

## ASPECTS OF INDIAN MODERNITY: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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75

I

There are two Indias. One is called Bharat, after a legendary King. This represents a traditional culture strongly rooted in religion. The other is India, the creation of a modern set of circumstances. It has to do with British rule and the modernities set in motion by that phenomenon. India as a nation is very much a creation of the encounter between an ancient people and a western discourse. The British unified the geographical space we call India in a manner never done before. Only Asoka the Great and Akbar the Great had brought large parts of the Indian sub-continent under their control, but their empires were not as potent or as organized as the British Empire. The British gave India communications, railways, the telegraph and telephones; they organized their knowledge of India systematically by surveying the landscape, categorizing the flora and fauna and by dividing the population into castes and religious groupings. Edward Said has shown in his well-known general studies of the colonial enterprise how this accumulation of knowledge is a way of establishing power. In India the British engaged themselves in this knowledge accumulation to give themselves an Empire and a free market and a site to work their experiments in social engineering.

This command of the land also translated into command of the languages of the people. British scholars like G.U. Pope and C.P. Brown, to name only two,

attempted to make sense of the grammars of the Indian languages which they assumed were in a barbaric state.<sup>1</sup> These languages, they believed, needed the catalyst of English systematic thinking and grammar to become intelligible. They modernized Indian languages by applying the principles of grammar peculiar to English or the classical tongues of the West. English grammarians brought a degree of arbitrariness into their linguistic classifications of the Indian languages. This was their way of establishing their command of language, which in turn became a language of command, as Bernard Cohn has so eloquently argued.<sup>2</sup> By modernizing the Indian languages the British enabled their officials to master the local tongues and, what is more, to master the local people who spoke those tongues.

But real modernity came via the English language. The introduction of English education into India was a decisive intervention in Indian affairs. It was responsible for the modern spirit becoming widely diffused among the elite. The Bhadrak, upper caste, upper class gentlemen of leisure of Kolkata, were the initial collaborators with the British in this respect. Raja Ram Mohan Roy,<sup>3</sup> for example, strenuously pleaded for funds to be made available for English education and his plea was backed up by a number of Bengali gentlemen. The establishment of Hindu College (now the Presidency College) in 1817 was an important event and eventually signaled the triumph of the Anglicists over the Orientalists and the Vernacularists. The Anglicists like Lord Macaulay wanted the medium of instruction in India to be English, the Orientalists had a sentimental attachment to the classical languages —Sanskrit and Persian— and wanted to see them promoted, while the Vernacularists argued that the local languages, the Bhashas,<sup>4</sup> should be taught to the people. Macaulay carried the day with his famous Minute on Indian education and was instrumental in the passing of the Indian Education Act in 1835.<sup>5</sup> Parliament made funds available for the spread of English education in the belief that neither the classical languages —Sanskrit and Persian— promoted by the Orientalists nor the indigenous or native languages, promoted by the Vernacularists, were fit instruments for modernity. Macaulay's argument, in brief, was that the introduction of English, which he believed was superior to the Indian languages, would have the effect of bringing India more firmly under the British influence because that education would produce a class of native gentlemen who would be dark skinned but very English in temperament and sensibility. The impact of the Macaulayan experiment is felt even today because English education has indeed produced a class of Indians who are very western in temperament and who often do not show enough sensitivity to the 'brute reality' (Edward Said's phrase) of India.

At the time Macaulay wrote his Minute, the English-educated Indians were collaborators with the British, a comprador class, loyal to British rule, English in

sensibility and modern in outlook. Hindu College paved the way for the establishment of many institutions of higher learning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the missionaries, David Hare and John Duff must be mentioned for the institutions they set up and nurtured in those early days of Indian modernity.<sup>6</sup> Duff, it is apocryphally said, made an attempt to sail to India and his ship floundered. He lost all his books but what survived was the Bible. He was convinced that God had chosen him for the task of educating the natives of India and converting them to Christianity. The evangelizing zeal of the missionaries was an important aspect of the modernizing process because the schools the missionaries set up had a place for English and, clearly distinguished from the conversion agenda, the missionaries also imparted instruction in science, mathematics, history and so on.<sup>7</sup> Thus, to cut this part of my exploration short, there is a modern India which is in many profound ways cut off from Bharat, the traditional India, and this differential can be traced to the existence of an English-educated elite which dominates education, the law, the bureaucracy and upper-class social life. This is being challenged particularly in the northern parts of the country, in what is called the Cow Belt, by politicians who, with a combination of muscle power and popular acclaim, make a mockery of the values of parliamentary democracy, which after all was a British legacy to India.<sup>8</sup> For this class of politicians the English-educated class does not matter and must be humiliated. But, be that as it may, the final result is that this English educated class has the edge and India to a large extent depends on its expertise and knowledge. The impact of globalization and economic liberalization has only made this class more powerful.

