Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture

on

Education and the Complex World of Culture

by

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"There is cultural subjection only when one's traditional cast of ideas and sentiments is superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost. This subjection is slavery of the spirit"

--- Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya.[1]

EDUCATORS are usually burdened with impossible tasks. On the one hand, we have to bring to students not only information but also knowledge systems that enable them to make sense of that information. This information and knowledge have to be drawn from all parts of the world. On the other hand, governments tell us that we have to familiarise students with Indian culture which is roughly translated as the culture of the majority Hindu community. This responsibility raises a troubled and a troublesome question. How do we

understand and represent the culture of a society that has undergone two hundred years of British colonialism?

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The Homogenisation of Hinduism

The late nineteenth century witnessed the politicisation of religious identities that followed investigations into, theorisations of, discussions around and consequent awareness of belonging to a wider community called Hinduism. The same process occurred later for Islam. Historians tell us that before the late eighteenth century and the establishment of colonialism, Indians did not, in general, identify themselves as Hindu or Muslim in the religious sense. But by the turn of the twentieth century, they were defining themselves predominantly in terms of a religious identity.

In history, the biography of the term Hinduism has been a fluid one and, in pre-colonial India, people tended to identify themselves on different occasions as members of a *jati*, of a caste, of a linguistic group, and/or as the residents of a region. Etymologically, Hinduism stems from a Persian term --- *Hind*, or *Al-Hind* in Arabic --- which was first used by the Achaemenid Persians to indicate people

who lived beyond the river Indus/Sindu, in the region of Hind. References to this term are found in the inscriptions of Darius I and other rulers of ancient Persia from 6 century BCE. The term Hindu was used by Alberuni (1030 CE) to refer to Brahmanical Hinduism. Three centuries later, Ziauddin Barani made frequent references to the 'Hindu' in his history of India. However, in his hands, the term Hindu denoted a politico-administrative as well as a religious category.

In his *Constructions of Religious Boundaries*, Harjot Singh Oberoi argued that the Vedas, the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, which today are seen by many as the defining religious texts of the Hindus, do not employ the word Hindu.[2] And the historian Romila Thapar pointed out that even in classical texts like the *Dharamshastras*, communities are defined by reference to location, occupation, and caste, none of which are necessarily bound together by a common religious identity.[3] Moreover, in the annals of Sanskrit, a classical language, Hinduism does not refer to the identity of people who belong to a religious community.[4] Religion was just one of the affiliations Indians subscribed to. By the end of the nineteenth century, marked on the one

hand by the introduction of a census that required respondents to unambiguously state their religion, and on the other hand by political mobilisation on religious lines, the term Hindu came to be deployed as a social category of self-identification, and of identification with a community.

The making of a collective identity was strengthened in the period of high nationalism and competitive nation-making projects that stretched from the late nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century. Affinity with the larger religious community enabled individuals and communities to identify with each other, and thus establish the foundations for the nationalist and the anti-colonial struggle. By the first two decades of the twentieth century, we see the eruption of competitive nationalism, the two-nation theory, and the demand for a state of one's own. The nation-making project and competitive nationalism that hinged around the demand of a 'state of one's own' culminated in the blood-drenched Partition of India. The project was and is deeply problematic, because colonial investigations into and translations of upper-caste Hindu texts had narrated the religion as highly

intellectual, Sankritised, and Brahmanical. This tradition, as will be suggested later in the argument, excluded much more than it included.

Interestingly, the idea that standardised Hinduism is a product of colonialism was catapulted onto intellectual and political platforms as a puzzle, as a paradox, as a doubt, and as a contradiction in the 1980s and 1990s. The debate erupted against the background of the demolition of the Babri Mosque on 6 December 1992. Scholars in departments of religious studies, anthropology, and history in mainly western universities suggested that the glorification of Hinduism was, in essence, the glorification of a conceptual category that was assembled, privileged, and theorised by various agents of colonialism. These agents ranged from Indologists to Christian missionaries, to colonial administrators, to ethnographers and to philologists. Indian advisors were complicit in the interpretation and codification of Hinduism. The project was not steered by Western scholars and administrators only. Brahmins who were familiar with Sanskrit texts of ancient India, and Kayastha scholars who knew both Sanskrit and Persian, helped identify, translate and

privilege selected sacred texts, and tutor the administrators of the East India Company on what an authentic Hinduism looks like. Resultantly, a differentiated body of religious beliefs and practices was collapsed into a mega-category of a peculiarly upper-caste Hinduism. Some western scholars came forward to suggest that there is no religion in India that corresponds to what we understand by the term.

