

## *Pandits and Professors: The Renaissance of Secular India\**

IT IS IN philosophy, if anywhere, that the task of discovering the soul of India is imperative for the modern India; the task of achieving, if possible, the continuity of his old self with his present day self, of realizing what is nowadays called the Mission of India, if it has any. Genius can unveil the soul of India in art but it is through philosophy that we can methodically attempt to discover it.<sup>1</sup>

### *1. Introduction*

Philosophy in the West is a highly academic discipline, not often associated with great political and social movements. Philosophy in India has often been associated primarily with religious traditions. Philosophy as pursued in India under the British Raj, particularly that written in English, has had a peculiar reception, typically regarded as either a pale imitation of Western philosophy or as watered-down classical Indian philosophy. It is well worth taking a second look at this body of work and its contribution to Indian culture and to world civilization. In particular, we will argue that Indian philosophy of this period contributes to India what we call "the gift of the secular." We examine specifically a set of strategies that Indian scholars adopted in a range of disciplines—including the social sciences, visual arts, poetics, philosophy, politics, and religion—that led India to a rich and enduring form of secular modernity.

We begin by considering the context within which philosophy was pursued in this period, a context constituted by The British Raj. While Indian philosophy enjoyed a long history prior to the arrival of the British, at least as long as that of Western philosophy, until the late 19th century it was predominantly scholastic. Despite the fact that its *content* was often independent of specifically religious views, its *practice* was closely associated with religious schools.

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1. Bhattacharyya, "Svaraj in Ideas," present volume 106.

The British higher education system and the European discipline of Oriental studies brought the practice of philosophy into the secular domain. Universities brought with them departments of philosophy—for the most part focused on Western philosophy, but with some attention to Indian philosophy as well. These departments were staffed by eminent Indian scholars whose work demonstrates their solid training both in Western and in classical Indian philosophy. At the same time, Western Orientalists introduced a systematic and philological secularized study of classical Indian philosophy, producing critical editions and scholarly studies of Sanskrit classics outside of the confines of the *maths*.

The encounter between Indian and Western philosophy as well as that between traditional Indian academic forms and the British university system generated a new self-consciousness in the Indian philosophical world. What had been regarded as a primarily *religious* activity was secularized; what had been regarded as essentially an *Indian* activity came to be seen as but one of several world traditions, at the same time, Indian identity came to be seen as consisting in part in an intellectual and ideological core, distinct from, but coequal with, that of Western culture. This dialectic between the development of a distinct Indian identity and the demand for an equal role for India and Indians on a global stage emerged as a central theme in the development of Indian self-consciousness.

The development of this self-consciousness was the central ideological project in the Indian struggle against British colonialism. This struggle began the moment the East India Company gained its foothold, and developed focus after the rebellion of 1857. This in turn required the creation of a definition of a national identity that could lay claim to such loyalty, requiring the diverse people of the subcontinent, never comprised by a unified nation since the fall of the Ashokan empire, to come to see themselves in *national*, as opposed to regional, religious, or caste terms. Theorizing and prosecuting this struggle preoccupied Indian civil society until independence in 1947.

The development of a narrative of origins, and of the Indian cultural essence, was a promising strategy and was deployed with great success by cultural icons and political leaders alike. But this was a not a single strategy as much as a meta-strategy, implemented in different ways with different agendas by various influential figures in the colonial Indian intelligentsia. We see three important, and importantly different, implementations in the hands of A. K. Coomaraswamy, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Jawaharlal Nehru. Coomaraswamy (1909) writes:

The whole of Indian culture is so pervaded with this idea of India as the LAND, that it has never been necessary to insist upon it overmuch, for no-one could have supposed it otherwise....

