CRITIQUING BRAHMANISM
A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

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"Brahmanism and Capitalism, these two are the real enemies of the workers." —Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

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Preface

Keen on learning Marathi, using the forced idle time I would have to spend in the Yerwada Central Prison (Pune), I decided to proceed by combining a study of its grammar with a reading of some Marathi text. (This model was supplied by the method the mathematician and historian D. D. Kosambi used to learn Sanskrit.) Mo Ra Valimbe's *Sugam Marathi Vyakaran* and B. G. Tilak's *Gita Rahasya* became my study aids, supplemented with dictionaries and generous assistance from fellow prisoners, most of them being Marathis. I already knew of Tilak's work and the circumstances of his writing it while imprisoned by the British, convicted of sedition. This was one reason for making my choice. The other was the sure chance of getting a book on the *Gita*, and that too written by Tilak, passed through the prison walls. That was a time when even dictionaries needed the backing of court orders to reach me! My choice turned out to be quite productive in learning the language, with an added, unexpected bonus. Tilak's systematic exposition and defence of the philosophy and theology underlying the *Bhagavad Gita* and the ethics it propounded was of immense help in ordering my own thinking. Most of the essays collected here represent its fruits.

The *Gita Rahasya*, which includes the *Gita* as commented on by Tilak, gave me a better understanding of Brahmanism's philosophy *(Advaita)*, its theology, logic and the foundations of its ethics. Some critical ideas I had put down in brief in earlier writings could now be sharpened and expanded. Facets and nuances I had missed could now be dealt with. This permitted a deeper and more exhaustive critique. Current concerns over the direction in which the country is being taken became an added spur.

For any critique to be creative it must go beyond exposure and refutation and become an occasion for self-critical reflection. Elements in one's thinking that identify with those being criticised must be searched out. Some of the essays therefore also address what I consider to be problems in the practice of Marxist theory. Brahmanism's absolute monism, the employment of "pure" categories in its elaboration, its ambivalence and subjectivity—all of these have their resonance in the Communist movement. True, the movement already has its criticism of eclecticism,

mechanical thought and so on. Nevertheless, an examination of issues concerning the thinking and practice of the movement in India, in the light of a critique of Brahmanism, is worthwhile. After all, the ideological milieu, and even the grammar and vocabularies of our languages, carry the stamp of Brahmanism.

These essays were written over a period of three years. While writing them I could not access reference materials or do any cross checking, since it was "not allowed". Later, I had the benefit of getting them commented on by comrade VV and others. Some additions and corrections have been made accordingly, as well as in the light of some new reading I could do after coming out on bail. But factual errors may still persist. My rendering of quotes from Marathi may not be accurate. Despite my best efforts I haven't been able to locate reliable authentic translations. The *Gita Rahasya* website gives no indication of an English translation. Despite such potential infirmities, I am confident that the overall thrust of the arguments these essays advance will still hold up to scrutiny. I hope they will be of help in developing the critique of Brahmanism, encouraging wider debate and aiding the practical concretisation of immediate concerns.

Before concluding, I must mention the effort and time put in by the editorial team of Navayan Publishers, led by S. Anand, who went through this collection and came up with several proposals to improve it. They certainly would have made for a better reading experience. But that would mean a diversion from other tasks and delay, which was unacceptable. Written as a contribution to the political struggle against Brahmanist Hindu fascism, I keenly felt that this collection of essays should be published at the earliest, given the developments taking place in our country. Some of their suggestions have been incorporated, though much had to be left out.

The idea was to bring it out by April on our own, but the pandemic delayed it. Moreover, the onerous tasks of pre-publication also proved more than expected. That hurdle was overcome through the timely initiative of the Foreign Languages Press, Paris. This publisher is dedicated to bringing out revolutionary literature, ensuring that their books remain affordable to all, all the while maintaining high standards in publishing.

They already have an impressive list of titles, ranging from the classics of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to contemporary writings. A proposal for simultaneous publication, both by FLP and Kanal, was worked out and the final product is now before you. Apart from the dedicated labour of the FLP Collective, a number of comrades and friends have assisted in typing and proofreading the handwritten manuscripts, as well as in raising funds. I thank them all, with the usual caveat that I alone am responsible for all of its errors.

In a perspicacious observation made at a worker's conference Dr. B. R. Ambedkar remarked that "Brahmanism and capitalism are the two enemies of the workers". This also implied that the struggle against the one should be complemented by that against the other. And, as a corollary, those fighting against one should necessarily engage with the other. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. Much has been written about the reasons underlying this. Much is still being written. But very little is being done in theory as well as in practice to actually bridge the gap. This collection of essays is an attempt in that direction, made from a Marxist viewpoint. Breaking away from the traditional view of recording Brahmanism as a relic of the past, properly belonging to all that has in fact been superseded by the modern, I have preferred to contextualise it within that modernity itself, without ignoring its historical origins and trajectory. Most importantly, the focus of these essays is on critiquing Brahmanism as living ideology, very much present in all spheres and aspects of our society. Given the looming threat of the "Hindu Rashtra"[1] becoming a reality through the agencies of those presently in government, these essays have made their arguments the focal point of the critique. Along with that, this collection also labours to demonstrate why it would be wrong to project them as some sort of an aberration. Rather their exclusivity is shown to be intrinsic to the inclusiveness that has hitherto been celebrated as the mark of our national ethos.

Murali
(Ajith)

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[1] Hindu Nation.

A Brief Introduction to Brahmanism

The ideas of a ruling class become the ruling ideas of that society. This observation made by Marx offers us a broad template to contextualise the dominant ideology of any social formation. Marxism demonstrates how this ideology is instrumental in the establishment, deployment and sustenance of state power. Antonio Gramsci expanded on the theme through his concept of hegemony. Hegemony is the domination established by a ruling class in the ideological sphere through shaping a consensus, unconsciously internalised by the ruled. The concept of dominant ideology has been further refined and added to by many others. The means of its reproduction, mechanisms through which it influences and shapes the ideological world of the masses and the various institutions of the society that partake in this have been the subject of much study. Through all of this, Marx's guidance relating the dominant ideology to specific interests of the dominant class remains essential. It grasps the crux of the matter.

The dominant ruling class changes with radical changes in the social system. Accordingly, the ruling ideology also undergoes change. Old values are condemned. New ones take their place. For example, loyalty to the king was a cornerstone of feudal ideology. It is anathema for the ethos of capitalism. However, along with such abrupt reversals, certain beliefs, values, and cultural traits specific to a region or country are carried on. More often than not they relate to the dominant religion, particularised by features unique to that country or region.

Similar to other spheres of ideology, the dominant religion also undergoes transformation, in keeping with the demand of the new ruling class' interests. Continuity is allowed through such refashioning. Its dynamics were different, where the new ruling class followed a different religion. Despite that, where the deposed order represented a developed civilisation, the continuity of the old would persist, no matter how different its elaborations would have become. These religio-cultural beliefs, values and traits reside at the core of the ruling-class ideology. This is precisely the status of Brahmanism in India. It lies at the very centre of the ideological makeup, the hegemony of the comprador-bureaucrat bour-

geoisie and the feudal lords. It is instrumental in the consensus shaped and deployed by these classes to legitimise their rule. And thus it serves imperialism.

Brahmanism is an ensemble of philosophical, theological, ethical, cultural, social and economic views and associated values. Though closely related to each other, it is still possible and necessary to differentiate Hinduism from Brahmanism. Hinduism, as such, is a term which, over the past few centuries, has come to stand in as a common appellation for a number of belief systems. This was made possible by some features and core beliefs they share. But this has not eliminated their distinctiveness. Among them, a greater or lesser presence of Brahmanism stands out. Some even have their origins in fierce anti-Brahmanism. This therefore allows for the possibility of differentiating Brahmanism from Hinduism.

Some sections of the ruling classes and their ideologues have described Hinduism as a common "way of life". It stands contradicted by cultural diversities prominently and widely seen among Hindus themselves. Let alone "way of life", even the "ways of worship" of Hindu castes living in the same cultural region are quite varied. Ever since the beginning of colonial rule, attempts were being made to unify the Hindus. Over the past few decades this has taken on a specific hue. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its cohorts have made conscious, concerted moves to steamroll these varying belief systems into their brand of a uniform, explicitly Brahmanist, North Indian version of Vaisihnavite Hinduism. Though they have already made some headway, contrary streams are still holding out. And that makes it all the more necessary to differentiate between Brahmanism and Hinduism.