The 1990s debate on the nature of and indeed the existence of a category called Hinduism, drew upon an earlier work authored by W. C. Smith in 1962, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Smith argued that Hinduism refers not to an entity; it is a name that the West has given to a prodigiously variegated series of facts.[5] Taking their cue from Smith, scholars focussed on the colonial project of flattening out a plural tradition, and casting it in the image of Abrahamic religions. For instance, Stietencron suggested that rather than the development of a uniform and centralised religious doctrine and practice that was characteristic of other religions, in Hinduism a number of factors promoted fragmentation and regionalisation. None of the traditions of the religion developed an all-

India institutional body invested with the power to judge correct exegesis of sacred scriptures except for *Advaita Vedanta*. Divergent interpretations of religion could not be banned, because authority was not vested in a church but in the individual charisma of a teacher. Even dominant *Vaisnavism* and *Saivism* were divided into numerous *sampradayas* or sects, which were further distinguished by regional differentiations in theory and practice. These sects would only come together on occasions when the meaning of a scripture was disputed. The *Vaisnanvas* worship a different god than the *Saivas*; they use different holy scriptures in prayer, ritual and mythology; and even their paradise is located in a different mythical world. Why then should we insist, he asked, on a verbal unity of Hinduism?[6]

The problem with western scholarship is that Hinduism has seldom been studied on its own ground; it has been investigated and evaluated through the conceptual lens of Eurocentric theory. Many of these scholars preferred to explore and define Hinduism by the Vedantic textual tradition which is theistic, abstract, and marked by lack of rituals and superstition. This tradition neatly conformed

to European notions of religion which were inspired in a large part by Protestantism. Consequently, Hinduism, which is composed of plural and often incommensurable traditions, was neatened out and reduced to one strand that cohered closely to the western notion of what religion is and what it should be by colonialism. More significantly, not only were various philosophical schools of Indian thought collapsed into one, philosophy itself was held to be synonymous with Hinduism.

It is, therefore, surprising that in the 1990s critics of the colonial construction of Hinduism used the same concept of religion and similar methods to evaluate non-Christian religions as the colonialists did. If a community of faith does not have one sacred text, one founder and one church, the presumption was that it could not be called a religion. We could not but conclude that the power of colonialism to constitute traditions, history and culture, and therefore identities had to be taken seriously.

Whether the colonialists succeeded in flattening a multihued and complex philosophical system and a system of beliefs to one cohesive strand is another story but an important one. It is equally true that till today

Hinduism lacks a core or essence, monotheism, a single sacred text and a church that can serve as a unifying symbol. It is, as T. N. Madan points out, best conceived of as a religious tradition which resists incorporation into the idea of religion as defined by the Abrahamic religions --- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The lack of a single text, or mandatory rituals of performance, or monotheism, does not mean that Hinduism is not a religion as western scholars tell us, even as they critique colonial efforts to construct a unified religion. It can be thought of as a network of high traditions, localised gods and practices, webs of mythology co-existing easily with one of the most sophisticated philosophical systems, and Godmen or Gurus, the extent of whose followings challenges the very concept of a unified Hinduism. The idea that a religious community can be decentred, composed of diverse traditions each of which follow their own faith, their own practices and their own beliefs, has simply not been accepted by western scholars.[7]

The debate on whether Hinduism is or is not a religion is a fascinating and a complex one, but this particular theme requires another sort of argument. We should note that the

debate has hinged around the non-resemblance of Hindu traditions to western categories of religion. The debate might exaggerate the extent to which Hinduism can or cannot be considered a religion, but it signposts the ways a colonised society is understood, or rather misunderstood, by scholars of another tradition. In short, it is, as we see, the west that identifies sacred and other texts considered definitive of Indian religion and culture, translates the text and interprets it as definitive of the religion. Two, we have to distinguish between Hinduism as a faith and Hinduism as the anchor of a political identity to which was hitched the project of the nation-state. In sum, whatever had been the complexities of Hinduism as a faith, a unified homogenous Hinduism served to anchor the nationalist project.