77

And so the real challenge facing the political class today is how to bridge this differential and, indeed, while there are only confrontationist postures visible, it seems to me that, if Bharat and India are to become one, there has to be a greater and more dynamic interchange of ideas and values between these two facets of that geographical space we call India. The result will be a dynamic mix of the new and the old, a reinterpretation of the old in the light of the new and also, and this is important, a strong shaping influence of the old on the new. That has been India's way for centuries. When heretical ideas challenged the Vedic culture, what happened in India was that the heretics were incorporated in the mainstream and the tradition widened and became more expansive without necessarily giving up its core. The classic case is that of the Buddha. Siddhartha, the Buddha, was against Vedic ritualism and priestcraft. He posed one of the greatest challenges to the traditional Vedic culture. Today there are hardly any Buddhists in India but the Buddha is a revered name in the Hindu pantheon. Indeed in the representation of the evolution myth in Hindu scriptures, in what is called the Dasavathara (ten manifestations of Vishnu, the supreme Godhead), the Buddha finds a place along with Rama and Krishna!<sup>9</sup>

Hindu culture is the dominant strain in India, and while there are other strains, any meaningful discussion of India has to take serious note of the Hindu strain and of Hindu traditions. While I am aware that Hindu culture is not the whole of India, I would nevertheless argue that Hindu culture is an assimilative and tolerant culture and has and can accommodate a strong dose of pluralism. Hinduism has always assimilated and shown its capacity for inclusiveness. That has been the strength of the culture. Modernity, of course, poses a great challenge to the traditional culture. If the Hindu-Indian way asserts itself, I can see the challenges posed by modernity shaking the foundations but not destroying it, and there is every chance that the modern quest for a more equitable social order, for gender justice and identity for the individual person will find sympathetic reverberation in those who uphold tradition. The tradition will modify itself and inform the new and the new will find itself challenged by the old and informed by it and divested somewhat of its polemical edge.

I am acutely aware that I am formulating a logic of the tradition/modernity debate in India which is currently being questioned by scholars like Sanjay Subrahmanyam, David Schulman and Velchuri Narayan Rao, US based academicians doing remarkable work on Indological materials. I am valorizing a colonial modernity linking the nineteenth century to British rule. But recent studies by the scholars mentioned above and by others of their kind have shown that there is an earlier modernity in India which is not the derivative modernity of the nineteenth century. These studies question the exclusive status accorded to colonial modernity. Colonial modernity, these scholars argue, is itself viewed as an exclusive European achievement from which the colonial states derive the modern spirit. The modernity of the colonial states is thus derivative and the argument is that these client cultures have their own modernities which can be traced back even to medieval times, certainly to times before colonialism became a fact in India. This school also argues that, if India had not been affected by British rule, she would have asserted an indigenous modernity unrelated to colonialism. This is only partly true. For example, the writings of a medieval Telugu poet like Pingali Surana or the writings of an early Indian woman Bhakti (devotional) poet like the Tamil Andal can be seen as embodying profound questions about the body, sex, women, caste etc. These are then considered examples of an indigenous modernity, albeit early modernist, by the new scholarship. I am in sympathy with a view that claims that Indian literatures were quite radical in their questioning of received mores and values and that we can detect a progress forward in these matters. To call this early modern is fine, but early modern is not modern because the early modern, in my opinion, is still in the grip of the intellectual ancien régime. I am not sure that we can attribute modernity to them because modernity represents an attitude, a way of seeing and feeling that deeply implicates the valorization of the individual. The

European Renaissance, which may be seen as the origin of modernity, does give importance to the self-awareness of the subject. The subject is now psychologically aware and this, in turn, is related to an increasing secularization of life, with Man as the point of reference, not God. Although in medieval India the body may have been foregrounded and love treated with a degree of boldness, the self and the human person were still not detached from the larger context of the spiritual foundations of life and the real sense of an overarching God, the point of reference for all human action. It was still a theocentric universe. In other words, the valorization of the self or the body, which we see in Durer, Michael Angelo, Rembrandt and Montaigne, is not the same as in Surana and Andal. While the treatment of love in the medieval Bhakti poets may seem an interpersonal affair, rather than an abstract and general love, there is no gainsaying the fact that Andal or Nammazhwar or Sundarar posited thought and spoke of their love of Krishna or Siva in terms of human love, but always implied the impersonal Godhead manifested in human form. True, in Bhakti poetry we see a resistance to Brahminical authority and a democratizing process, but one would be completely off the mark to imagine that this necessarily constituted a radical rejection of tradition. Indeed, the remarkable phenomenon in India is, as I have already pointed out, that such radicalisms get assimilated by the tradition which is resilient enough to accept new currents and to include great diversity in itself. One could argue that this was a Brahminical device for extending its authority, and this is not untrue. But the Brahminical mind in its subtlety appropriates dissent, perhaps stifles it, and continues to wield much authority in things temporal and things sacred. That perhaps explains why in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Madras Presidency, the Social Justice movement was called the anti-Brahmin movement.