And just in such wise, are all of the different parts of India bound together by a common historical tradition and ties of spiritual kinship; none can be spared, nor can any live independent of the others. (pp. 70-71 of present volume)

In this essay, Coomaraswamy develops a narrative of Indian unity grounded in geographical and cultural identity, an identity that links contemporary (that is, colonial) India to Vedic India in an unbroken continuum. Aurobindo Ghosh develops a narrative of Indian unity and identity in a slightly different register. In "Is India Civilized" (1918/1968), while Aurobindo agrees with Coomaraswamy that the foundation of India's identity is to be found in its spiritual link to its Vedic past, he emphasizes neither geographical continuity nor a history of the interdependence of distinct Indian cultures, but rather a persistent spiritual orientation that expresses itself in each embodiment of actual Indian culture:

India, though its urge is towards the Eternal, since that is always the highest, the eternally real, still contains in her own culture and her own philosophy, a supreme reconciliation of the eternal and the temporal... and she need not seek it from outside. (p. 6)

These spiritual approaches to a narrative of Indian identity contrast dramatically with the narrative developed by Nehru, despite the fact that Nehru shares with Coomaraswamy and Aurobindo a drive to seek that identity in Vedic roots. In *The Discovery of India* (1946), Nehru develops a historical narrative according to which India enjoys a continuous *national, political* identity from the Indus Valley civilization to the present day. The narrative is breathtaking as much for its creativity as for its rhetorical success. For present purposes, it is important to note that Nehru, drawing on the three decades of cultural development that lie between the work of the early nationalists and his own pre-independence meditations, takes up the theme of historical national identity not in religious terms, but in explicitly secular terms. Inasmuch as the canonical origin in all of these nationalist narratives was identified as Vedic culture, and inasmuch as that culture is articulated through a set of philosophical traditions, philosophy had a central role to play in this project. But inasmuch as this project also required a secular identity in order to unite diverse religious communities, philosophy needed secularization.

The creative juxtaposition, and often fusion, of Indian and Western philosophy thus served several purposes at once. First, it enabled the legitimization of Indian philosophy as part of a global enterprise. Second, it provided a model for a secular Indian philosophy independent of the *maths*. Finally, it

made possible an ideological dimension to the articulation of Indian national identity. This ideology promised to unify disparate communities behind ideas both distinctively Indian and competitive in a global intellectual economy.

It is therefore not surprising that this period is enormously philosophically fecund, in virtue of the cross-fertilization of classical Indian philosophy, Indian religious revival, revolutionary politics and the infusion into India of Western ideas and models of academic life. It is only surprising that the work of this period is not better known.

## 2. *Methodological Pluralism and Pluralistic Secularism*

It is instructive in this context to consider James Mill's approach to the study of civilizations in his infamous *The History of British India* (1858). Mill claimed to adopt an *objective* approach to the location of civilizations on the cultural spectrum. As a follower of Jeremy Bentham, he took himself to be a man of science, approaching this question from the privileged perspective of the scientific method. He was the dispassionate observer, intellectually and emotionally independent and distant from any particular culture and civilization (including his own!). From this perspective, the issue of whether, to what extent, or in what respects civilizations were equal or unequal was to be settled objectively by the investigation rather than presupposed at the outset. The goal of the investigation, after all, was the ranking.

While the construction of a league table of cultures might appear to be the epitome of comparison, it is not. Instead, is an exercise in *evaluation*. The questions asked are not about similarities or differences of arguments or positions, with the goal of learning what one culture or tradition might contribute to another, or of what range of differences in perspective are possible on a question. Instead, they are questions about relative sophistication, relative distance from the primitive.

The fatal flaw in this application of the 'objective' method, of course, as was recognized even at the time, consists at least in the fact that it relied on the investigators' own intuitions in selecting and then interpreting the data at hand, simultaneously presupposing the *objectivity* of the external observer and his occupation of the highest rung on the ladder of civilization. The consequence of the deployment of such an apparently objective 'comparative' method by Mill was a reiteration and reinscription of British hegemony. Thus, his 'comparative' method amounted to justifying the expansion of a particular view of culture and civilization. It is ironic that James Mill's *History* was taken up, even by Indians, as the definitive account of British India for many generations to come (Mill, 1817/1858).

