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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.[1]

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 an 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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[*] We thank Margaret Dodge, Francesca King, Kendra Ralston, and Shama Rahman for comments on an earlier draft of this essay and for research assistance on this project.

[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 Jawarharlal 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 Brahmo 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 Brahmo 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 Brahmo 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 *Gitānjali*, 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, 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 professional Indian philosophers, although certainly devoted religious practitioners in their private lives, brought the philosophical ideas that emerge from ancient Indian religious traditions into a secular space in the university.

5. *Public versus Private in Practice*

We noted above both the historical association of philosophy with religious practice in India and the importance of the secularization of philosophy in its role in the broader project of nation building. How did this work out in practice? We know from a variety of sources, including public biographical data (Kulkarni, 1986, 1997; Pandey, 1994) and interviews we have conducted with some of their children and students (G. N. Mukerji, interview with the authors, 2007; P. K. Sen, interview with the authors, 2007), that many of the prominent academic philosophers of this period were devout religious practitioners. R. D. Ranade, for instance, in retirement established and led an ashram. He has religious followers to this day. Gopinath Bhattacharyya is well known for his piety and Hindu orthodoxy. A. C. Mukerji was a stalwart supporter of temples and had a reputation as a singer of *bhajans* at religious festivals.

This private piety, however, is strikingly invisible in the published work and in the academic leadership of Ranade, Mukerji, and Bhattacharyya, and in our interviews, their students report that their religious commitments were never expressed in the classroom. Ranade was a great scholar of classical Greek philosophy and Western philosophy of science, as well as an expert on Buddhist and Vedānta philosophy. His approach to the latter is every bit as philosophical, judicious, and critical as is his approach to the pre-Socratics or early modern Western philosophy. Nothing betrays a life that would lead him later to be referred to as the sainted Gurudev (Kulkarni, 1986, 1997).

A. C. Mukerji built his career in the philosophy of mind and psychology and led the University of Allahabad's department in a mission devoted primarily to the study of the history of Western philosophy. While much of his own philosophical problematic derives from Vedānta, that problematic is pursued in dialogue with Western voices and in the pursuit of purely epistemological and metaphysical questions. His interlocutors are philosophers, including both classical sources such as Śankara and Śriharṣa (Mukerji, 1928), and Indian contemporaries and Western philosophers such as Kant, Caird, and other idealists (Mukerji, 1925, 1931), rather than religious figures in the orthodox tradition. Gopinath Bhattacharyya was renowned for his personal religious orthodoxy but wrote exclusively on Western themes in epistemology and the philosophy of language and founded the Jadavpur philosophy department in Calcutta, for which he designed a predominantly Western curriculum. As Indian philosophy was and is studied in Jadavpur, it is again studied philosophically, not religiously (P. K. Sen, interview with the authors, 2007).

This pattern is common among the major philosophers of this period. Most were personally pious, but academically secular. This double existence can be seen in retrospect to have been valuable at two levels. First, at the ground level, this explicit dissociation of professional Indian philosophy from religious practice was necessary both in order for Indian philosophy to be taken seriously internationally, and in order for Indian philosophy to constitute a unifying force on the subcontinent. If these texts and ideas were to be of more than parochial interest, it was necessary to separate them explicitly from the personal religious commitments and practices of those who were teaching and writing about them.

Their students noticed this. We know this both from memoirs (Kulkarni, 1986, 1997) and from our interviews. Could it be that this double existence itself had demonstrative value? Were these scholars modeling a way of taking up with modernity while maintaining continuity with the Indian traditions in which they were raised? It is hard to know the degree to which this was intentional, but it is hard not to speculate that it was. These philosophers were in the process of creating a liberal civil society, ironically modeled in large part on the libertarian ideas inherited from the British who were so derelict in their conformity to the ideas they bequeathed to India. Their own practice demonstrated the importance of the distinction between the private and public spheres so fundamental to liberal civil society. Given the degree to which so much of the independence movement was dominated by individuals or movements explicitly religious in nature, it was essential to the development of India as a liberal democracy that the academy provide a counterpoint demonstration of the observation of this distinction.