Modernity, then, needs to be distinguished from early modern and other such manifestations of the modern spirit. The European Renaissance, of course, is not the only marker for modernity. The French Enlightenment is equally important and so are the ideas of Locke, Berkeley and Coleridge, if we, for a moment, confine ourselves only to British names. Such trends of thought, combined with the Unitarian ideas from America, was an important background for a thinker like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who led the Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth century. There is, therefore, a connection between the thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian thinkers and the modernity inaugurated by the Renaissance of Rembrandt, Montaigne, Michael Angelo and Durer and the radical thought of the French philosophers. The nineteenth century, in addition, also happened to be the time of high imperialism in India, and imperialism and colonial rule were linked up with the Enlightenment project which, in its turn, was the handmaid of the European Renaissance. The salient features of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance were: a more focused sense of the body and the individual, a concern for the rights of woman, a desire to participate

in the larger comity of intellectual brotherhood by getting an English education and a rejection of tradition, which went side by side with a recovery of tradition. Thus colonial modernity poses a different set of challenges. It cuts at the root of Sanatana Dharma (this is the traditional appellation for Hinduism), but Sanatana Dharma modulates into its recuperative avatars like the Brahma Samaj (in Bengal), the Prarthana Samaj (in the West) and the Arya Samaj (in the North). These in turn empowered the careers of 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo.

What is popularly called the Indian (Bengal) Renaissance is an aspect of colonial modernity, no less, and it has deep connections with the imagining of an Indian nation, an idea which the 'early modernists' and their contemporaries scarcely took into account. At this time, with the help of English Education and the fiery spirit of academicians like Henry Derozio<sup>10</sup> and the discourse of the Young Bengal movement, there is an increasing resistance to authority and a recognition of the socializing process created by the establishment of a public space. That public space was occupied, in characteristic Indian style, by spiritual movements like the Brahma Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj and the Arya Samaj. These Movements were Hindu reformist and increasingly concerned themselves with secular questions like widow remarriage, thus raising the age of consent, education for women and so on.

80

The nineteenth century, then, is the beginning of colonial modernity in India. It was after all the period of the introduction of English which, by the way, is not just a language but also an ideology. Its ideology is that of colonialism and modernity. We may legitimately ask if there was only a 'derivative modernity' in the Indian texts of this period<sup>11</sup> or whether it is possible to detect a modernity which is the result of a healthy mix of English and the native provenance. I think this latter possibility is the truth of the matter. One has only to read Toru Dutt or Derozio or Madhusudan Dutt to see the point I am making. And here I have referred only to writers in English. It is equally true that there is a modernity in the writings of the Telugu Veereshalingam, the Tamil Vedanayagam Pillai, the Bengalis Bankim Chandra and Sarat Chandra, the Oriya Fakir Mohan Senapati and the Malayali Chandu Menon. And if we see the writings of a Swami Vivekananda or a Sri Aurobindo or a Pandita Rama Bai or a Kripabai Sattianathan we see this increasing reinterpretation of the past, this restless energy and this desire for progress and social justice which are the hallmarks of the modernist era. In Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo we see more dramatically the modernity espoused by religious figures, and I shall be saying something about this later. Suffice it here to point to a trait in Indian intellectual life. There is usually a measure of continuity with the past and, if I have pointed to the nineteenth century as a period of Indian modernity, it is with a full realization that there was more discontinuity in this period because of the impact of the West than at any other time in Indian history. Still it would not be disputed that even with this

disjuncture there is a symbiotic process being set in motion. Tradition is changing with the modern but the modern is increasingly taking the colour and shape of the traditional. Indeed there is a case for seeing the Indian Renaissance as a profoundly conservative movement. While the rest of the world is moving in the direction of humanist autonomy, in India any progress in this respect implies a dialogue with the theocentric bases of culture.