Interestingly, an intellectual debate on the nature of the religion created a political identity for unifying the people under a nationalist flag. The referent point of these debates was religion as faith, or practices of personal salvation, rituals, and devotion. But over a short period of time Hinduism as a mode of faith was transformed into a mode of politics: politics as colonial domination, the

politics of discrete identity formation, and the politics of nationalist resistance. The colonial project fed into nationalist and subsequently power projects.

Since then, Indians have had to view themselves through the frames set by debates amongst the agents of colonialism. These debates not only legitimised colonialism; they also shaped the strategies of national resistance. And they continue to influence policy and politics in an India that has been independent for over seventy-two years. There was more to the story of colonial domination than the one registered in history text books.

The Colonial Encounter

Every story has a beginning, even if the end is left to the imagination of the reader, or to the vicissitudes of history. The narrative of Europe's engagement with India goes back to the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. This is the time when European scholars began to take interest in a rich and complex philosophical tradition. Christian missionaries and Indologists proceeded to examine Indian civilisation through studies of art, architecture, philosophy, science, and religion. German Romantics, for instance, saw in Hinduism a

corrective to the malaise of modernity that had swept Europe in its grasp. Indologists who engaged in the philological study of South Asian languages, had been for long fascinated with the Sanskrit language, which many saw as the root of European languages. They were enamoured by the philosophical sophistication of the textual traditions of ancient India, particularly the *Vedas* and Sanskrit hymns.

In other words, as agents of colonialism set out to decipher a complex civilisation and unravel the plural threads of its dominant religion --- Hinduism, they inaugurated a project of cultural and intellectual domination. S. N. Mukherjee suggests in his work on the Indologist Sir William Jones that there was an underlying unity to the different missions of understanding India. Men, he argued, came to the country for a variety of reasons, but a majority was possessed of a missionary zeal to shape the future of the country.[8]

Among the many enduring marks these colonial agents left imprinted on the collective consciousness of Indians, was the homogenisation of a loosely articulated religious tradition of Hinduism. Colonial officials seeking to understand a society which they planned to control and govern, set about

reducing its bewildering complexities to manageable proportions. The first move towards homogenisation was the codification of, to use A. K. Ramanujan's terminology, 'context-dependent'[9] laws into a uniform system.

The codification of an immensely complex system of sacred texts, most of which were unfamiliar to the European mind, carried noteworthy consequences. Much of the meaning system of these texts was lost in translation. As the philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy suggested, translations were carried out by scholars who were trained in linguistics rather than metaphysics. The educated man of today, he continued, is completely out of touch with intellectual traditions of Christianity that were nearer the Vedic tradition. A European is hardly prepared to study the *Vedanta* unless he has some knowledge of Plato, Philo, Hermes, Plotinus, the Gospels and finally Eckhart, who with the possible exception of Dante can be regarded by Indians as the greatest of all Europeans.[10]

This makes sense when we recollect that modern notions of religion --- as a system of beliefs and practices that are rational,

metaphysical and private --- were a product of the Enlightenment. Though the term religion goes back a long way in the history of Christendom, it was the modern, Protestant notion of religion that was universalised as an evaluative and a normative category. The bias in favour of abstract and intensely metaphysical texts is clear in the selection, translation, and privileging of texts that were considered representative of Hinduism by Orientalists. Translations of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads, Manusmriti*, the works of Kalidasa, the *Bhagvadgita*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Brahmasutras* into European languages were regarded as an interpretive exercise, as providing a window onto Hindu society.

The philosopher Bimal Matilal reminds us that western scholars were fascinated by the highly speculative metaphysical system that occupied the overlap between religion and philosophy. And Indian intellectuals, after centuries of foreign domination, were looking for an identity that could help them assert themselves. Some national leaders sought an escape in the mythical aura of Indian spirituality. As a result, philosophy remained identified with mysticism, and was regarded as inseparable from religion.[11]

The problem is that these texts were abstracted from the social context defined by caste discrimination. They were seen as embodying eternal truths irrespective of the fact that these truths had been contested and challenged throughout the history of ideas, and by biographies of movements. Two, colonialists laid importance on a highly metaphysical tradition within Hinduism as constitutive of religion. They failed to consider and incorporate within the canon critical, rationalist philosophies and oppositional movements. Ironically, Indian public intellectuals and nationalists adopted the same tradition.