B. N. Seal's approach was very different. He introduced comparison as a device in the practice of philosophy. From the perspective of the 21st century, comparison seems a bit quaint and dated as a philosophical method, enshrining archaic Archimedean fulcra and visions of discrete cultures. In the context of the colonial presence in India, however, the strategy of comparison had staggering intellectual and political potential and indeed came to play a formidable role in Indian philosophical thought. Indeed, it was radical, in that it presupposed equality at the outset, and it had the consequence of generating an interest in and respect for cultural pluralism and diversity. "Comparison," Seal argued, "*implies* that the objects compared are of co-ordinate rank" (McEvilley, 2002, p. ix, italics added). His point could hardly be missed. Regardless of the fruits of comparison, the very act of comparison in India *presumed* the equality of Indian and Western philosophy, of Indian and Western culture, in effect anticipating what would become the distinctive approach in anthropology as articulated by Boaz in 1893.

This approach, which involved comparison, was the first step toward a cultural pluralism, and toward what we now recognize as a cosmopolitan attitude to cultures. It is significant that this initial move to comparison was a move away from a prereflective assumption of the truth of one's own beliefs, the rationality of one's own rituals and practices, and led to a valuation both of diversity of practice and ideology and of cultural commonalities. For comparison required a focus on the descriptive details of actual beliefs and practices, which in turn led away from transcendent concerns and toward the daily, the practical. This shift in focus thus led to a greater interest in the similarities between the different societies (among particular Indian communities as well as between India and the West) and in turn contributed to the creation of a shared secular space in which the interests of very different religious, social, and cultural groups coincided and in which they could engage in dialogue.

In India the context for this turn away from orthodoxy to secularity was provided in part by the great social reform movements that swept India at this time, originating in Bengal and in the Punjab, the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. Each focused not only on religious questions—doctrinal, hermeneutic, and ritual—but also on the social fabric of daily life in India. Each rejected practices that they deemed unjust, irrational, and unbecoming to an emerging modern India, such as caste restrictions, child marriage, sati, and so on. Each was simultaneously, almost paradoxically, both modernist and deeply traditionalist. On the one hand, they each drew inspiration from liberal democratic ideas and Protestant religious institutions, and on the other hand, each was concerned to develop and reinforce the narrative of Indian culture as constituted by roots in a shared Vedic past, looking to the ancient sacred texts as a purer and richer source of Indian ideas than the subsequent religious and

philosophical scholastic texts, which grounded the conservative social institutions these samaj movements were concerned to criticize.

Ram Mohan Roy, founder of the Brahma Samaj, is simultaneously the founder of the comparative method in the social sciences. In his writings and in his social activism, Roy strove to develop a productive interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism as well as a new, rationalist approach to Indian religion. His method was always to develop a neutral space in which theological and philosophical debate could occur (in English—despite his fluency in Bengali, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic) absent commitment to any particular religious tradition. In an era of missionary activity and state-authorized communal division, Roy pioneered the idea of the secular on the subcontinent. Roy conducted himself not as a Christian, but as a modern thinker, an equal party in debates with the missionaries. He presented Indian ideas so that they might be considered in their own right in a public dialectical space, not simply so that they might be assessed and evaluated by Christians. Roy emphasizes the unity of humanity as well as the distinctive contribution of Indian civilization to modernity, just as does Seal in his advocacy of the comparative method (Collet, 1900/1962; Kotnala, 1975).

