinson knew and praised Baba Bharati. The assertion, "The men collaborated and with Bharata providing the material and Atkinson the writing talent" appears to be a sizable

overstatement. It is possible that Baba Bharati inspired Atkinson, to write on Indian subjects, but to what extent we do not know. William Walker Atkinson (1862-1932) a highly successful author and attorney was one of the most influential writers associated with the “New Thought” movement. When Atkinson published under the pen name of Yogi Ramacharaka (1903-09), he helped to popularize Indian religious concepts in America, with Yoga philosophy being his primary interest along with the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. The 13 works of Yogi Ramacharaka have been widely translated throughout the world including Gujarati and Hindi, and after a century are still being reprinted. Four of them can be downloaded on the computer free of charge.¹⁸

References

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- ² *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 550-51.
- ³ *New York Herald* (Nov. 23, 1902) found in Bharati (2007), pp. xxix, 332-33.
- ⁴ Bharati (2007), pp. xxx-xxxii, 334-36; *New York Herald* (Nov. 23, 1902).
- ⁵ Bharati (2007), pp. xxxiv-xlii, 330-31, 339; *New York Times* (March 1, 1895), p. 8; (Nov. 24, 1902); Gopal Stavig, *Western Admirers of Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, ed. Swami Shuddhidananda (Advaita Ashrama, 2010), pp. 397, 432, 456-57, 679, 817; Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1987), II, pp. 161-62.
- ⁶ Bharati (2007), pp. lxxv; *Los Angeles Times* (May 13, 1906), p. VI18; *Prabuddha Bharata* (Feb-March 1911), p. 58.
- ⁷ Bharati (2007), pp. xlii-vii; Stavig (2010), pp. 333, 361.
- ⁸ *Los Angeles Herald* (July 4, 1905), p. 4; (Aug. 7, 1905), p. 2; *Los Angeles Times* (June 22, 1907), p. II6; Bharati (2007), p. xlvii; Stavig (2010), pp. 331-33.
- ⁹ Bharati (2007), pp. xlviii-xlix.
- ¹⁰ Bharati (2007), p. xlviil; Stavig (2010), pp. 738-39,
- ¹¹ Bharati (2007), pp. lxxvii-ix.
- ¹² Carney (1998), pp. 161-88.
- ¹³ Bharati (2007), p. lvi; *Light of Asia* (July 1907), pp. 355-56; Burke, (1987), VI, pp. facing 112, 133-34.

¹⁴ “Email correspondence with Professor Gerald Carney” (June 9, 2005); *Light of India* 2 (Jan. 1908), p. 22; Stavig (2010), p. 883.

¹⁵ Bharati (2007), pp. lvii-lx; Carney (1998), pp. 161-88; Stavig (2010), pp. 396-98.

¹⁶ Bharati (2007), pp. lxi-iii; *New York Tribune* (June 30, 1911); Carney (1998), pp. 161-88.

¹⁷ Bharati (2007), pp. lxiii-iv.

¹⁸ Web: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Walker_Atkinson;
users.telenet.be/ananda/ramach.htm; williamwalkeratkinson.wwwhubs.com