II

The Response to Colonial Appropriations

Given that India's past had already been appropriated by the coloniser, and the present dismissed as the disintegration of a once great civilisation, how did Indians receive, absorb, and negotiate colonial interpretations, critiques, and definitions of India's past, philosophy and religion? How did they speak back to colonialism and its many hegemonies; in what vocabularies?

There can be, of course, no single answer to the question of how Indians responded to intellectual colonialism. Some public intellectuals uncritically absorbed the philosophies of the colonial power, some mediated these intellectual resources in innovative ways, others resisted colonial epistemologies, and still others, like Gandhi, transformed both Indian and western thought. On balance, Indian intellectuals had to accomplish a double recovery. They had to reclaim their own philosophical traditions to answer the question 'who are we.' But they also had to retrieve their tradition from the metaphorically speaking acquisitive grasp of western scholars, administrators, and missionaries.

Consider the thesis that the glories of ancient India were followed by a sharp and precipitate decline of India that continues to hold proponents of the Hindu right in thrall. This thesis was first put forth by western scholars, for example, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Fredrik Hegel, among others. Hegel's dismissive comments were a response to German romanticism. Hegel's professional life unfolded during a period of intense European interest in India in the eighteenth

and the nineteenth centuries. Hegel inherited from the Romantics an attraction for the Orient, but he set out to demolish their assumptions. Accepting that, chronologically, philosophy, religion and art took root in the Orient, that is, in Persia, China, Egypt and India, he suggests that India, like China, is a phenomenon which is antique as well as modern. But it has remained stationary and fixed. "It has always been the land of imaginative aspiration and appears to us still as a fairy region, an enchanted world. In contrast with the Chinese state, which presents only the most prosaic understanding, India is the region of fantasy and sensibility."[12]

However, after explorers, missionaries, traders and commercial companies conquered India, and as the exotic became the known and presumably the mundane, it became clear that India had nothing to offer to the world. European investigation into Indian knowledge systems, and European domination, heralded the end of the search for India's mythical wisdom and 'philosophy.' India cannot teach the West; its tradition is a matter of the past; it has never reached the level of philosophy and science, which is a genuinely and uniquely European achievement.[13]

Hegel did not know Sanskrit, and he had not studied any original Indian text. His considerable knowledge of India was derived from translations of Sanskrit texts, reports of the East India Company, and the scholarship of his contemporaries. Over the years, his knowledge of India, writes Wilhelm Halbfass, became more nuanced and differentiated, and he incorporated this awareness into his later lectures and research on India.

Yet, Hegel's opinion on Indian philosophy was shaped by two factors: his response to the Indologists he drew upon, and his profound ignorance about the great debates that accompanied the consolidation of the four sacred texts --- the *Vedas*. *Philosophies*, such as *Carvaka*, *Samkhya*, *Buddhism and Jainism*, repudiated the moral authority of the *Vedas*, the Bhakti movement challenged Brahmanical authority, and Buddhist philosophers such as Nagarjuna in the second century CE gave to the world a sophisticated and rational philosophy. But the impact of these philosophies on colonial interpretations of Hinduism was practically negligible. The history of philosophy in India, concludes Hegel, is but the pre-history of Europe. "There is nothing left in India, or indeed in the Orient,

because philosophy can never return to the past, it can only incorporate the past, it is but the history of philosophy. It is [therefore] the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans," he wrote.[14] Hegel continued to be taken up by India as the birthplace and seat of philosophical learning almost three thousand years before Christ. After that, he suggested, India stagnated, ripe for conquest.

How did Indian Intellectuals React?