Brahamanism cannot be reduced to something solely related to Brahmins, even though they have been instrumental in its development and sustenance. In fact, the Vedic period itself records sages from the Brahmin *varna* who propounded views diametrically opposed to the key precepts of Brahmanism. Besides, members of other *varnas*, the *Kshatriya* king Janaka for example, have contributed to or refined Brahmanism. In the middle ages and modern period, people from castes classified as *Shudras* have played a similar role. Thus, the Brahmanism that is articulated today is a product of the *Savarnas* as a whole. They form its social

base. Moreover, as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has pointed out, Brahmanism has influenced all classes and castes. Along the way, it has also penetrated all religions in South Asia to a greater or lesser degree.[2]

The ancient *varna* system and the existing caste system were given form to and sustained by Brahmanism as a division of labour and division of labourers. It propounded '*karma*', i.e. pre-ordained, *varna*/caste-bound duty as an inescapable universal law and gave it a sacred stamp. It thus sanctioned the inhuman exploitation and oppression of those literally excluded from community life as *Shudras* and as *Dalits*. They were (and still are) the main, direct producers. But they had to (have to) live in extreme drudgery and deprivation, subject to the worst form of social abuse. In some parts of the sub-continent, *Dalits* were traded or rented out as chattel as recently as the late 19th century. They were denied rights to the land, even as tenants.

During the colonial period and later, some of these despicable features were eliminated or mitigated. But the caste system with its specific forms of oppression and exclusion continues to exist; it permeates all spheres of society. Brahmanism is contemptuous of manual labour and extols mental labour. It is thus instrumental in reproducing and maintaining the division between mental and manual labour, a prominent feature of all exploitative societies.

Brahmanism disparages women as polluters and demeans them as agency-less servitors. Thus it promotes patriarchy. It commended such

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[2] *Varnasrama* is a four-fold social division: *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya* and *Shudra*. Each of them were considered as a *varna*. Brahmanism claims that it was divinely ordained. The Purusasukta stanzas of the *Rg Veda* claim that these four *varnas* were born from the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet respectively of the *Purusha* (the cosmic being). The *Brahmin* was the priestly section, *Kshatriyas* kings and warriors, *Vaisyas* traders and peasants and *Shudras* the menial servitors of these three *varnas*.

The *varna* order transformed into the *jati* order (caste) in the early centuries of the common era. There are several theories explaining this transition, from Marxist as well as non-Marxist viewpoints. What is notable is that *jatis* and their *upajatis* (sub-categories) are (and were) specific to cultural regions and nationalities. However, *varna* continues as a broad categorisation.

All the four varnas come within the broad category of *savarna*, literally those with *varna*. The remaining castes, including untouchables, come within the *avarna*, those without *varna*. Today this includes the Dalits and the intermediary castes (noted in government records as Scheduled Caste [SC] and Other Backward Castes [OBC])

hateful practices like *Sati*[3], child marriage and forced seclusion of widows. Though women scholars were occasionally mentioned in Upanishadic texts, later texts like the *Manusmriti*[4] explicitly denied all freedom to women. They were placed in the same category as *Shudras*. This retrogressive attitude lingers on in present day biases against educating women and in female foeticide, to give some examples.

Brahmanism seeks and retains domination through assimilation and accommodation. This is its method of proselytisation. It allows space for some of the beliefs, deities, customs, etc. of an assimilated people. But it simultaneously modifies them. They are then integrated at lesser levels in its own theology, pantheon and ethics. The whole process allows Brahmanism to appear as quite tolerant, even while it firmly consolidates its hegemony. At its core, Brahmanism nurtures racism, born of its concept of the *Aryavarta* and its people as exalted.[5] This generates an arrogant attitude of despising ethnic minorities like *Adivasi* peoples, those with dark skin colour and those from different racial stocks like the various peoples of the North-Eastern regions of India. All of Brahmanism's accommodation and assimilation only serve to reproduce and consolidate this reactionary exclusivist core.

According to Brahmanism, every individual is bound by pre-ordained caste *(varna)* duty, i.e. *karma*. Ultimate liberation is possible only by sticking to it without fail. *Moksha*, liberation of the soul, depends on the elimination of *karma*. Evidently, humans are the sole species capable

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[3] Ritual suicide (mostly forced) of the widow on the husband's pyre.

[4] The *Manusmriti* is an ancient legal text of Brahmanism.

[5] "Aryavarta, that is the land of the well-bred, the land between the Ganga and Jamuna, where the black antelope roams without hindrance, that land where sacred deeds serving *dharma* take place". –translated from a Marathi rendering of Vashishta Dharmasutra (1.12, 1.13), Maharashtra Times, 7-10-2016. Patrick Olivelle's rendering of the Vashishta Dharmasutra as seen in his *Dharmasutras*, OUP, Oxford, 1999 is as follows: "The region east of where the Sarasvati disappears, west of Kalaka forest, north of Pariyatra mountains, and south of the Himalayas is the land of the Aryas; or else, north of the Vindhya mountains. The Laws and practices of that region should be recognized as authoritative everywhere, but not others found in regions with Laws contrary to those. According to some, the land of the Aryas is the region between the Ganges and Yamuna. According to others, Vedic splendour extends as far as the black antelope roams east of the boundary river and west of where the sun rises. What men who have a deep knowledge of the three Vedas and are learned in the Law declare to be the pure and purifying Law, that, undoubtedly, is the Law". (p. 248-249)

of this because only they have consciousness. The *atma* (soul) can communicate through it and bring about realisation of the unity of *atma* and *paramatma* (the Absolute). Hence human birth is declared by this theory as something exalted.[6] The fatalist concept of *karma* is a key component of the hegemonic consensus Brahmanism helps to shape.

Advaita (non-dual thought), its core philosophy, is claimed to have enjoyed supremacy in South Asian philosophy. The roots of this philosophy go back all the way until the Vedic period. Yet, it had in fact, occupied the prime position only for brief spells. Its resurrection and anointment as the foremost achievement of South Asian philosophical thought and the world outlook of Hinduism was actually a product of colonial Orientalism. Progress from perceptions of multiple phenomena to conceptualisation of the unity among them was an important accomplishment of the monism seen in *Advaita*. But it was absolutist. Together with its idealism that declared objective reality and its diversity as unreal, as "maya", *Advaita's* absolute monism created a dead end in the *Vedanta* stream of South Asian philosophy. This was finally overcome by rupturing from absolute monism and dislodging Advaita from its prime position. But it continued to provide the philosophical basis for Brahmanism's deviousness. These are seen in its precepts like, "unity in diversity" and the "truth is one, (though) sages call it differently". Apparently there is acceptance of diversity and different views. Beneath it lies Brahmanism's monopoly claim on truth and insistence that diversities are mere manifestations of this truth.[7]

This account of Brahmanism is by no means exhaustive or comprehensive. It only deals with some of its prominent features. All said, what stands out is the reactionary nature of Brahmanism in all its essential features and their elaborations. For centuries together, over different social systems, under diverse regimes and through various religious dispensations, Brahmanism has served as the ideological lynchpin of reaction in South Asia.

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[6] "In the carrying out of the process of creation which goes on according to the will of the Supreme, a special role has been given to humans, and the Supreme has brought them into being for it to be carried out by them"; *Gita Rahasya*, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, translated from the 26th Marathi edition, Pune, 2015, page 265. See "A Critique of Brahmanist Ethics", p. 27 of this book."

[7] See "The Limits of Absolute Monism", p. 41 of this book.

Brahmanism was the ruling ideology of the *Shudra*-holding mode of production[8] and then of various caste-feudal societies that took shape in South Asia. The division of labour of the *varna* system had some amount of flexibility. But under caste-feudalism it became very rigid. That, however, did not totally exclude elevation or demotion in social status of specific castes. Improvement in economic prospects, pressure exerted by anti-Brahmanic struggles, the rise and fall in the fortunes of royal dynasties and various other factors allowed for this internal dynamism within the rigidity of the caste system. Most notably, Brahmanism retained its hegemony through all of it.

The spread of Brahmanism and its caste system hastened, and in a certain sense, eased the incorporation of various tribal people into caste-feudal societies. Initially this promoted the growth of productive forces. Advances were made in the sciences, medicine, literature and the arts. A great deal of scattered knowledge in diverse fields and regions was collected, classified and synthesised into comprehensive theories. Previous advances made in this direction under Buddhist and Jaina[9] domination were taken over. In all of this the class and caste interests of the ruling class laid down their stamp. This was seen in the particular syntheses made, guided by Brahmanism. Denial of the local, empirical, sources of knowledge was quite prominent in the theories that were worked out. Instead, all knowledge, whether it be in the sciences or the arts, was attributed to the blessing of one or the other god from the Brahaminist pantheon.