The Arya Samaj movement was a cradle for social reformers. Its emphasis on concrete action and service inspired political theorists such as Lajpat Rai, arguably the founder of the Young India movement. This movement was internationalist in character, with important connections to the Young Ireland movement, and ideological foundations both in liberal democratic theory and socialism. Arya Samaj also delivered to India Mulk Raj Anand. Anand is today best known for his fiction—the politically charged novels such as *Untouchable* and *Coolie*—but his oeuvre is much broader, including systematic work in aesthetics (the field of his academic chair) and art criticism (he founded and edited India's leading journal of modern art, *Marg*). Anand's philosophical contributions and contributions to the Indian art world are every bit as important to the development of Indian thought in the preindependence period as are his literary contributions, as again, they develop in a secular space political ideas that have their origins in the Modernism of Dayananda Saraswati's religious reform movement. Through this social and intellectual engagement, what began one Shiva Ratri as a religious reform movement became a pillar of Indian secular society.

In the rise of comparative philosophy in the academy and in the activity of the samaj movements on a broader social and religious scale, we see the same apparently paradoxical objectives, brought together in the service of constructing a modern Indian identity. Continuity with classical Indian ideas is valorized, but modern liberalism and internationalism are also celebrated. Internationalism and liberalism at once provide a context in which

Indian ideas can be seen as coequal with those of the West and a direction in which Indian ideas can receive a trajectory demonstrating their continued vitality. This curious combination of classicism and Modernism introduced by the samaj movements permeated Indian intellectual life, inflecting politics, philosophy, and the visual and literary arts. An examination of its impact in literature is instructive as a background to our consideration of the role of philosophy in this cultural process.

### 3. Tagore's Poetics

Among the most prominent intellectuals to arise from the Brahma Samaj movement was the first President of the Indian Philosophical Congress, Rabindranath Tagore, who also enjoyed a career on the side as a poet, philosopher, and educator. Tagore's own explicit aesthetic theory represents a fairly straightforward endorsement of the broad outlines of Abhināvagupta's theory of *rasa* and *bhāva*. His greatest philosophical influence, however, derives not from his academic work, but from his poetry and fiction (Das, 1996). Examining this corpus shows how Tagore, reflecting the ideology of the Brahma Samaj, contributed to a sense of Indian intellectual and artistic life as at once continuous with a classical tradition and engaged with the modern world.

Tagore's synthesis of the classical *kāvya* structure and rhythm with Whitman's transcendentalism and cadences allowed him to present to the world Indian literary art that could claim to be as Indian as that of Tulsidas, as modernist and as forward looking as that of Whitman, and as much a part of the global mainstream as that of Yeats. In Tagore's enormously popular poetic and musical stage dramas, we find a revival of the *mahākāvya* form, albeit often with contemporary thematic material, demonstrating the vitality of this classical Indian dramatic form during the renaissance period. His revival of this classical form in vernacular Bengali placed classical Indian cultural tropes at the centre of his contemporary culture.

Tagore's place in Indian intellectual history underscores the centrality of language to that history. Tagore's native language, and the language in which much, though not all, of his poetry was originally presented, was, of course, Bengali. This was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it elevated vernacular Indian writing and so assisted in breaking the hold of Sanskrit over high art, helping to usher another dimension of modernity into Indian art. On the other hand, Bengali was a *regional* language, and this meant that for Tagore's work to have *national*, as well as *international* impact, it had to be rendered into what was, ironically, the only *national Indian* language, English. By producing translations of his own work into English, and by writing some

originally in English, Tagore transformed that language from a convenient subcontinent *lingua franca* into an instrument of Indian self-expression.

Tagore hence achieved a very public fusion of the Indian classical tradition, the romantic tradition at the center of highbrow English culture, and the democratic, progressive, and prophetic tradition of the new world. This fusion was apparent not only to a Bengali audience, but to a pan-Indian audience, Indian and British alike. Moreover, especially after the Nobel Prize and the subsequent global popularity of *Gitanjali*, it was apparent to a global audience as well. It demonstrated that Indian culture, continuous with its classical tradition, was not degenerate, but flourishing; that its flourishing did not consist in a mere recovery and representation of ancient texts, themes, or forms, but in its progressive development in dialogue with other contemporary global cultural forms; and that India was not isolated from modernity, but part of it, contributing its own voice to world conversations. The English language is thus no mere instrument of expression, or even of colonial domination, but, in the hands of writers from Roy to the present day, becomes the vehicle that enables a literate Indian engagement with modernity. English, paradoxically, enabled a progressive nationalism, and a nationalist progressivism embodied in literary production.