But, to change tack, here are two images. Some years ago, the conscience of the nation was shocked by what happened to Roop Kanwar, a Rajput woman. The Rajputs are a valorous people and stories are woven around them which are the stuff of legend. Sati or concretion was practised in their community and history is full of instances where Rajput women either jumped into a collective funeral pyre when the Muslim invaders were at their doorsteps and their menfolk were at war or committed Sati on the funeral pyres of their husbands, in a demonstration of Hindu piety and sacramental intensity. Sati was abolished by Lord Bentinck in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in 1987 Roop Kanwar sat on the pyre of her dead husband. Her action was witnessed by thousands. In Rajasthan Satis are glorified and temples commemorating their deaths are raised. The belief is that a Sati has enormous spiritual power to bless the living and in any case the fortitude with which she accepted the ordeal by fire qualifies her for divine status. The public outcry by civil society in India ensured that Deorala, the place where Roop died, would not be a place of pilgrimage because Parliament passed laws outlawing the public veneration or glorification of Sati. This is all very well but, where does that leave the thousands of Sati shrines which already exist in private homes and elsewhere? Can a government legislate faith out of existence? I am certainly not suggesting that Sati must be retained! But I am suggesting that Sati has happened and it is part of the daily belief systems of millions of Hindus. Can modernity come to terms with the existence of such belief or is modernity to be permanently at loggerheads with that past? I do believe that the British educated intellectual has an onerous responsibility to come to terms with the existence of these violent beliefs, which along with many other beliefs constitutes the sum total of the great spiritual traditions of the people of India. There are no signs that the people are going to change in a hurry. The moderns will have to do business with this past. The question is, can they find a space where faith and religion will be given honourable status and not be contemptuously dismissed by the modern spirit of radical reform? As I see it, in India modernity must mean a fusion of the spiritual dimension with the secular. And, lest I be misunderstood, modernity will have to select from tradition what may be retained, and sati is certainly not one of the things we must retain!

Come to Bombay (now called Mumbai) and you see the great monuments of the British Raj. One such great structure is the Taj Hotel, owned now by the Tata

82

family, an Indian industrial family, but in the Raj days a symbol of British power and opulence. It is still a glorious building and the rich and the famous still stay there. But cheek by jowl with buildings like the Taj you also have slums where Indians live lives of quiet desperation. Mumbai's Dharavi has the largest slum in the world, and Dharavi is an unsettling place. It is a site for crime, drugs and violence. Mumbai is India's business lifeline and a bomb blast in Mumbai can destroy the economy. Indeed Mumbai was subjected to medieval cruelty in the wake of the serial bomb blasts in the early 1990s and the images of people from different communities killing each other on religious grounds made one wonder if this was the same Mumbai of Marine Drive, the Gateway of India, and the tall skyscrapers which house the great industrial giants of India. Poverty is the blight of India and must go. Mumbai represents the new India of our dreams. Poverty must go and that is the reality of Bharat. But Bharat is not coterminous with poverty. It is marked rather by a great culture and poverty only stains it. So Bharat minus poverty must do business with India without her modernist pride and arrogance. The question is, can modernity find a place for the old, tried and trusted? And this certainly does not mean that we need to glorify all those horrible atrocities we have perpetrated in the name of patriarchy and a caste based hierarchy. Having said this, let me also clearly proclaim my lack of sympathy for religious fundamentalism or for exclusive Hindu majoritarianism. But I do try to rationalize the attraction Mumbai has for right wing Hindu zealots. It must have something to do with the contempt the moderns show for religious traditions and it is a backlash. The moderns, by accepting the inalienable right of people to practice religion, might in fact be able to take the wind out of the sails of religious fanatics, who only use religion for their own ends.

The interrelation of tradition and modernity is the thesis of this article. I am unabashedly following T.S. Eliot in this respect. It is T.S. Eliot's view that tradition need not smack of archaeological excavations and fossils. The present is the most energetic moment of tradition. It is the presence of the past in the present so as to secure the future.<sup>12</sup> When Edmund Burke, whose conservative opinions need no glossing, spoke of the matter, he put it eloquently by describing the purpose of existence, which for him is a shared partnership between the old and the new, experience and experiment, tradition and modernity. Burke believes that a large view of existence must be taken because this shared partnership cannot be the burden of only the present generation, but rather a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. As is well known, for Burke each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great *primaevae* contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher nature, connecting the visible and invisible worlds, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral



natures, each in its appointed place. I believe Burke is right in this matter. In the name of change and fashion we tend to destroy the laboriously built artifacts of the past. The impulses that drive the younger generation and those who are carried away by the hustle and bustle of the present are based on a perception that man is perfectible, that reason is a secure guide to conduct, that a sentimental adherence to abstract notions of equality is a value which one dares not question on pain of being declared politically incorrect. The Irishman Burke, and in our country Rajagopalachari,<sup>13</sup> have a different view of the organization of society. They would see it as emanating from God, as admitting of transcendence, and they would admit of equality only in the eyes of God, not necessarily in interpersonal relations. This is common sense but the unthinking and sentiment driven radicals are governed by an abstract sense of justice and equality and by a sentimental humanitarianism with respect to human relations. They ask for a leveling down, while Burke and Rajagopalchari ask for a preservation of the mystery and the variety of human existence. I am arguing that a true modernity in the Indian context has necessarily to be a fusion of the past and the present. It is the Indian way, and it has been demonstrated in the writings of the best of our nineteenth century writers and in the activities of the greatest of our national leaders and thinkers.