Such appropriation of "peoples'" knowledge was not unique to Brahmanism. But it went well beyond all other ruling-class ideologies known to world history in denying knowledge to the oppressed, including women. The Brahmanist legal-moral code of caste-feudalism given in

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[8] "Resembling the slave holding mode of production in several respects, the *shudra* holding system however had its own distinct features. But despite all its distinct characteristics, the essential criterion leading to its nomenclature is derived from the condition of labour; that of *Shudra* helotage; a form exclusive to this period". Readers are directed to *Making History: Karnataka's People and their Past – Volume 1*, Saki, Vimukti Prakashana, Bengaluru, 1998, from which this quote has been taken (p. 133), for a fuller elaboration of this concept. Saki, comrade Saket Rajan, was secretary of the Karnataka State Committee of the CPI (Maoist). He was martyred in 2004 while participating in PLGA activities in the Western Ghats.

[9] Buddhism and Jainism are two religions that emerged in the South Asia in ancient times, contesting the beliefs and rituals of Vedic Brahmanism.

the *Manusmriti* calls for pouring molten lead in the ears of a *Shudra* who commits the "offence" of listening to the recital of the *Vedas*.[10] This reactionary stance led to an unbridgeable gap between manual and mental labour. It caused great harm to the further advance of science and technology. The empirical sources of knowledge, restricted to the labouring castes, were shut off. This shrivelled up theory, monopolised as it was by the Brahmans and other elites. Practice, quite naturally, floundered in repetitious ruts, bereft of new insights from theory.

The caste system, with its graded inequality and division of labour, greatly facilitated control over the labouring masses. Hence, irrespective of religious orientation, whether Islamic, Buddhist, Sikh or Christian, every ruling class took care to retain it. The traditional *Kshatriya* kings were displaced during Turk, Mogul, Afghan and Sikh reigns. Yet they, and the Brahmin castes, continued to be part of the ruling class as a whole. The caste system continued with some modifications.

Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Christianity explicitly exclude any form of social segregation like caste. Yet caste has become an inseparable part of these religious communities in South Asia. Brahmanism retained an influential role in the ruling ideology of every kingdom, no matter what the religious belief of the ruler. And thus, its characteristic of being at the core of everything reactionary in South Asia was maintained.

During the Middle Ages, some castes considered as *Shudras* succeeded in elevating their social status and economic position. This laid the foundation for the later forging of *Savarna* caste blocs. Under colonial domination they received a major boost. That became the basis for conceiving of a single Hindu community spanning the whole sub-continent. However, this was not premised on the elimination of caste, though it did contain a measure of reforms. These reforms were brought about by two factors. One of them was the challenge posed by Christian (Victorian) values promoted by colonialism. The other was the pressure exerted by the *Shudra* and *Avarna* castes. The former were keen to ease their way into further advances within the emerging *Savarna* blocs. The latter sought

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[10] *Vedas* refers to a large body of religious texts. Passed on over centuries as spoken texts, they were later recorded in Sanskrit and are considered as foundational scriptures by Brahmanism.

to overturn the caste system itself. Both of them challenged Brahmanist values and practices to a greater or lesser degree. Yet the reforms proposed and debated as part of the formation of a unified Hindu community were essentially shaped and led by Brahmanism itself.

The Brahmanist elites' response to colonial modernity was uneven. In some regions they turned their back on it. In others, mostly regions that became major centres of colonial rule, a prominent section of the local elite adapted to and strove to profit from it in all spheres of their lives. This section identified the opportunity to regain the ruler's seat in the future on the strength of a Hindu majority. This would be done by relying on the "rule of the majority" principle seen in parliamentary democracy. Their efforts to forge a unified Hindu community were largely led by such calculations. The reforms they promoted were meant to serve this cause, apart from allowing their own advance under colonialism. Colonial Orientalism's construct of an ancient Aryan Golden Age and its anointing of *Advaita* as the height of philosophical achievements in South Asia provided a powerful impetus for the growth of this reform stream. Raja Rammohan Roy was one of its main initiators. Swami Dayanand Saraswati was an important theological proponent. At a much later stage, M. K. Gandhi worked to bring in intermediary and *Dalit* castes into this stream by adding suitable political and social dimensions.

Colonialism led to the emergence of new classes like the comprador traders and urban middle classes. An elite intelligentsia greatly influenced by Western mores grew. All of these classes and strata were overwhelmingly *Savarna*, with a preponderance of *Brahmins*. While aping their colonial masters in public life they retained most of Brahmanism's casteist, patriarchal, feudal values and practices in the private sphere. And that was equally true of those in favour of reforms.

From its initial period, colonialism started transforming caste-feudalism. Capitalist relations of trade and production were steadily promoted. Imperialism with its wider investment of finance capital, gave a big boost to this process. Unlike the capitalism that emerged and grew in Western Europe by fundamentally eliminating feudalism, the one spawned by imperialism in the colonies was intertwined with feudalism. It served both imperialism and feudalism. Mao Zedong termed it 'bureau-

crat capitalism', represented by the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie. Elements of this class took form in British India and the numerous petty kingdoms of the sub-continent. Over the period of colonial rule they began to coalesce into a single class. Their social base was *Savarna*, mainly *Brahmin, Kshatriya* and *Vaishya*. Jainas, as well as Christian and Muslim *Savarnas* were also a part of it. Brahmanism was an essential part of the ideological outlook of this new bourgeois class. They shared it with the feudal classes with whom they retained many ties, social and as well as economic.

Though sharing Brahmanism in common, these local elite classes had major differences among themselves on how it was to be adopted and articulated under modern conditions. Initially this was to a great extent centred on colonial reform measures, a part of its so-called civilising mission. By this time the *Shudra* castes had made significant advances. They were keen on more reforms that would loosen up caste structures sufficiently to further enable their growth. Apart from this, from the late 19th-early 20th century onwards, intermediate and *Dalit* castes entered the path of struggle against the caste order. They started to improve their economic status and were pushing against casteist barriers. All of these factors made the matter of reforming Brahmanism all the more crucial and complex. Under these circumstances, a division between liberal and diehard wings of the *Savarnas* emerged and gradually became rigid.

The latter, epitomised by B. G. Tilak and his colleagues, were vehemently opposed to colonial reforms. To them it was a hidden assault on the basic tenets of Brahmanism. That did not mean that they were insisting on sticking to the Brahmanism of the bygone caste-feudal period. While they opposed reforms promoted by colonialism, such as women's education and prevention of child marriages for example, theirs was not an outright rejection. Rather, their stance was that all of these were not part of original ancient Brahmanist social more. They claimed that they were later additions caused by its corruption. Hence, they demanded that Brahmanism itself should guide the changes demanded by modern conditions instead of basing them on a critique of Brahmanist thought and practices.

Their stance was also largely informed by their anti-colonialism (not anti-imperialism).[11] They observed that much of the thinking underlying the reforms and the accompanying critique of existing practices came from the standpoint of the coloniser. That was certainly true. However, their opposition was by no means consistent. Along with their pro-reform opponents, they too shared in applauding what was being described as the "beneficial outcomes" of colonial rule. The very standards and proofs they relied on to declare the superiority of pristine Brahmanism were those offered by Western thought and conditioned by colonial modernity. In essence, they were trying to retain explicit, traditionalist Brahmanist views and its practices as much as possible under the cover of a fake national pride.

The opposite stream initially addressed caste practices and rituals that hindered the advance of *Savarnas* under colonial modernity. A major change took place with the rise of Gandhi to the leadership of the Indian National Congress (INC). He strove to evolve and promote a benign form of Brahmanism, suited to the new situation. The stress was on its accommodative character. It was particularly directed at retaining the *Dalits* and intermediary castes under the hegemony of Brahmanism. These castes had started organising independently and articulating their demands in opposition to the *Savarna* bloc. The possibility of their conversion to other religions also loomed. In the given conditions, diehard, orthodox Brahmanism advocated by Tilak and companions was proving counter-productive. Conditions were thus suited for the acceptance and ascendency of the Gandhian variation among the *Savarna* elite and middle class.

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[11] Anti-colonialism refers to the opposition shown by a growing section of the local elite to direct British rule. Starting from seeking positions in the colonial government, they went on to demand "dominion status". (Dominions were semi-independent countries with legislative independence, remaining within the British Empire.) Tilak's often quoted declaration, "*Swaraj* is my birth right," actually referred to "Home Rule", i.e. "dominion status". "Swaraj" as total independence was formally adopted by the Indian National Congress much later. This came through the pressure from the revolutionary nationalist movement and growing communist and Left movements. Even then, "independence" as framed by the Congress did not mean breaking off from imperialism—hence, the differentiation of "anti-colonialism" and "anti-imperialism".