#### 4. *The Visual Arts, Artists, and Art Criticism*

Revivalism and Modernism, the two major and opposing approaches to art in India, were each motivated by the colonial context. E. B. Havell is the best known of the Revivalists, functioning first as Principal of the Art School in Madras in 1884 and later on as Principal of the Calcutta School in 1896. Havell had very specific ideas about Indian art and art education that captured the core of the Revivalist approach: first, that Indian art was so thoroughly interwoven with Indian philosophy and religion that one could only understand and make Indian art if one were already immersed in these disciplines; second, that traditional Indian art was based fundamentally on idealized images rather than on visual images (Havell, 1964).

Havell's nemesis was the Bombay art school, which, he argued, in adopting the technique of academic realism, revealed a lack of appreciation for the rich and unique heritage of Indian art as it rushed to imitate Western formal painterly techniques. Ravi Varma, one of the Bombay School's most famous alumni, was indicted by the Revivalist art critics like Coomaraswamy and Nivedita on just these points (Coomaraswamy, 1994).

Abanindranath Tagore was the most influential of the Tagores on the Indian visual art scene and a poster child for the Revivalists. This was a form

of Revivalism that was quite self-consciously inflected by Indian nationalism. But while Tagore was a Revivalist both in his writings about his artwork and as a member of the Calcutta school sympathetic to Havell's ideas, many of his paintings reveal a borrowing and blending of techniques and a sensibility that is often rather different from his stated views. In A. Tagore's work, we see what would in effect become the self-conscious aesthetic attitude of the modernists who succeeded him like Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher-Gil, and, curiously, his uncle R. Tagore, who took to painting in a serious way in his later years: a more cosmopolitan view of what constituted authentic Indianness in the realm of the arts. Once again, then, we see this curious use of reference to the classical Indian heritage as a vehicle for Modernism.

While Indian Revivalism initially had an important role to play in colonial India, it had a short life span. Not only art historians, but also other intellectuals, took serious issue with Havell's claim of a radical difference between the East and the West in the field of art and aesthetics. This move away from the notion of radical difference in the arts was simultaneously a move toward a more integrated way of viewing the Indian nation and its relation to the rest of the world. B. K. Sarkar, for instance, argued that—far from being radically different in virtue of being essentially tied to philosophy, religion, and culture—art was in fact subject to its own universal laws of form and color,<sup>3</sup> and the mechanisms of color construction, color harmony, spacing, and grouping are among the universal laws of *rasa-vidya* or aesthetics that one finds both in East and West (1932, p. 167 this volume).

Sarkar therefore encouraged artists to experiment with techniques across the global cultural spectrum and rejected the criticism that this amounted to denationalization, arguing to the contrary that this was the way for India *as a nation* to take its rightful place and be a legitimate player in the modern global cultural arena. While some of his views were and remain controversial, Sarkar's criticism of Revivalism in the art world was shown to be right on target. He showed that Modernism ushered in a very different attitude toward Western techniques and subjects. He saw that these techniques were not a threat to Indian art but sources of its enrichment. We explore these themes in greater detail in "An Indian in Paris," later in the present volume.

So far we have been emphasizing diverse strands of the progressive secularization of classical Indian culture in the context of Indian engagement with modernity during the colonial period. We have seen these processes at work in Roy's and Seal's conception of comparison. The comparative project they initiate anticipates the contributions to secularization we have observed in the visual and literary arts and even in the development of social movements whose sources are explicitly religious. We now turn to the role of academic philosophy in this complex social and intellectual process. We will see that