6. *The Jāli between the Math and the Academy*

This distinction, however, was not so much a brick wall as a loosely woven screen, establishing a boundary, but admitting fresh air, and even a bit of unanticipated dust. Much that passed through from the religious side is constitutive of the distinctly Indian character of philosophical work of this period. Our research has revealed that many of the major academic philosophers of the preindependence period, despite their carefully cultivated public secularism, made regular trips to consult with Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, the great exponent of Advaita Vedānta in the early decades of the 20th century, at his ashram in Pondicherry. We don't know what they discussed, and it is possible that the pilgrimages were purely personal, private religious affairs. But there is reason to think that they were more than that.[2]

As we argue in "Bringing Brahman Down to Earth," in the present volume, one of the distinctive features of much of the most creative Indian philosophy in the preindependence period is the revival of Advaita Vedānta and the development of a conversation between Advaita and various strands of Western idealism, including Kantian transcendental idealism and Bradley's absolute idealism. Aurobindo was largely responsible for popularizing the *līlāvāda,* as opposed to *māyāvāda,* most clearly in *The Life Divine.* It is significant that when we examine the way Advaita Vedānta was advanced by such philosophers as Malkani, Nikam, Hiriyanna, Mukerji, and Indrasen, we see that all adopt an approach that fits much more comfortably with the *līlāvāda* rather than with the *māyāvāda* perspective. And most, if not all, traveled to Pondicherry. While we cannot demonstrate that it was Aurobindo's influence that led them to this perspective, the circumstantial evidence is compelling and gains greater strength from the fact that the Indian Philosophical Congress found it important to host an all-India symposium addressing the question, "Has Aurobindo Refuted *Māyāvāda?*" We return to this in detail in our later essay.

This infusion of philosophy with ideas derived from religious leaders and schools is, of course, nothing new. Philosophy in India has, as we noted above, long been prosecuted as a religious activity. Religious institutions and leaders have always contributed to Indian philosophical dialogues, and religious leaders such as Sri Aurobindo and his contemporary Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission contributed a vision of how to develop Advaita in the modern era, and so, by continuing a long tradition of religious involvement in Indian philosophy, helped to keep Indian philosophy, albeit secular, decidedly Indian.

This transition from attention to philosophical texts and ideas in an explicitly religious context to a more abstract and secular presentation of those ideas is characteristic of the development of Indian philosophy in this period and marks the particular way in which the interplay of classical reference and Modernism in the development of Indian cultural identity works itself out in philosophy.

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[2] We know, for instance, from an interview with Professor Indra Sen's daughter, Professor Aster Patel, that Aurobindo specifically charged Indersen with the task of mediating between the religious and academic Vedānta communities; it is also significant that all of the participants in the academic symposium held at the philosophical research center at Amalner under the auspices of the Indian Philosophical Congress were visitors to Pondicherry.

7. *The Politics of Young India and the Construction of a Secular Indian Nation*

So far, we have examined the process of secularization as a means for the creation of a public discourse in the arts and in philosophy. But the whole point of a public discourse in the context of a struggle for national identity is the creation of a shared political space. The artistic and philosophical movements of this period are framed by a coordinate shift from the religious to the secular in the political context. Young India, under the leadership of Lajpat Rai, originated as an activist counterpoint to the then more conservative Indian National Congress. Its history, connections with other nationalist movements, such as Young Ireland and eventual rapprochement with the Congress, need not detain us now. We are, however, interested in how Lajpat Rai, in his stillborn masterpiece *Young India,* rhetorically recruits what might appear to be religious movements for secular nationalist purposes. In a chapter entitled "Types of Nationalists," after scouting what he calls "extremist"(1917, p. 141) positions that advocate armed insurrection, Rai shifts his attention to two, what might be prima facie, surprising types of nationalists: the "mother worshippers" and "Vedāntists," (pp. 144–150).