The Gandhian refashioning of the evolving hegemonic consensus had to take into consideration the new challenges; it had to offset and neutralise them. The religious communal divide also had to be addressed. This divide was a combined product of colonial "divide and rule" policies and the sectarian interests of the Hindu and Muslim elites. Mobilisation of peasants, workers and students on class lines, breaking away from and weakening traditional ties of caste and religion, the growing influence of communism and progressive thought in general and the strengthening of a radical anti-imperialist current of struggle were additional developments. In their totality, these factors threatened to upset the hegemonic consensus being forged. The Gandhian shaping of hegemony sought to overcome these threats by accommodating, in part, the concerns underlying them. It represented an application in modern conditions of the age-old Brahmanist method of domination through assimilative accommodation.

This was also a process of forging a common ideological frame unifying the various sections of comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie and feudal lords: the "ruling classes in waiting". The imagining of an Indian nation existing from antiquity and positing the task of regaining its assumed world status and glory through anti-colonial struggle were prominent aspects of the political dimension of the new consensus being shaped. Elements of modern bourgeois thought such as nationalism, and later, economic development, were thus incorporated within an essentially Brahmanist hegemony. Gandhi was instrumental in this endeavour, making its modern political dimension explicit, even while weaving it into a Brahmanic fabric with the liberal deployment of Hindu symbols. Many others also contributed, from the littérateur Rabindranath Tagore to the modernist Jawaharlal Nehru. Even if their views were often at variance in specific instances, the Brahmanist vision of "unity in diversity", now concretised in the imagining of an Indian nation, was a common theme.

Under colonialism, diverse nationalities and far-flung regions were unified under centralised rule, spanning the whole subcontinent. Tutoring their local elites in the coloniser's language and values promoted a new type of inter-communication. This was the material basis that allowed

the imagining of an Indian nation. Brahmanism's dream of a "Bharath"[12] covering the whole subcontinent could thus acquire a new life, now as a single country. Simultaneously, through providing a sense of ancient origins, Brahmanism made it possible to conceive what was actually an outcome of colonial rule as the resurgence of a past that had been held back. It thus contributed massively to the concealment of the foreign, dependent foundations of the future rulers' concept of Indian "nationhood", in the inverted reality conveyed through the false consciousness of Indian nationalism. This was a glaring instance of Brahmanism's service to imperialism. It continues to do this.

Following the transfer of power in 1947, India, formed through the integration of petty-kingdoms with post-partition British India, became formally independent. Under neo-colonial conditions of indirect imperialist control and exploitation, the semblance of independence was of much importance both for the new ruling classes as well as imperialism. Imperialist designed and funded projects and technology were absorbed. Deeper penetration of foreign finance capital, which heightened dependence, was heralded as development. Thus, the false consciousness of independence and development became a crucial part of the new hegemonic consensus. It has been employed to legitimise the ruling classes' exploitative reign, their aggressive Indian expansionism externally, and national, ethnic oppression internally. In all of these functions, Brahmanism's claim of an *Akhand Bharat*[13] has been an underlying theme. The myth of a*himsa* (non-violence) as a long-standing characteristic of a purported Indian civilisation was promoted to conceal this ugly truth.

Even a cursory glance through Brahminic texts will show that the civilisations guided by it were anything but non-violent. Violence, for the seizure, control and retention of state power was elaborated on in Brahmanism's sacred as well as temporal texts. Violence, to put down the *Shudra* or *Adivasi* who dared to breach Brahmanism's prohibitions was extolled. Violence, to safeguard patriarchy, even maiming women "to put

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[12] *Bharath* is used by many South Asian languages in its variations to refer to India and is recognised by its Constitution as an official name for the country, along with India.

[13] *Akhand Bharat* translates as "Undivided India".

them in their place" —all of this was accepted as legitimate acts of rule.[14] *Ahimsa* was actually a product of Buddhist/Jainist opposition to Brahmanism's ancient practice of large-scale animal sacrifice. Incorporated by Gandhi as a posture of the new hegemonic consensus, it became a tool to cover up for Brahmanism's inherently violent character.

The hegemonic construct of a moderate, inclusive Brahmanism did not go uncontested. Organised in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Hindu Mahasabha and like-minded organisations—mostly around the communal issue—efforts were made to elaborate an aggressive stance.[15] Most of this centred on the positioning of Brahmanism in Indian nationalism in the new hegemonic consensus. However, in the period leading up to the transfer of power and for several decades since, this stream did not gain traction among the elite. It had to remain as an aberrant, inconsequential trend. But it was never completely excluded. On the contrary, it had always been allowed space, albeit limited. The journey of this aggressive Brahmanist stance from the margins to a position of dominance in the hegemonic consensus of the Indian ruling classes has been the most significant development in the Indian political scene during the past few decades.

In order to gain a proper understanding of this shift we must first of all reject a simplistic view widely held in liberal, progressive circles. It reduces the matter to mere power hungry machinations of the RSS. Far

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[14] Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the principal Brahmanist text on statecraft, enumerates the kith and kin who should be eliminated to safeguard a newly established royal power. Rama, extolled as the "model king", beheaded Shambuka, the *Shudra,* for daring to do "tapas" to gain knowledge. The *Mahabharata* tells us of the *Adivasi* Ekalavya, forced to cut off his thumb for the "crime" of learning and excelling in archery. A ninth century king of a region (presently in Keralam) issued an edict demanding the slicing off of the breasts of any woman who failed to bare them before a male of a superior caste. Such are some examples of Brahmanism's violent nature.

[15] Among the leaders of this stream, VD Savarkar stands out with his singular positions. He was a prominent leader of the Hindu Mahasabha and fully shared its communal stance vis-à-vis Muslims and other religious minorities. But within this, he was distinguished by his efforts to advance a "rational" Brahmanism. He opposed untouchability and insisted on ending caste segregation in order to build a single united Hindu community. With this orientation, he supported Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Savarkar rejected the majority view of the Hinduvadis and Congress stalwarts like Gandhi on eating beef. In his view, such restrictions only helped to physically weaken the Hindus and was therefore unsuited to contemporary challenges, including that of protecting Hindus, using force where called for.

beyond manipulation of any one section, this shift is rooted in the interests of the ruling classes as a whole. It stems from the legitimacy crisis they face. The hegemonic consensus evolved under Gandhi and further supplemented by Nehru, faced severe strain from the 1960s onwards. Claims of developing an independent Indian nation were increasingly exposed by visible signs of imperialist dependency. The legitimacy of the ruling classes' state was challenged by struggles of the masses and national movements. The Naxalbari armed peasant rebellion shook the whole country.

Attempting to repair and restore the hegemonic consensus, the Congress, led by Indira Gandhi, first tried a mix of populism coupled with fascist rule. When that failed, an ideological remoulding raising the need to revise hitherto sanctioned views on caste-based reservation, secularism and other elements of the old consensus was promoted. The state-controlled, public sector-led, economic model began to be dismantled. The semblance of self-reliance made way for deeper penetration of Trans National Corporations (TNCs). All of this would take a leap with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wholesale promotion of the globalisation agenda in the 1990s. The recasting of the hegemonic consensus was accompanied by a conscious attempt to bind the *Savarna* Hindu castes into an all-India compact as a core social base of the State. Over the years, the undertones of the new hegemonic consensus being shaped became more and more apparent as an explicit Brahmanism, packaged as resurgent Hinduism. This is endorsed and promoted by all sections of the ruling classes, by their representatives across the whole political spectrum. They differ among themselves on the limits of its aggressiveness and the modes of its articulation. The extent to which the social base of Brahmanism should be widened beyond the *Savarna* bloc is also contested.

The extension of reservation to the intermediary castes (OBCs) at the Central level by the VP Singh government's implementation of the Mandal Commission's[16] recommendations and the rise of caste-based parties like the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)

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[16] The Mandal Commission refers to the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission headed by BP Mandal. It was appointed to examine the question of extending caste-based reservation to the intermediary castes at the Central government level and to recommend measures.

were two important developments during this period. Were they counter-currents to the ideological remoulding going on? These developments are often clubbed together and termed as the "Mandalisation of the polity". However, the social dynamics underlying them were distinct. They need to be examined separately. The implementation of the Mandal recommendations certainly was a tactical move aimed at checking the RSS game plan. But that was not all. It was also intended to ease caste contradictions inevitably sharpened by the promotion of explicit Brahmanism and thus related to the overall design of consensus recasting being pursued. Similar in intention was the countrywide celebration of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's birth centenary, also initiated from the Centre by the VP Singh government. In the process, he was positioned as some sort of a "Father of the Constitution" and co-opted into the ruling classes' political pantheon. His primary and prominent role in the anti-Brahmanist struggle was thus back-sided.