## II

The impact of British education in India was felt, as we have already noted, in Bengal, but it was also felt elsewhere. The Brahmo Samaj<sup>14</sup> founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1830 was an early attempt to purify Hinduism of its dross and its superstitions. Roy was in the forefront of the attack on obscurantism. He demanded a ban on Sati, a raising of the age of consent so that child marriages could be avoided, and he pleaded for the right of widows to remarry. These were radical measures and Roy became a hated figure among the Kulin (high caste) Bengalis and among the orthodox Pundits. He was not safe in Kolkata due to his activism, and this in spite of his influential family background. Brahmoism stressed the philosophical part of the Vedic scriptures and, in essence, it is a kind of Unitarianism, if we want an equivalent from the West. Emerson and Thoreau knew Roy's writings and he had good friends in England where, incidentally, he died. Roy was well versed in Sanskrit but, as we have seen, he asked for support for British education and he was a founder of Hindu College. Instruction in the classical tongues was to be imparted but this would not be in the old Brahminical way but on sound European principles. Brahmoism thrived for a while but it was soon beset with schisms and passed on to the leadership of distinguished Bengalis like Debendranath Tagore, an ancestor of the poet Rabindranath, and the

charismatic Keshab Chandra Sen. No one can, however, deny the obvious progressiveness of the Brahmos and their importance for culture in India and for Indian nationalism. Roy is rejecting tradition when he speaks up for women but he is passionately involved in a reinterpretation of the Vedas and the Upanishads in order to recover the ancient wisdom for modern times. It is, if you like, a kind of Brahminism, but a Brahminism under correction as it were.

The Prarthana Samaj founded in western India was a counterpart to Brahmoism in Bengal. The principal figures were Ranade and Gokhale. They reformed Hinduism by insisting on women's emancipation and education and raising the age of consent. Gokhale started the Servants of India Society, which was to be a band of political Sanyasis (monks), and whose members would not accept political office though they would engage with society and political action. There was a religious touch to its activities, as a perusal of the writings of Gokhale<sup>15</sup> and his disciple Rt. Hon. V.S. Srinivas Sastri reveals.<sup>16</sup> The Servants of India Society was secular, but secular in the Indian sense of the term, which has always meant that the world has to be seen from a religious perspective because man is the child of God. Secularism in the Indian context does not mean the denial of religion but, in the Hindu spirit, an acceptance of religion as an integral part of life.

84

In the north west Dayanand Sarawati founded the Arya Samaj, which was a purified Hinduism with much stress on Vedic practices. Dayanand questioned the caste system, untouchability and the ritualistic practices of traditional Hinduism, but his puritanism enabled fiery nationalists with a Hindu cast of mind like Lala Lajpat Rai to engage with the British Raj in an extreme way. Rai died after being beaten by the police. The politics of the Indian National Congress was informed by the spirit of the Brahmos, the Arya Samajists and the Prarthana Samajists, and the fact that these were spiritual movements suggests that the freedom struggle in India was, to a large extent, informed by spiritual principles. That is why the current Indian debate on secularism is heavily weighted on the side of those who profess a religious view of life, but not a narrow sectarianism, as opposed to those who disclaim any role for religion in affairs of state.

These Movements were attempts to modernize Hinduism and contemporary Hindu society, which has clearly been informed by their spirit of radical reform. The history of Indian nationalism is the history in part of these religious movements, and any definition of Indian nationhood would be far off the mark if the spiritual dimension is ignored. In this respect two figures, however, stand out in this period. They are Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. Both are religious leaders but they are not the narrow, fundamentalist and fanatical types who are only too ubiquitous in our times. Like the movements mentioned above, we see in them a good fusion of tradition and modernity and a synthesis of various currents. Swami