Ironically, Hegel's thesis on decline legitimised the colonial project that India had to be saved from its own collapse. It also motivated the endeavours of Indian intellectuals and nationalists to return to a once glorious past. This is not surprising when we recollect that the philosophies of G. W. F. Hegel, Emmanuel Kant and British idealism, ruled the world of academics after the establishment of the university system in India in the early nineteenth century. Given the dissemination of western scholarship that travelled throughout the colonised world through journalism, literature, political discourses, and academics, the minds of generations of Indians were bound to be shaped by European knowledge

systems and categories of understanding. This is explicit in the discourse of the nationalists that took from European thinkers the thesis of the greatness of ancient India, and consequent deterioration.

It is not surprising that the return to the past inescapably involved the invocation of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* or the *Vedanta*, both as an evaluative measure of the present, and an aspiration for the future. Despite the onset of a restless modernity, and the consolidation of relentless materialism in India, this ambition remains a dominant project for many.

Surprisingly, Indian intellectuals joined the Orientalist acclaim of a rich and sophisticated Vedic tradition without acknowledging its adverse impact upon society, that is, the consolidation of Brahmanical superiority. The philosopher J. N. Mohanty tells us that the *Vedas* that developed around two thousand years BCE cover an entire range of subjects, but above all they represent an exemplary spirit of enquiry into the "one being" or *'ekam sat'* that underlies the diversity of empirical phenomenon, and into the origin of all things.[15] These themes were philosophically developed in the Upanishads, a group of texts that ranged from 1000 BCE to

the time of Gautama. But if the real that we find behind the empirical nature is the universal spirit within, then what is the nature of the empirical world? This, suggests Mohanty, became the leading disputative question among commentators on the Upanishads, and various schools of Vedantic philosophy.

The lessons in wisdom given by the Vedas were challenged both by supporters and opponents of the philosophy. The main lines of division were drawn between philosophical schools that believed in the *Vedas*, and those that did not or the *Sramanic* tradition. But within the tradition, according to Mohanty, we see considerable sceptical self-criticism. Both Gautama and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism (599-527) were influenced by intellectual dissenters within the Vedic tradition. These dissidents rejected sacrificial rituals as well as *Upanisadic* monism. For example, an influential philosophy that belonged originally to the Vedic tradition had a strong strain of atheism and naturalism. This was *Samkhya* philosophy associated with the legendary figure of Kapila. The philosophy eschews notions of the Brahman and subscribes to theories of the five elements. Other sceptics refused to accept the claim that the *Vedas* code absolute knowledge,

questioned the doctrine of omniscience, and believed that the conclusions of these texts were contradictory, as well controversial.

Also excluded from dominant and metaphysical conceptualisation of Hinduism was the heretical materialist school of *Lokayata* or *Carvaka* philosophy. This philosophy was originally one of the branches of Vedic learning, but over time it developed an anti-Vedic materialism. The origin of *Carvaka* philosophy is the thesis that the self is the body, not the soul. This school of philosophy was left out of the dominant constructions of Hinduism, both by the colonialists and the nationalists. It just did not fit into the model of theism, and of the ultimate objective of the merger of soul with the divine.

The marginalisation of critical and rational philosophical schools, both by the Indologists and the nationalists, gives us cause for considerable thought. If only a rational, materialistic, empiricist and sceptical philosophical school such as *Carvaka* had been given prominence in the forging of a Hindu tradition, perhaps India would have escaped being slotted into the spiritual versus materialist dichotomy. This stereotyping of Indian society as exotic and other-worldly has

not helped us forge an equitable future. India, with all its material inequities, communalism and casteism, which erupt into conflict over material needs at the veritable drop of a hat, has been slotted into a spiritual pigeonhole.

Till today, Indian society has failed to accept the enormity of material inequities, fascinated as it is with the metaphysical spirit. In short, the privileging of a highly metaphysical tradition as the public philosophy of India leads us away from social oppressions and power. It cannot help us to pinpoint power equations or remedy the inequities.

A critical tradition could have helped us to challenge the authority of the Brahmins, identified the lacunae in a transcendental philosophy, and become more sensitive to the empirical realities of inequality, injustice, plurality and caste discrimination. Though traditions and figures that had been marginalised by this construction of Hinduism were later taken up by the subalterns, and used to counter the Brahmanical interpretations of the religion, a hierarchy had been created between high and popular Hinduism. This was produced and reproduced over time. The selectiveness with which Sanskrit texts were

studied and interpreted, and scholarship on Vedic rituals and superstitions developed, served to privilege one strand of Hinduism, fix the nature of the religion, and fulfil one of the objectives of the colonial project, to standardise religion and culture. A major tension permeated the study of Hinduism in times of colonialism and nationalism, and the construction of a binary opposition between colonialism and nationalism.