Struggles for getting the Mandal recommendations implemented, by going against Savarna resistance, did produce a new awareness among the oppressed castes. To that extent it brought forth a counter-current and also gave a boost to the growth of caste-based parties. But their formation and growth were essentially propelled by a different dynamics. The breaking away of various social sections from the Congress conglomeration was already underway. It was not limited to the *Dalit* and intermediary castes alone. In some states, *Savarna* castes moved away from the Congress, concerned over the prospects of being side-lined in state politics. In some others, caste and nationality interests combined, allowing the formation of a broader breakaway. It was propelled by nationality-based exploiting classes trying to shake off the control of an all-India party in order to facilitate their own growth by gaining greater and direct control over governmental power at the state level. In yet some other regions, alienation from the Congress was spurred by economic stagnation arising from the plateauing of the "Green Revolution". Overall, these developments indicated the sharpening of contradictions—economic, political and social. The new parties that emerged represented the aspirations and concerns of new elites forming within various social sections, located in the nationalities and cultural regions. It opened up the spell of coalition

governments, with and without an all-India party as anchor. The political churning this gave rise to complicated the ruling classes' ideological project as well. However, soon enough the new elites also got integrated with the ruling classes and became participants in its remoulding exercise. The metamorphosis of the BSP from *Savarna*-baiting to locating its own symbols in Brahmanist iconography is a striking example of this transition.

Other than its extreme aggressiveness, the shaping being given by the RSS to the hegemonic consensus has its own specificity. They are born of compulsions particular to it. To put its stamp on the refashioning of the hegemonic consensus, the RSS must recast it altogether by displacing and marginalising the dominant Gandhi-Nehru motif. This is being done through an exercise in de-hyphenation. While Gandhi is given a makeover projecting his "localness", Nehru is vehemently excluded, emphasising his "Westernness". The Congress has staked monopoly claim on representing the Indian nation all along, since it was the main political stream in the anti-colonial struggle. This was a major aspect of the old consensus. The Gandhi-Nehru legacy is firmly enmeshed with it. So long as that legacy retains some credibility, the formal enthroning of aggressive Brahmanism at the core of the new hegemonic consensus cannot be realised with full force. Crude substitution of the RSS' aggressive stance in place of the benign Gandhi-Nehru motif, while allowing the latter's claim to supremacy in anti-colonial pedigree to remain is not feasible. The historical record of Sangh Parivar and its founder leaders simply won't allow it. They kept away from the anti-British struggle. The broader Hindutva forces also fared no better.

Given this burden of its past, the RSS has been pursuing a multipronged strategy aimed at manufacturing its own "nationalist" discourse. This ranges from chauvinism centred on flaunting Brahmanic symbols and slogans, to the appropriation of icons of past struggles, social as well as national. The RSS is energetically trying to offset the Congress' monopoly claim on being the leader of the anti-British struggle. With this in mind it publicises all the other streams, hitherto ignored or side-lined in the official narrative. In all of this, repositioning or rereading them as votaries of Hindutva, even if as mild ones, is sought to be realised.

Liberal intellectuals, the Congress and the parliamentary Left, try to resist this by summoning the anti-communal stance of those whom the RSS seeks to appropriate. But that will hardly make a dent. Most of those leaders were from the elite. They retained much of their Brahmanist upbringing. This was expressed in their thoughts and practice. A number of militant, non-Congress, anti-British movements deployed Hindu symbols and motifs as markers of their nationalism. As for icons of the anti-Brahmanist stream, the social reformers, a simple appeal to their teachings will not be of help today, in opposing the RSS co-option game plan. An elite has emerged from within the oppressed castes that formed the social base of those movements. They are increasingly Brahmanised in direct proportion to the growth of their exploitative interests. They, on their own, have been "sanitising" their struggling pasts and its leaders to suit them to their current class interests and supposedly improved social status. Hence, there is much that is complementary between the dynamics governing this elite and the RSS' appropriation strategy. Since these elite still enjoy considerable influence among the oppressed masses, this complementarity has serious implications.

The ruling classes have been able to proceed with refashioning/recasting their hegemonic consensus without facing much ideological challenge. A crucial factor allowing this is the failure of the Left, particularly the communists, to develop a comprehensive, trenchant critique of Brahmanism and fully integrate an assault on the caste system with the class struggle. The parliamentary Left further compounded it by trying to position itself as the true defenders of the Gandhi-Nehru legacy. It even competes with the RSS to lay claim on Brahmanism's icons. Though rather late, the radical Left has made some advances in grasping the need to struggle against Brahmanism, in theory and practice. However, it faces many limitations. It has yet to translate its vision into a powerful political and ideological challenge.

The history of the critique and struggle against Brahmanist values, norms and social order goes all the way back to antiquity. Materialist thinkers like the Carvakas[17] ridiculed its idealist philosophy. Buddha and

[17] *Carvakas,* also known as *Lokayatas,* were the ancient materialists of South Asia. Though the presence of its followers are recorded even in the Middle Ages, none of their texts have survived. Knowledge about their views and reasoning were obtained

Jaina theologies opposed Vedic Brahmanist rituals and beliefs. However, through a combination of internal degeneration of these religions and outright suppression, they were either Brahmanised or crushed. Even a fierce assault, such as that of the Lingayat led by Basavanna[18] in the Middle Ages, was overcome by Brahmanism. It was accommodated as yet another sect, with its own caste divisions. We see this repeated in the case of Sikhism too. In all these instances, the caste order and thus Brahmanism, have repeatedly made a comeback through the transformation in the class character of the leading strata of those who came forward to challenge Brahmanism and their becoming part of the exploitative order.

An additional dynamic pushed them in this direction. Cultural and religious practices deemed as superior by the caste system were exclusively reserved for the *Brahmin* castes. The *Kshatriya* and *Vaisya* castes were allowed some laxity in this matter. But it was totally denied to the *Shudras* and *Avarna* castes. They were forced to follow practices and norms declared as lowly and polluting. This gave rise to an intense sense of lack at the psychological level. The push to challenge the caste order was propelled in part by the urge to overcome it, to end the self-abasement it caused. Becoming "cultured" thus acquired a great significance in the process of breaking out of that humiliation. But, in the absence of a total, sustained rupture from Brahmanism at the ideological and material levels, this urge translated into efforts to gain access to previously denied Brahminist spaces, cultural practices and rituals. This inevitability resulted in their getting Brahmanised. Yet, despite such regressions, the penetrating critique on Brahmanism made by these movements remain a valuable legacy. Based on it, through generations, they have continued to inspire new upsurges.

The colonial period witnessed a series of attacks on Brahmanism and the caste system at the theoretical and social levels. Among the notable ones were those articulated by Mahatma Phule, Vaikunta Swamy, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Poykayil Johannan, EV Ramaswamy Peri-

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from the refutations seen in idealist writings.

[18] Basavanna was a 12th century social reformer, radical in his refutation of Brahmanism. Lingayat was the community he and his colleagues founded as a caste-less social grouping bound together in the worship of Siva.

yar, Sahodaran Ayyappan and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.[19] Vaikunta Swamy (from the southern extreme of Thiruvithamkoor, presently in Tamil Nadu's Kanyakumari district) explicitly targeted both *Nisan* and *Vennisan*, terms referring to the *Kshatriya* king of Thiruvithamkoor and his British suzerain. But that was an exception. All the others limited their critique to Brahmanism, leaving out its nexus with colonialism. Ground reality greatly influenced this skewed approach. Colonial rule had opened up avenues for the advance of the oppressed castes. Their articulate elite quite readily saw the colonial power as a benefactor, if not a saviour, and kept it outside the ambit of their struggle. Some among them, Periyar and Ambedkar for instance, did criticise British Rule on some occasions. Even then, they didn't make the struggle against it integral to the anti-Brahmanist struggle. The need to address the caste question in its concreteness, as a vital component of persisting semi-feudalism, was also missing. That Brahmanism was now becoming part of the ideological make-up of a modern class, the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie that had emerged under and through colonial rule, was never identified. Therefore, despite the advances made by these anti-Brahmanist leaders and movements, they failed to develop a comprehensive critique of Brahmanism. In a repetition of the past, they are in the process of being converted into hollow figureheads. Some are already well advanced in becoming Brahmanised gods.

Among the anti-Brahmanist critiques of the modern period, that of Dr. Ambedkar stands out for its depth and comprehensiveness. Ambedkar exposed the graded morality of the caste system. He pointed out that caste was a division of labourers. His declaration that "Brahmanism and

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[19] Given my limited knowledge, this list is quite restricted. Some of the names need an introduction for a wider readership. Narayana Guru insisted that all humanity is one caste and only individual differences exist among them. Ayyankali led what may have been the first *Dalit* public protest in the early decades of the 20th century claiming the right to public passage. He organised a year-long agrarian strike demanding the right to education. Poykayil Yohannan broke away from a Protestant order after realising that Christianity was also caste-ridden. He elaborated a new theology and established a religious order aptly named "God's Assembly for Direct Salvation (*Pratyaksharaksha Daiva Sabha*)". Sahodaran Ayyappan, a disciple of Narayana Guru, went beyond his teaching of "One Caste, One Religion, One God for humanity" and put forward a radical, rationalist position: "No Caste, No Religion, No God is needed for humankind". All of these stalwarts were from Thiruvithamkoor, presently part of Keralam.