Vivekananda spoke eloquently at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 and his representation of a reformed and resurgent Hinduism won the attention of people all over the world (Ramanan 2004: 143-166). Clearly he was the most charismatic of the delegates and he had a great fan following. He spoke in the name of the most ancient order of Hinduism, which he asserted was not a religion but a way of life. Also Vedanta was the foundational ground of all religions and to speak on its behalf was to eschew all forms of sectarianism and narrow doctrine. The message of Vedanta was that man is essentially divine, that he must realize the strength within him. With this confidence man must serve suffering humanity. India required, not cloistered monks, but people who were athletic and who could work incessantly to improve the lot of their countrymen. With this aim he founded the Ramakrishna Mission, named after his revered teacher Ramakrishna Paramahansa. The Paramahansa was an eclectic man who experienced God consciousness through Hindu, Islamic and Christian practices. Swami Vivekananda's order of celibate monks with a large lay following was, and continues to be, organized on the lines of the Jesuit order and has for over a century taken the message of practical Vedanta to every corner of the world. It is a shining example of the way an ancient faith can integrate itself to the needs of the changed modern present. Vedanta on this showing is a modern faith. Sri Aurobindo (Ramanan 2004: 229-249) had passed the Civil Service Examination but refused to take the mandatory horse riding test to join the service. Instead he left the West and took up employment in India, learning Sanskrit and Bengali and reading the great Indian texts. At first he was associated with an extremist and radical politics and was jailed. Freed for lack of evidence, Sri Aurobindo abruptly disappeared and surfaced in Pondicherry, where he set up an order. Joined a few years later by his spiritual companion Mary Alfassa, an Algerian French woman, the duo galvanized religious thought and in a short time the Pondicherry Ashram became a model for a revived religion based on Hindu thought. Sri Aurobindo spoke of the possibility of Man becoming the Supra Human and of divinity descending and bestowing grace on the prepared individual. Anyone who has been to the Ashram can see Hinduism at its brilliant best, refashioned for our modern times. This is tradition in modernity. Sri Aurobindo passed away in 1950, but his work was a constant presence in India's march to freedom and in her acquiring the character of a modern nation.

India has consistently demonstrated, in all aspects of life at both the individual and the societal level, that she can strike this difficult and delicate balance. An important ingredient in Hindu thought is the insistence that nothing is static, that adaptation is the law of life, that change is inevitable, though not all change is progress. Given this provenance, it is not surprising that Hinduism has been so resilient. I am painfully aware that there are many marks of a feudal past still present in India, but

I am convinced that the Indian people with the Hindu ethos I have outlined will be able to modernize without necessarily throwing away whatever is valuable in the past. Tradition and modernity should not be seen as binaries but as interpenetrating so that to speak of the one is to speak of the other. In this way, it should be possible to see Indian modernities in more complex ways than as simply a derivation of British colonial discourse.

### III

To return to the question of the dynamic nature of tradition, which is the past living at the most intense moment of the present, I would argue that many of the changes we see in our times and which bewilder us need not upset us at all if we bear this larger view of tradition in mind. Once again, let us see the cities of India. Urbanization is clearly a marker of modernity. The cities, we are told, are different from the villages, and so they are. But there is an important rider. Our cities are being besieged by the village folk, who see in them opportunities for employment. In Kolkata, where I was raised, the Bihari migration was a major factor, and I remember that if it came to cheap public transport (the hand pulled rickshaw) or employing a cook or finding someone to wash your clothes or tend your garden a Bihari could always be found for this purpose. In Chennai, where I belong, the influx from the villages is proving to be a major factor in the increase of unemployment. This is true of all big cities. Mumbai, the industrial capital of India, is full of chawls and it is their facelessness that gives people from rural areas their identity and, ironically, their insecurity. The picture which emerges is that the cities have grown at the expense of the villages. It was Nehru who initiated large scale industrialisation (see Khilnani 1997). In this respect he was turning his back on his mentor Gandhi, who advocated village self-reliance.<sup>17</sup> Today we see the spectacle of the village increasingly wanting to become a city with all the facilities of urbanization available in them. President Kalam, a visionary, who speaks to his people frequently on programmes which remind one of the classroom, believes that by providing internet connectivity to the villages a major step would be taken to discourage large scale migration to the cities. A major reason for villagers seeking employment in the cities was that there were more opportunities in the urban conglomerates and now, with the Kalam mission under way, such a reason disappears since the villages will henceforth be powered by technology. Thus, it is hoped that the cities would be relieved of undue pressure. Here is a classic example of the interpenetration of the binary opposition between village and city, between tradition and modernity. And this is happening right before our eyes. Our villages will no longer be the Gandhian institutions they were for a long time represented

as being. Instead we will have urban villages and they would be a blend of the old and the new. This is assuming, of course, that we do not snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, and that we will implement the Kalam mission!