III

The Philosophical Debate

We can see this tension in the debate on the celebrated text *Svaraj in Ideas*, a lecture delivered in 1928 by Professor Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya [1875-1949]. KCB was a distinguished philosopher who held the King George V Chair at Calcutta University [now the B. N. Seal Chair]. He spoke on the theme to a gathering of students at Hoogly College. KCB began his argument by exploring what today is known as colonialism of the intellect. We, he said, speak of domination of man by man, but there is a subtler and imperceptible domination in the sphere of ideas by one culture over another. The very qualities of subtleness and imperceptibility make this

domination dangerous. If we are conscious of domination we are bound to struggle against it. Not to perceive domination as an evil and to allow it to sink into the deep recesses of the soul is slavery. "This subjection is slavery of the spirit [and], when a person can shake himself free from it, he feels as though the scales fell from his eyes. He experiences a rebirth, and that is what I call Svaraj in ideas."[16]

The scales must fall from our eyes because colonialism had paralysed the Indian mind. One would have expected, argues KCB, that after a century of contact with western ideas we could have expected contributions in a distinctive Indian style to the culture and thought of the modern world, to humane subjects like philosophy, history or literature. Countrymen who still retain a hold on the vernacular could have interpreted, say, Shakespeare, in light of the distinctive soul of India. But Indian scholars failed to use Indian epistemologies to contribute to western literature, or aesthetics, or drama, or poetry let alone philosophy. This is regrettable because it is in philosophy that we can attempt meaningful contact between the east and the west. "It is in philosophy, if anywhere, that the task of discovering the soul of India is

imperative for modern India..… Genius can unveil the soul of India in art, but it is through philosophy that we can methodologically attempt to discover it." But even if we were to attempt this, how do we confront western ideas with Indian ones? Professor Bhattacharya rejected the idea of a patchwork between two and more cultures. This, he concluded, is as offensive to the scholarly mind as a patchwork of different religious ideas is offensive to the spirit.

In any case, argued KCB, it is not important that in every case a synthesis should be attempted between the East and the West. There are certain ideas and ideals that are the product of specific cultural contexts and that cannot be translated outside these contexts. The community within which ideas and ideals flourish is the product of specific histories and soil. They hold no resonance for other cultures. But then there are also ideas and ideals that carry meaning for us, and these are the ones that need to be accepted. No society or culture can afford to reject other ideas as alien just because they emanate from the foreign soil. This would amount to national conceit and obscurantism. We have to accept some ideas and ideals as universally relevant. The Guru

must be respected. This respect has to come irrespective of the society one lives and thinks in.

For someone writing in an intensely nationalist period, KCB showed an unusual tendency towards cosmopolitanism. He was ready to accept ideas from another cultural context provided that Indian thinkers translate these ideas into their own idioms and assimilate philosophies into their own categories, languages and symbols. Europeans had till then assimilated Indian ideals into their own language and fitted them into their own categories. It was time to turn the tide, take some if not all ideals that might prove relevant for our own condition, and assimilate them into our conceptual understanding, categories, and knowledge systems.

The process was cumbersome, accepted KCB, as it involved intense study of both sets of philosophies, finding commonalities, discovery of a system of translation and integration into our own ideals. What we call universality is not a given, it involves a process of bringing together two systems of thought, two sets of assumptions, two philosophies, and two languages. What is significant is that philosophies from elsewhere must fit into our

own epistemological schemes and resist appropriation by the coloniser. The only way to appraise new ideals is to view them through our own and the only way to discover a new reverence is to deepen our old reverence. I plead for a genuine translation of foreign ideas into our native ideas before we accept or reject them, argued Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya. Let us everywhere think in our own concepts; it is only thus that we can think productively on our own account. Our own ideas and ideals that pulsate in the life of the masses are the only touchstone for the relevance of other ideas. We can draw upon other traditions and construct a fund of metaphors to assist in the interpretation of our own thought. The moment we learn to do this, he concluded, we achieve Svaraj in ideas. In effect, Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya inverted the colonial project of interpreting Indian texts, laws, and practices through the prism of their own commitments.