Capitalism are the two real enemies of the working class" has great implications with regard to the gaining of class consciousness by the proletariat. In our conditions, the process of the proletariat becoming a "class for itself" must necessarily involve a sharp struggle against the caste system.

Dr. Ambedkar welcomed radical practices such as the promotion of inter-caste dining and marriage. Along with that, he also cautioned those who believed that these steps would lead to the end of the caste system. He directed their attention to the need to destroy the whole ideological frame sustaining it. This was the crux of his clarion call to "dynamite Hinduism" for the annihilation of caste. Inasmuch as this posed the need to make an ideological rupture, it was correct. However, in treating the matter as simply one of Hinduism, Ambedkar severely limited the scope of such rupture. Not just Hinduism—all the religions of South Asia have internalised caste and thus Brahmanism. What is needed is a wholesale attack on Brahmanism; an attack that aims at annihilating it at the ideological, political, social, cultural, psychological and economic levels.

Despite its accommodative methods, Brahmanism is extremely divisive. The more aggressive it gets, the more divisive it becomes. Hence its plans to forge a seamless Hindu Bloc inevitably get upset. Brahmanism cannot but push the oppressed into struggle. It cannot but aggravate contradictions within itself. Therefore, the prospects of struggle against it, of gaining victory over it, are quite bright; provided proper lessons are learnt from the past.

We have seen that the long history of anti-Brahminist struggles in the subcontinent has been marked by many forceful leaps. It was also noted how, on every occasion, the elevation of the caste (social) status of the strata leading the struggle and their absorption into the exploiting classes has led to the muting of the attack and its ultimate defeat. The lesson that emerges from this is the necessity to carry out the struggle against Brahmanism as an integral part of the struggle to plough over the exploitative social order that sustains it and all the classes representing this order. This, again, would only be the first step. Time and again, Brahmanism has adapted itself to different social systems. Will the ending of the present exploitative set up eliminate all grounds for another adaptive adjustment of Brahmanism? No, it won't.

So long as classes exist, so long as remnants of the caste system exist, so long as the contradiction between mental and manual labour and such differences exist, so long as patriarchy exists, Brahmanism will be able to seek out niches to lodge itself. It will then gradually spread, aiding and preparing grounds for a reactionary restoration, one that will allow it to make a complete comeback. If this is to be prevented, if it is to be completely eliminated, the process of social revolution must be pushed on. The soil that can allow Brahmanism to make a re-entry must be done away. This demands the elimination of all exploitative production relations, of all social structures that have risen upon these relations, and of all the thinking, ideas, generated by those social structures. In the past, there was no social force, no ideology capable of pursuing this task till the very end. Today, there is such a class, the proletariat and its ideology. The future of the struggle against Brahmanism is critically dependent on its creative application to this task.

A Critique of Brahmanist Ethics

I have chosen to attempt a critique of Brahmanist ethics taking Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Gita Rahasya* as a foil for a special reason, apart from its being readily available.[20] He elaboration and commentary on the ethics advanced by the *Bhagavad Gita*, remains consistently faithful to *Advaita*. *Advaita* is, at present, the dominant school of idealism confronting materialism in our context. The tradition of South Asian philosophical debate demands that one must engage with the strongest position of one's adversary. Therefore taking on idealist ethics elaborated from the viewpoint of *Advaita* as "purvapaksha"[21] would be most appropriate.

Tilak's scholarly work is a reasoned and passionate plea for "karmayoga", the path of action. The whole purpose guiding his work is the ambition to establish *karmayoga* in opposition to "jnanayoga" (the path of contemplation) or "bhaktiyoga" (the path of worship). This makes it eminently suitable for debating ethics. Ethics is, of course, present in both the contemplative and worship modes of consciousness. Yet, the mode of action surpasses both of them in this regard. In any action, the ethical question of good or bad, right or wrong, is always present, prominently and immediately. Therefore engaging with *karmayoga* is best suited for my purpose. With this as an introduction, let me get started.

Tilak subtitles his *Gita Rahasya* in English thusly: "The Hindu Philosophy of Life, Ethics and Religion". Yet, throughout the work, "Hindu" is used rather sparingly while referring to religion. "Sanatan", "Bhagavad" and "Narayan" mostly, and on a few occasions "Brahman" have been used as qualifiers for *dharma*, where this word is used in the sense of a religion. Hinduism was (and is) by no means a monolith. It is a broad range of belief systems with many visible divergences. Brahmanism justifies the *varna* (caste) system. There were (and are) other streams that opposed them. This was also true of those who upheld *Advaita*, claimed to be the core philosophy of Hinduism. These included Narayana Guru who vehemently rejected *varna*/caste divisions; he refused to accord any utility

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[20] *Gita Rahasya* [GR], Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition, Pune, 2015.

[21] *Purvapaksha* is the opponent's argument. It is a tradition in the South Asian debates to set out the opponent's point of view before criticizing it.

to them. There were also Tilak and Gandhi who justified *varna* and, by implication, caste. All of them were staunchly *Advaidi*. Given all of this, I am surely justified in treating Tilak's work as an elaboration of Brahmanist ethics, based on his reading of the *Gita*.

Unflinching adherence to one's *karma* (duty) lies at the core of Tilak's exegesis. He insists that this is the central message of the *Gita*. In order to establish this he takes up a detailed refutation of other readings of the *Gita*, which argue that its teaching is "nivritipar" (the withdrawal from *karma*) or *bhakti* (worship of god) as the path to "moksha" (liberation). *Moksha* is the liberation of the "atma" (soul) from "jani-mriti", the endless cycle of birth and death. Tilak contrasts *karmayoga* to these views; it calls for continuing to do one's *karma* ordained duties given by one's *varna*, even after gaining *jnana* (inner realisation). *Jnana* is the gaining of awareness of the unity of one's *atma* with the *parabrahma* (formless, quality-less, eternal absolute). The *parabrahma* lies beyond *maya* (illusion), beyond the illusory sensuous universe. Normally, *karma* binds one to the cycle of *jani-mriti*. Hence it may seem to be an obstacle for gaining *jnana*. Tilak argues that this won't happen if one does *karma* with a *nishkama* (unattached, disinterested) outlook. That is, doing *karma* with the attitude of remaining free of desire for or attachment to its outcome. The *nishkama karma* called for by the *Gita* does not cause binding of the *atma* in *maya*. Thus, it is not a hurdle for attaining *jnana* and ultimate *moksha*. Taking this as his frame of thought, Tilak accuses Adi Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and other *Gita* commentators of misinterpreting it in order to project their "sectarian" views foregrounding *jnana marga (path)* or *bhakti marga*.

Tilak was a leading member of what was known as the "political" wing of the Indian National Congress in its pre-Gandhi period. This wing insisted on focusing the anti-colonial struggle on gaining the right to self-rule (dominion status). Tilak and his colleagues made strident criticisms of the British rule and advocated activism.[22] Additionally, he was a prominent member of the orthodox *Savarna* grouping that tried its best to stop social reforms, or, at the least, delay them.

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[22] Though Tilak was not directly involved in armed activities, his views were quite influential among those carrying them out. VD Savarkar is said to have sent a copy of *Bomb Making*, a manual he compiled, to Tilak.

Tilak's advocacy of *karmayoga* was informed by these views; it was marshalled to substantiate them. The *Gita Rahasya* was thus intended to fulfil a political, ideological role, even while it stayed within the frame of a theological-philosophical treatise.

Tilak's dismissal of Adi Sankara and other interpreters of *Gita* as a bunch of sectarians is not quite convincing. Its text gives room for all three—*jnana marga*, *bhakti marga* and *karma marga*. However, Tilak is on more firm ground when he points out that the very purpose of the *Gita* was to overcome Arjuna's doubts, which were inhibiting action. The *Gita* urged him to make war, not sit in contemplation or pious worship.

The *Mahabharatham* portrays the Pandavas as reluctant to make war.[23] They were forced into it by the adamant refusal of the Kauravas to accede to their demand for a share of territory. In this sense they were justified in making war, but this would entail the annihilation of their own kith and kin, their revered teachers. This was Arjuna's ethical dilemma. The *Gita Rahasya* expounds *karmayoga* by elaborating on the ethics underlying Krishna's exhortations to get Arjuna to join battle. It thus seeks to answer the most fundamental question of ethics: why should or should not someone do something? Tilak's defence of *karma*yoga is thus simultaneously an exposition of Brahmanism's "ethics of action". He however, is not satisfied with a mere account of the ethics given by the *Gita*. The reader is taken on a rapid survey of alternative views. Through comparison, the supremacy of Brahmanist ethics is sought to be established.