In every walk of life one perceives this interpenetration of oppositions. Let us shift to the image of the family. Till about 30 years ago the extended family was a physical fact. Grandparents lived with their children and their children's children and with several other members and relations. Food was cooked for all. Everyone was indissolubly linked to everyone else. Sorrow was shared and so was happiness. Everyone contributed to the commonweal. It was not as though there were no tensions but the patriarch was always implicitly obeyed and there was a lot of give and take. As an ideal, there is nothing to compare with this system. It was a training for the world and I believe it made one relatively unselfish—that is, unselfish as far as the family was concerned. Today the extended family is dead and if it exists it exists only as a shadow of its former self or as a fragmented variation of the original. The nuclear family is the norm and the children resent their space being occupied by grandparents. More and more the older generation is accepting this change and staying away from the children who have their own lives to live. We have not yet come to a point where the children, on attaining their majority, would be expected to fend for themselves. We are still psychologically attuned to old ways and we continue to show the respect old people must be given and so, even if the old are not living with us, we do consult them on most things. There is a fear of being cursed and there is a fear of being alone in the world without the comfort of the blessings of the older generation. So even here we may read a complex interpenetration of the tradition/modernity debate.

We may move to the larger unit of society now, and in particular to the question of the organization of our society. Caste is still a fact and, with the intensification of identity politics after the Mandal Agitations of the 1990s, it is never far from the public consciousness. We are not moving towards a casteless society. In some ways such a move is fundamentally flawed. Caste as an institution is not India's peculiar institution. It is universal. Every society has a system of categorization and while one may not speak of caste, it is a psychological presence. To legislate caste out of existence is simply a utopian dream and it might be better to accept the fact of caste and understand its rationale. In the beginning it was a division of society in terms of the temperamental distinctions one saw in people. Thus, there are people who are intellectual, others who are natural leaders, yet others who can contribute to the generation of wealth, and finally some who are not any of the other things and who can contribute manual labour. It is evident that there is mutual interdependence. Indian or Hindu society has managed to weather many storms for thousands of years, and one reason is that this organic and hierarchical organization of society was broadly accepted and it worked. In the beginning there

was flexibility and mobility, but soon ossification took place, rigidity destroyed the creative possibilities of the caste system, and untouchability scarred its face. There is no excuse for untouchability. If we recognize our mutual interdependence, self-preservation should say that this oppressive practice must go. Gandhi understood this. He fought untouchability but he did not ask for the destruction of caste because he saw the need for some such division of society. True, it is caste which brought about untouchability, and it is caste that, in its ossified state, reduced a large number of human beings to less than human status, while also preventing many in the name of birth from having minimum standards of life. There is much to be angry about. But absolute equality is never possible. Even communist countries do not have it. We go back to the dictum that absolute equality does not exist. Equality before God, yes, but the view that all are equal is false and flies against the facts. In modern India we are moving towards equality of opportunity and this is laudable, but all change must come gradually lest we destroy the good things we do have along with the bad ones. On this showing the democratic experiment in India has worked. Caste and its rigidities are slowly being called into question and the people who historically had been marginalized are slowly asserting their rights and society by and large is acceding to their demands. Things take time and a process of gradual evolution rather than violent revolution is the surest answer to the need for all round progress.

88

#### IV

It will be evident that my explorations above have a decidedly conservative character. It is wrong to think that conservatism is reactionary, in the sense that it bespeaks a return to some glorious past. On the other hand, conservatism allows for a healthy balance of the old and the new. It asserts that all change is not progress but it does not ignore change. It accepts the inevitability of change but only asks that the change be well thought out, gradual and be in keeping with the genius of the community. Indeed the good conservative has a respect for the world and does not live in an ineffectual world of mystic nothingness. The conservative is worldly insofar as that means a capacity for constant adjustment in the wake of new realities. The adjustment is made with a broad sense of the theocentric humanistic purpose of life, and the changes are seen as only a variation of an already existing ground or foundation. In the Indian context, that reality principle is linked up with the transcendental reality of the Vedanta where, to use Emerson's formulation, the Soul identifies with the Over Soul. Man is not seen as a sinner in need of redemption but as ignorant of his true nature, which is divine. To remove ignorance and to arrive at a higher degree of consciousness is the purpose of Man.

Society and its character have to be seen in this context. In India great changes are taking place but to imagine that this is a takeover by a completely secular and godless establishment is to look at things from a Eurocentric view. In India religion stares you in the face wherever you go and the spiritual dimension of life is an unwritten but active code. Change in India has to be in this framework. To think otherwise is to miss the reality of India.