What is significant about taking "mother worship" to be a specifically nationalist phenomenon in the context of the freedom movement? Rai quotes B. C. Pal, another Young India activist: "The so-called idolatry of Hinduism is also passing through a mighty transfiguration. The process started really with Bankim Chandra, who interpreted the most popular of the Hindu goddesses as symbolic of the different stages of national evolution" (p. 144). After a tour of the iconography of Durga, in which Rai, following Pal, maps the different manifestations of Durga onto distinct moments in Indian nationalism, Rai concludes, "This wonderful transfiguration of the old gods and goddesses is carrying the message of new nationalism to the women and the masses of the country" (146). In this transfiguration we see both the choice of popular *religious* imagery as a rhetorical starting point, and the conscious *secularization* of that imagery in the service of the development of national consciousness.

Rai's discussion of Vedānta follows this model, seeing a transformation of a religious movement into a secular nationalist movement. He begins by asserting the affinities of Vedānta to Hegelianism (pp. 146–147), emphasizing its implications for social life. He concludes "[Vedānta] demands, consequently, a social, an economic, and a political reconstruction...The spiritual note of the present Nationalist Movement in India is entirely derived form this Vedāntic thought" (p. 148). In the discussion that follows, Rai explicitly takes on Swami Vivekananda as a political ally, arguing that he inspired "a slow and silent process of the liberalization of the old social ideas. The old bigotry that anathematized the least deviation from the rules of caste, or the authority of custom, is giving way to a new tolerance. The imperious necessities of national struggle and national life are slowly breaking down, except in ceremonial affairs, the old restrictions of caste" (p. 148).

Once again, Rai's approach, following the lead of Ramakrishna and his followers, is to begin his discourse in the temple, but to end in a public, secular, common ground. Whereas in the case of "mother-worshippers" the transfiguration is iconographic, in the case of the Vedāntists, it is straightforwardly ideological. But in each case, the trajectory is obvious and deliberate. In these discussions, as well as in the subsequent consideration of the politics of the more radical Har Dayal (pp. 151–157), Rai emphasizes constantly the ways in which religious ideas are secularized in the service of nationalism. Indeed, R. D. Ranade, in a bitter screed against Har Dayal, agrees with Rai (who is more favorably disposed) that Har Dayal aims to develop a social theory grounded in Vedānta but at the same time aims to jettison the bhakti tradition he takes as its ground. The kind of secularization Rai applauds Ranade deplores (1956, pp. 166–184). Young India was first and foremost a political movement and an assertion of national identity; although religion played a (complex and problematic) role in the development of this movement, it never adopted religious revival as a route to independence. Instead, it adapted religious ideas to generate secular cultural, literary, and political ideas in order to construct a distinctly pluralistic secular space in the context of British colonial rule.

Despite the plurality of voices involved in the early nationalist movement, a single figure rises to prominence in most discussions of Indian national independence: M. K. Gandhi. Now, it might seem that Gandhi is the obvious icon, not for the *secularization* of Indian philosophy and politics, but for *religious revivalism*. Indeed, he is often read this way, given his regular scriptural references and his justified reputation for orthodox devotion. His central conceptual categories were *swaraj* and *satyāgraha*—*self-rule* and *insistence on* (or *grasping*) *truth*. Each term has distinctly Hindu resonance, harking especially to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Despite this religious resonance, however, Gandhi's conception of *swaraj* and the method of *satyāgraha* are more plausibly viewed as constituting a distinctly *Indian,* rather than a specifically *religious,* approach to the problem of truth. Gandhi grounds his political philosophy and his conception of the *political* struggle for *swaraj* in his reading of the account of *individual mokṣa* in the *Gītā*. This account draws both on the importance of *karma-yoga* and on the account of the relationship of the individual to a complex cosmos.