The *Gita Rahasya* gives a three-way categorisation—the positivist or materialist, the vitalist and the spiritual (metaphysical). Drawing on a number of sources, Tilak argues that, among the three, the first cannot provide a consistent, sound basis for ethics. The second is shown to be a specific variation of the third, the spiritual. And within this, the claim is made that *Advaita*, the philosophical core of Brahmanism, is the only

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[23] The *Mahabharatham* is one of the two major epics of ancient South Asia, revered (along with the *Ramayana,* the other major epic narrating the story of prince Rama) as a foundational scripture by Hinduism. It narrates the events leading up to the Kurukshetra War between two groups of cousins, the Kaurava and Pandava princes. Arjuna was second among the Pandavas and renowned as an ace archer and warrior. Krishna functioned as his charioteer.

one that can provide a correct, consistent and comprehensive foundation for ethics.

The account of various schools of materialism given in the *Gita Rahasya* is rather superficial. At times it even descends to cheap vulgarisation. Setting this aside, let us examine the core of its accusations. Materialism, it is said, fails to provide consistent reasoning for ethics since its vision remains at the level of the visible, sensed world of objects. Tilak agrees that some materialist schools do insist that, in any action, mental satisfaction must also be considered along with material satisfaction. But he then asserts that by going beyond sensuous reality they thereby violate their own materialist premises.[24] Besides, they cannot have solid criteria to determine what would fulfil their quest for mental satisfaction. Satisfaction will always be transient and incomplete.[25]

In contrast to this, Tilak argues, the spiritual view goes beyond the sensuous world. It is guided by the realisation, acceptance, of a Supreme Being or ultimate truth, which can be appealed to. One's action can be justified in reference to it. The dos and don'ts prescribed by all religions are set by this. Tilak accepts that all religions teach love and compassion to one's fellow human beings. However, he argues, non-Vedic religions are unable to provide a coherent reasoning to substantiate this teaching. Contrarily, *Advaita's* concepts of *parabrahma* and *atma*, its teachings on their oneness and the all-pervasive presence of *parabrahma* within everything, ensures this. Since all are part of *parabrahma*, a solid basis is given by *Advaita* to see oneself in the others and behave with them as one would with oneself. *Advaita* therefore gives a consistent, correct and comprehensive foundation to base ethics on. Such, in short, is Tilak's claim about supremacy of Brahmanist ethics.

The unity of the *atma* and *nirguna parabrahma* is one of the pillars of the *Gita's* ethics of action. Krishna employs it to overcome Arjuna's ethical dilemma: why make war and bear the sin of fratricide? He teaches Arjuna that the *atma* is never born, nor does it die. Even after a person is killed, the *atma* remains. It is indestructible, imperishable, uncreatable and eternal. He who gains this knowledge can neither be killed nor kill.

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[24] GR, p. 73.
[25] Ibid, p. 63.

Just as one takes off soiled clothes and wears fresh ones, the *atma* sheds the old body and joins with a new one. Therefore, there is no point in being saddened by what happens to any material body.[26]

Apparently, this settles the matter. There is nothing ethically wrong in Arjuna waging war if he actually does not kill anyone. But is this logic really sound? Can't it be used, equally consistently, to argue the opposite, i.e. turning away from the battle? If no one can be "really killed" then what is the point in waging war? There is also the danger of this thesis of "not killing, though killing" being employed to justify plain murder. Tilak admits as much and tries to get out of this predicament through a lengthy note.[27] His defence, however, is rather lame. Tilak states that to kill one's enemy in battle as part of one's *varna* duty is justified. But, since the human body is the means to achieve *moksha*, wilfully destroying it through suicide or murder would be a grievous sin. This logic gives rise to a question. If the *atma* can never be destroyed just how does it become a sin? Since it passes from one body to another, what difference would it make if death is caused by murder, instead of battle injuries? Rather, to kill someone could well be considered as a means of "progressing" the victim's *atma* towards *moksha*.[28]

Avoiding such sticky questions, Tilak takes up the direct one. If Arjuna will not really kill anyone, why should he take the trouble to engage in bloody war? Moreover, having gained *jnana* about the oneness of *atma* and *parabrahma*, isn't avoiding war the more correct thing to do? Tilak accepts that "some other powerful reasoning" has to be advanced to answer this. In his opinion, this is in fact the crux of the ethics advanced by the *Gita*.

Unsurprisingly enough, given the Brahmanist thinking it is part of and serves, the answer, the "other powerful reason", is nothing other than an appeal to *Chathurvarna*, the graded division of society into four *varna*s. Krishna reminds Arjuna that there can be nothing more honourable for a *Kshatriya* than waging war in line with his *dharma*, i.e. duty

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[26] Ibid, pp. 378-80. *Slokas* 2.19 to 2.30 of the Bhagavad Gita (BG).

[27] Ibid, pp. 380-81.

[28] The justification for Rama's (the protagonist of the *Ramayana*) treacherous killing of Bali and beheading Shambuka, the *Shudra* who dared to gain *jnana,* is founded precisely on such logic.

ordained by *varna*. Furthermore, war is an opportunity for the "lucky" *Kshatriya* to gain a direct pathway to heaven.[29] From the lofty heights of philosophy to a rather mundane matter concerning the social role given by a division of labour—the descent is indeed rather abrupt. It is necessitated by the compulsion to bring in another theory of Brahmanism, its concept of *karma*.

Karma is the duties passed on by one's past lives. Depending on what one did in those lives, it can take one towards *moksha* or push one down to lesser births further distanced from *moksha*. *Karma* never ceases. It can neither be destroyed nor hindered. It thus protects society from the danger of *dharma* breaking down.[30]

Here *dharma* is taken in the sense of the ordered functioning of a society. Right at the beginning of its discourse the *Gita* gives a graphic description of what would befall a society if *dharma* were to break down. "Adharma", going against one's preordained duties, would affect everyone. It would cause the *kulastree* (noble women, women of one's clan) to go astray. This would lead to the mixing of the different *varna*s. Consequently, it would destroy each and every clan, and by implication, *varna* itself. *Varna*-given duty and *kuladharma* took form in the past precisely to prevent this disaster, which is the sure path to hell.[31]

Karma and the adherence to duties prescribed by it are evidently of crucial importance for the Brahmanical *varna* (caste) order. Krishna reminds Arjuna that he cannot avoid following his *varnadharma* as ordained by *karma*. He must stick to the way of life predetermined for his *varna*. Tilak, following the *Gita*, argues that this provides a reliable compass for ethics. If one is guided by one's *karma* ordained *varna* duty and does not deviate from it, one's *atma* will come close to liberation from worldly encumbrances. Since this should be the ultimate goal, the path laid down by *karma* allows one to choose the path of righteousness. Very well. But what exactly does "guided by" mean?

Krishna not only reminds Arjuna of the *Kshatriya dharma*, he goes on to explain: "You only have the power to do your *karma*; (enjoying or

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[29] BG-2.31-2.33; GR, p. 381.

[30] BG, 2.40; GR, p. 383.

[31] BG, 1.39, 1.44; GR, pp. 370-71.

not enjoying) its outcome is not within your control. But this should not be made an excuse to avoid *karma* ordained duty; you must do it without any desire for its outcome".[32] Among these instructions the first one is of great importance in a discourse on ethics. According to it, enjoying the outcome of one's *karma* given duty is beyond one's control. One can neither add nor subtract from it, hasten or delay it. So, as Tilak elaborates, the question put before Arjuna is this: why bother about what he sees as the sinful outcome of fratricidal war, when he has no control over the outcome of his *karma* bound duty?[33] But, if that is correct, then conscious choice, self-will, becomes redundant. Further, the dilemma of having to choose between two paths of action itself gets eliminated. Arjuna's turning away from battle could also be considered as something ordained by his *karma*. After all, going by the *Gita's* premise, that very thought itself cannot emerge on its own. We are thus, once again, pushed back to the starting point, still far from arriving at a basis for ethics.

While listening to Krishna's discourse, Arjuna asks him a simple question: if there is no such thing as self-will what is the impulse underlying such acts as rape? Since all action is considered as being pre-decided by *karma,* this becomes a very pertinent doubt. Krishna answers by explaining that such things are done by an extremely covetous, sinful person.[34] But even if that is accepted, the question still remains. Where did this greed and sin come from? By the principles of *karma* they too would be the outcome of past *karma*. Is the rapist then simply acting out his *karma*? In that case, how can he be blamed?