IV

Furthering the Debate

Interestingly, though KCB elegantly and eloquently problematised ideas and ideals coming from elsewhere, he nowhere

interrogated the Indian tradition. This was taken as a given. As a philosopher he must have realised that what was naturalised as the dominant Indian or religious tradition had been constructed through the conceptual lens of colonial epistemologies. Is there one system of thought in Indian philosophy? What about other traditions that do not fit within the dominant philosophical system --- metaphysical, Brahmanical, and upper-caste? For instance, the heretical materialist school of *Lokayata* or *Carvaka* philosophy was left out of the dominant constructions of Hinduism, both by the colonialists and the nationalists. Buddhism, that had gained support as an acute and sharp critique of Brahmanical Hinduism, had been colonised by incorporating it into the Vedantic tradition and by regarding Gautama Buddha as the ninth avatar of Hinduism. KCB refused to question the spiritual ideals of our own culture. They were beyond all scrutiny. Nor did he see that the textual tradition was different from practice. Can we have a theory of Hinduism that is shorn of caste discrimination?

The problem of Indian or even indigenous philosophy versus western philosophy did not leave intellectual debate

after independence. In 1984 a special issue of the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* focussed on the contributions of and critiques of Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya. Let us focus on one set of critiques because they illustrate the dilemma of privileging some authentic version of Indian culture. Which strand of the Indian spirit, asked Dharmendra Goel, is representative of the Indian self? We, he accepted, can endorse KCB's thesis of colonisation of the mind and intellectual slavery that has eroded the autonomy of the colonised soul. But there are blind spots in his non-discriminating sleep-walk through the long and hoary spiritual legacy and cultural identity of Indian society. There is a problem with his bland affirmation of unique spiritual values that India possesses. KCB, argued Goel, hardly took the trouble of grasping the non-ideational features of Indian civilisation. He reifies ideals, but whose ideals? Those of Vedic Sanskrit Pandits? Are these everybody's ideals?

The panorama of India's past, continued Goel, which extended for more than five centuries, cannot be articulated within the limited perspective of Sanskrit traditions, even if we add to the *Vedas* the *Dharamshastras*, the epics, poetic classics, theatre, dramaturgy

nitishastras, and even social institutions. The *ahimsa* of medieval Brahmanic *Vaishnavism* is influenced by Buddhism and other non-Aryan sources. The sexuality of Tantric Shaktism is derived from primitive oral beliefs and rituals. Tribals include Brahmanical texts in their oral myths. There is no homogenous and continuous identity of ideals and ideas throughout inconsistent and eclectic traditions. What is dharma? No one seems to know. The great grammarian, philosopher and yogi Bhartrihari of the classical period wrote, like Shankara, erotic and evocative lyrics even as he advocated the purity of desire and penance; those staples of the tradition that came down from the *Vedas*. If one is burdened with tradition, the tradition has to be left unproblematized.[17]

The question is relevant. Does reverence for one's tradition lead to creativity? Does it allow the mind to exercise critical and reflective judgement on what is handed down to us? Another philosopher, Rajendra Prasad, writing in the same special issue of the journal, pointed to the hero of U. R. Ananthmurthi's *Samsara-Pranescarya*. Ananthamurthi's protagonist is a reputed, sincere and erudite scholar who is steeped in his tradition. But he

is unable to deal with a complex moral situation. What do you do with the dead body of a renegade Brahmin? The Brahmins of the village had refused to let the renegade be cremated in their own cremation ground. But Pranescharya had no answer to this complex issue, though he was celebrated as a learned man. His reverence for the *Vedas* had enslaved his mind to the extent of depriving him of man's natural equipment of reason. This might have allowed him to find a solution. People like Pranescharya can only regain Svaraj in ideas, suggested Prasad, when they shake off an indigenous tradition.[18]

We see the problem. An escape out of colonised tradition does not imply that our tradition has been left unproblematised. The west versus the rest is a false equation. What we call the cultural-religious tradition is plural and incommensurate. The dominant tradition, which we equate with Hinduism and with culture, is a product of the nineteenth century. In order to construct a homogenous Hinduism, not only the colonialists but our givers of knowledge and our nationalists had excluded other, more critical and interrogative traditions that would have helped us to come to terms with our political predicaments. A postcolonial

scholar has to shake off not only the western but the chains of one's own tradition. This is not to renounce our culture but to view it with a sense of scepticism and enquiry, to use it as a resource to think with and think through human predicaments.