The genius of Gandhi was to take these ideas from a text that was deeply *religious,* and to secularize these as *Indian* ideas in an *Indian* political context. The *Gītā's* vision of the unity of the personal self with the cosmos is transformed in Gandhi's hands into a claim that an individual's identity is bound up with that of others, and that *responsibility* is hence universal in scope. The theophany of the *Gītā,* in which the universe is revealed as infinitely complex, becomes Gandhi's insight that, while we all aspire to the truth, none of us can claim to seize much of it, and hence that we never have enough to justify violence, or to allow us to ignore the views of others.

While Gandhi insists on the unity of truth, he also insists on the irreducible multiplicity of perspectives on it. *Karma-yoga* is tied in the *Gītā* via *svādharma* to *varna*. Gandhi releases it from this religious mooring and constructs a *universal svādharma,* a fundamental duty to selfless action that derives from our joint political and social situation. Gandhi hence starts from specifically *Hindu roots* but cultivates a distinctly *Indian* form of nationalism available to *all* Indians, regardless of religious persuasion (Gandhi, 1905/2008).

The Bengali polymath Benoy Kumar Sarkar might at first seem like a counterexample to this account of the centrality of nationalism to the development of Indian secularism. After all, in *The Futurism of Young Asia,* he defends a striking *internationalism,* treating with disdain those who would advance the "hypothesis as to the 'Indianness' of Indian inspiration, that is, the distinctiveness of Hindu (or Indian?) genius," (1922, p. 168 this volume) and urging that this would be as bizarre as an Indian physics or chemistry! His consideration of Indian art in the context of his critique of Indian nationalism is intended to articulate a distinctive vision of a secular Indian *cosmopolitanism*. This vision is apparently grounded not in the evolution of distinctively Indian ideas, but rather on a broad internationalism and a concern to see India as a member of a modern Asian community of nations. Where Gandhi saw *Young India,* Sarkar saw *Young Asia*.

Nonetheless, Sarkar's Asia embraces India, and India as a *nation*. Sarkar develops a sustained argument for a conception of a pluralistic India that rises above "subjectivism, pessimism and religiosity" (1922, p. 297). "There is no one India," he writes, "there are Indias" (1922, p. 298). He documents the heterogeneity of Indian historical, cultural, and religious experience; the distinct approaches to modernity in the different disciplines from chemistry, to literature, to politics; and articulates a vision of an India that is united in virtue of, rather than despite, its heterogeneity, in its hopes for its future as a nation. His pluralism, in the end, is not a *counterpoint* to nationalism, but rather a version of a secular nationalism.

Sarkar and Gandhi, despite their difference regarding an underlying Indian *cultural homogeneity,* hence share a vision of a secular nation constructed on the ground of a public space in which none can claim a privileged position. While Sarkar's enthusiasm for Modernism contrasts starkly with Gandhi's suspicion of modernity, they join in a repudiation of Indian parochialism and a commitment to an ultimately secular interpretation of the political ideas they advance.

8. *Conclusion*

We have argued that India's own intellectuals during the British Raj bequeathed to India the gift of the secular, a secularity that turns out to be an arresting form of modernity. Far from eschewing any link to religion, this form of secular Modernism invites a specific rendering of the relationship of religion to public life and provides an avenue for a religious practice that is as diverse as one might wish for (in one's private life) as it simultaneously facilitates a public discourse that embodies an Indianness grounded in India's diverse religious traditions, but that transcends that very diversity and that religiosity. It is hence a form of secular modernity that is insistent on retaining its ties both to religion and to tradition. The growth of Indian intellectual life consists in a persistent effort to develop what might appear to be parochial insights in the service of the creation of a secular public space.

The cradle of the Indian renaissance is often located in the revival of Vedānta, in the rise of the samaj movements, in the teachings of the great saints of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the art of the Bengal school. This is all right as far as it goes. But Indian intellectual life, as we have seen, quickly outgrows that cradle.

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