India, I assert, is not a nation, but a way of life, a way of thinking and feeling. British rule gave the Indian people a sense of a modern nation. That clearly is the most visible impact of modernity. But our sense of nationhood, however influenced by the West and by our contact with a western culture, is still not completely informed by it. The ancient Indian (if we wish to use this term at all) saw his culture as a unity and extended his sense of belonging from Khandahar (in present day Afghanistan) to Khambuja (present day Kampuchea). Hindu values and icons remain in these lands even today, and the great Sankara, an Idealist philosopher of the Vedantic persuasion walked, it is said, three times around the Indian geographical space in his brief life of 32 years. Sanskrit and its variations was spoken in much of this space and people understood one another. The devout Hindu goes to Prayag or Gaya in the north and carries with him sand from Rameswaram in the south to immerse in the rivers and brings back water from the sacred Ganga in the north to bathe the Siva lingam at Rameswaram, a testimony to the oneness of the people of India. If India is anything at all it is a cultural unity. Therefore, whatever the investment in modernity—dams, hydro-electrical projects, steel plants, aluminium industries, internet connections—, the real connectivity is cultural. A recognition of this should tell us that India is nothing if not traditional, and her modernity is nothing more than the present manifestation of the past in its most intense contemporaneous character.

## Notes

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This article is based on a lecture on “Aspects of Indian Modernity” I gave at the University of Zaragoza in November 2005. I have kept the flavour of the speaking voice in the writing of the article. I thank Professor Annette Gomis and Professor Dolores Herrero for inviting me to give this talk on a memorable chilly Spanish evening and to the University for its hospitality.

1. G.U. Pope was a Tamil scholar, a translator of the *Tirukural*, a great Tamil classic, while C.P. Brown gave the Telugu language a modern grammar.

2. “The language of Command and the Command of Language” is the opening section of Bernard Cohn’s *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*.

## Mohan Ramanan

3. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a founder of the Brahmo Samaj. His letter to Lord Amherst is a classic of prose. See Ramanan (2004: 60-64).

4. Bhasha is the Sanskrit term for the indigenous languages. In recent times nativists like G.N. Devy have used the term as a political counterpoint to English, which they associate with colonial hegemony. See Devy's *After Amnesia* (1992).

5. Lord Macaulay's Minute is available in Trevelyan's edition of the *Speeches* (1935).

6. Charles Duff and David Hare figure in Gauri Viswanathan (1989) and Lethbridge (1972).

7. On Missionaries see Gauri Viswanathan (1989) and Eric Stokes (1959).

8. The most prominent Cow Belt politicians are the two Yadav leaders —Mulayam Singh and Lalu Prasad; the former is Chief Minister of the populous state of UP and the latter is the Railway Minister of India.

9. Dasavathara is the Hindu myth of creation and evolution and describes the ten manifestations of the supreme Godhead Vishnu in terms of Matsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (ManLion), Vamana (dwarf), Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Balarama (but in one version the Buddha replaces Balarama), and Kalki (the redeemer of the future who is portrayed as riding a horse, somewhat akin to the Apocalypse).

10. Derozio was a teacher at the Hindu College and a leader of the Young Bengal Movement, which was radical in the spirit of the French Revolution. Derozio fell foul of the authorities of Hindu College and was dismissed. He died because of drink and dissipation.

11. Partha Chatterjee has advanced this view in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986).

12. T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual talent" in *Sacred Wood* (1920), and the view of culture in *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (1948) are conservative documents.

13. C. Rajagopalachari was described by Mahatma Gandhi as his 'conscience keeper'. Rajaji, as he is popularly known, is India's foremost conservative thinker. The political party he founded in the fifties, in opposition to Nehru's Congress, was called the Swatantra party and is hardly visible today, but Rajaji's influence is felt in the polity in these times of economic liberalization. Many of his conservative ideas are now part of the ruling establishment's thinking. He was a great populariser of Indian epics and a fine speaker on Indian culture and philosophy.

14. See studies by Sivanath Sastri (1911-1912) and David Kopf (1979).

15. G.K.Gokhale, a member of the Viceroy's Privy Council, was a brilliant lawyer, Gandhi's mentor and a leader of the moderates in Congress. See Ramanan (2004: 167-189).

16. The Rt. Hon. V.S. Srinivasa Sastri is by popular acclaim called the 'silver tongued orator' of the British Empire. Such was his command of the English language that he dared to correct Hall, the Englishman, who taught him. He was a statesman and a great writer of letters, which are among the finest examples of Indian English literature. See Ramanan (2004: 190-206).

17. Pandit Nehru was India's first Prime Minister, the undisputed leader of free India. As Sunil Khilnani has pointed out in *The Idea of India* (1997), he initiated most of the schemes which embodied Indian modernity. Gandhi chose Nehru as his successor but the two were temperamentally different. Nehru was a modern but Gandhi was traditional in his belief in the village.



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Received: 3 April 2006