V

Conclusion and a Suggestion

How do we approach our own tradition? My suggestion is that we familiarise our students with the fact that there is no easy answer to the dilemmas of the human condition. Life is messy and chaotic, we cannot rely only on what we call culture, and we have to think imaginatively to get out of this grip. Perhaps we should be able to understand our culture as a resource for telling us that life is a set of paradoxes and dilemmas that cannot be solved but, as the philosopher Bimal Matilal suggests, only resolved.

Dilemmas, wrote the philosopher Bimal Matilal, are like paradoxes, and genuine paradoxes are seldom solved. "They are generally speaking, resolved or dissolved. Those philosophers and logicians, who have tried over the centuries to solve the well-

known logical and semantic paradoxes, have more often than not created new problems elsewhere in the conceptual apparatus, which exposes the non-existence of a universally accepted solution. Can moral dilemmas be put into the same category as unsolvable paradoxes?" Theologians, ethicists, and "strong-minded moral philosophers," he goes on to argue, have often been reluctant to admit the reality of moral dilemmas. If there can be genuine unresolvable moral dilemmas in a moral system, then it would be good as courting defeat in any attempt to formulate rational moral theories.[19] But we are, suggests the philosopher, fated to inhabit a world of irresolvable dilemmas.

Matilal illustrates his argument with a story found in an Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. A hermit named Kausika had vowed to always tell the truth because he wanted to go to heaven when he died. One day he was sitting near a cross road, and he saw a gang of bandits pursuing a group of travellers. The bandits asked the hermit the direction in which their quarry had fled. Kausika, faithful to his vow, gave them the direction. People were looted and killed. And Kausika did not ascend to

heaven. His duty to tell the truth had violated his duty to uphold non-violence.

Moral dilemmas, suggests Matilal, arise when the agent is committed to two or more moral obligations, but the obligation to do X cannot be fulfilled without violating the obligation to do Y. Dilemmas present irreconcilable options, and our decisions cannot be but irrational, or based upon grounds other than moral. This is contrary to the system of Kantian ethics. For Kant, objective practical rules should form a harmonious whole and a consistent system. The system presumes that two mutually opposing rules cannot be necessary at the same time. In Kantian ethics, truth telling gets the highest priority, as does keeping of promises. This is equally true in the Indian systems of ethics that extol truth telling as *satya-rakhsa* (protection of the truth) along with *ahimsa* or non-violence. But when two equally strong obligations --- that of truth telling and that of saving lives --- conflict, we have to make a choice.[20] It is here that we have to think imaginatively.

For instance, suggests Matilal, Kausika could have told the bandits that though he knew which way the travellers had gone, he

would not share this information. He could simply have kept quiet. But he interpreted his commitment to truth unthinkingly and unimaginatively, and innocent lives were lost. We learn from Matilal that the dilemmas we find ourselves in might well prove intractable, but there is no reason why we cannot negotiate them with some degree of resourcefulness and ingenuity. We have to think deeply before we adopt a course of action; we have to enter into a debate with ourselves, we have to understand the significance of doubting our own state of knowledge. The advantage of the philosophical virtue of doubt is that it forces a rethink, forces us to know that we do not know enough, forces us to sometimes retract, and if we proceed, proceed cautiously, particularly if valuable human lives are at stake.

The poet W. H. Auden was to write in another context:

"Whether conditioned by God, or their neural structures, still/

All men have this common creed, account for it as you will/

The Truth is one and incapable of contradiction/

All knowledge that conflicts with itself is Poetic Fiction."[21]

Contradictions are not only a feature of poetic fiction; they permeate the understandings of our history and of our culture. We must teach our students culture, but we should also teach them that in an imperfect world there are no easy interpretations of culture. After all, Raymond Williams was to suggest that culture is one of the most difficult words in the dictionary.

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