The *karma* theory does not accept the excuse of inevitability, even though it judges that there is some pre-ordained impulse of *karma* in the person's act; it argues that he can avoid it by gaining *jnana*.[35] One example is of Valmiki, the sage who compiled the *Ramayana*. It is alleged that he was a brigand who reformed himself by chanting "mara, mara" which eventually gelled into "Rama, Rama" (the name of a god). The moral of the story being that even a person entangled in sinful karma can get out

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[32] BG, 2.47-2.48; GR, pp. 386-387.

[33] GR, p. 68.

[34] BG, 3.36-3.37; GR, p. 407.

[35] BG, 3.38-3.43; GR, pp. 407-408.

of it, provided he follows a righteous path. This brings up the question of the impulse leading to the turn towards righteousness and its origins.

According to *Advaita*, consciousness is part of *maya,* which too is *karma*. Therefore, it cannot, by itself, break free from *jani-mriti*. The *atma*, however, is part of the *nirguna parabrahma*. Though bound by the body it temporarily resides in, it is free of *karma*. *Atma,* being intrinsically free from *karma* and sensuous desires, gives impulses to the consciousness. It tries to guide it to the path of righteousness that will ultimately lead to *moksha*. The consciousness of a person is also open to counter-impulses of the sensuous world. It is immersed in *karma* and these impulses keep it entangled in it. Whether to heed the call of *atma* or the impulses of the sensuous world depends entirely on the concerned person.[36] There is nothing inevitably driving somebody to commit a heinous crime like rape. He can very well avoid it.

There are several contradictions in this elaboration. The *atma* is part of *parabrahma*, so it too must therefore be quality-less, inert. How can it have the capacity to give impulses? Where does this come from?[37] Tilak tries to meet this query by giving the example of steam contained in a vessel. It makes its presence known by exerting pressure on the lid. If this were to be removed one wouldn't notice the steam. Similar is the case of the *atma,* when it is bound by the body entangled in *karma*. Even then it is forever in unity with the all-pervasive *nirguna parabrahma*.

This explanation is quite revealing, apart from its logical error of comparing incomparables. The pressure of steam does not come from its being held back by a lid. Even if that lid is tight, at the most it can only aid

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[36] This entire argument is spread out over five pages. GR, pp. 169-173.

[37] Aware of this anomaly, Tilak tries to qualify this narration of the "impulse", the "free action" of the *atma*. He explains that he uses such words, following customary usage, in order to convey the sense of the argument in brief. It is done to avoid a long description of the *karma* process. "….(I)n its essential, <u>pure</u> state, the *atma* doesn't have any agency itself". (GR, p. 169; translated from Marathi. Emphasis added.) But the issue was not about using this or that term. As part of *parabrahma*, the *atma*, as such, has always to be in a pure state, even when bound by a body. So where does it acquire agency from? In fact, the same also applies to the *parabrahma*. How can it generate *maya*, *karma,* the sensuous world? *Advaita* has no answers, except qualifying this as a "one and only instance of generation" and attributing it to "profound reasons beyond the grasp of mortal beings". (GR, p 160). Yet this too is no justification for the *atma's* agency. If it is to give impulses to the consciousness, this quality must always be present in it.

in the build-up of pressure. The pressure of steam comes from its material state, from heat energy. The *atma* on other hand, does not, and cannot have, any such internal impulse or motion. This is ruled out by definition itself, since it is only a part of the *nirguna parabrahma*. Most importantly, if the consciousness of a person can choose between the *atma*'s impulse and those from the sensuous world, isn't that proof of individual free will? According to Brahmanism, *karma*, by itself, is neither good nor bad. It is blind, inanimate. All such attributes of action come from the consciousness of the person doing it, from her or his intention, etc.

When *karma* is excluded from any capacity to determine good or bad, when this is reserved to individual consciousness, how then can freedom of choice be denied to it? Whichever way you look at it, *Advaita's* concepts of *atma*, *nirgunabrahma*, *karma,* etc. turn out to be self-contradictory. Or else, they push us into rank opportunism, a situation where anything goes.[38] The only resolution offered by the *Gita* is its coupling of *karma* with *varnadharma*. Ultimately, it is this that guides the ethics of Brahmanism.

Arjuna is advised to carry out his appointed *karma*. Tilak reminds his readers that this is nothing other than doing *varnadharma* in order to ensure the permanence of *chathurvarna*.[39] Sticking to one's *varna* ordained duty *(dharma)* is unequivocally insisted upon by the *Gita*. To drive this home, it states that even if another *varna's dharma* is pleasant while one's own is not, the latter is still salutary. Dying while doing one's *varnadharma* would be auspicious. Death, while doing another's, is horrible.[40]

The *Gita* was unapologetic—explicit—in extolling the *varna* order and buttressing it with claims about its divine origin. The modern votaries of Brahmanism cannot simply repeat this. They are forced to sanitise *chathurvarna* in order to face up to contemporary democratic sentiments. They argue that *varna* is not the same as caste and insist that *varna* divi-

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[38] In fact there are several *slokas* in the *Gita* (4.28, 9.28, 18.17) where any injury caused to another by one who "has attained *jnana*" is attributed to bad *karma* of the victim. The aggressor is absolved of attracting any "bad" *Karma*. The act itself is not considered to have come from the aggressor's free will. (GR, p 239).

[39] GR, p 203.

[40] BG. 3.35; GR, p. 406.

sion was based on quality. Some say that it denoted the "natural" inclinations of individuals, which allowed their separate grouping. Some others claim that it was originally meant to denote rising grades of spirituality. The *Gita* had no need for such fine tuning. For it, the *varna* division was divine. It was based on differing qualities and *karma*. One is born into a *varna* as preordained by *karma*.[41] Both quality and *karma* together determine *varna*.

We have already seen the content of *karma*. As for quality, the *Gita*'s elaboration sharply differed from those of the modern apologists of Brahmanism. It sees qualities of the *varna* as something given by "nature", i.e. by birth. The differentiation of *varna* duty flows from these inborn qualities. The *Gita* spells out the duties of the four *varna*s. Among them, the duty of the last one, the *Shudra,* is that of serving the *varna*'s "above" them. This is said to derive from their quality.[42] Evidently, that can only mean an inbuilt slave mentality. Let us not forget that this is not very far from the precepts of modern racism!

Tilak argues that the four-fold division of *chathurvarna* distributed the weight of tasks that had to be carried out for social stability and sustenance. It would not fall on any one social section. If the *varna*s failed to do their ordained duty, *chathurvarna* society would degenerate.[43] There can be no quarrel here. But why should the *Sudras*, who bore the load of slaving away for the other three, be concerned about this? Why should women, considered as inferior beings, root for *chathurvarna*? Additionally, the fate of those who violated *varnadharma* was also unequal. A *Kshatriya* would, according to the *Gita*, loose esteem. He would attract "bad" *karma* and get further distanced from *moksha*.[44] If the violator is a *Shudra* she or he was condemned to suffer horrific punishments like getting molten lead poured into the ears. Or they would lose their heads like Shambuka.[45] For the oppressed, evidently, the destruction of *varna* (caste) would have been most welcome.

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[41] BG, 4.13 and 18.41; GR, pp. 413 and 568.

[42] BG, 18.41-18.44, 18.48; GR, pp. 568-69.

[43] GR, p. 40.

[44] BG. 2.33-2.34; GR, p. 381.

[45] Shambuka was a *Shudra* who was beheaded by Rama for daring to do penance, something that was prohibited for his *varna*.

Brahmanism teaches that anyone who is able to realise that there is as much *atma* in another body as there is in one's own is suited for gaining *moskha*.[46] This large heartedness apparently excluded the *Shudras* and women. Even today, the *Dalits*, other oppressed castes, *Adivasis* and women are seen as "lesser" beings. The ingrained disdain Brahmanism has towards them comes out when the *Gita* speaks about the "equanimous gaze" of a *jnani* (one who has gained *jnana*). It is said that this will be the same towards "…the true *Brahmin*, cow, elephant…. and so too the dog and *chandala*".[47] The hollowness of such magnanimity is well revealed in its ordering—the *chandala (Dalit)* gets positioned below the dog!

Duplicity in ethics is not unique to Brahmanism. Any morality rooted in the self-interests of an exploiting class must necessarily be Janus-faced. It will present itself as universal while serving narrow interests. As seen earlier, Brahmanism defended its graded division of labour and social status as something necessary for maintaining social stability. Echoing this, Tilak argues that all other societies also had one form or another of social division if not *chathurvarna*.[48] Quite true. One can also see some similarities. For instance, such divisions were considered to be divinely ordained by all pre-capitalist societies throughout the world. Tilak further explains that the *Gita*'s concern was not about deciding which social system is better suited for social stability. Whichever it may be, the key message delivered is that of sticking to one's given duty for the sake of social good.[49]

Here, Tilak, differentiates the ethics of Brahmanism from modern, Western views. For the former, one's duty must be done without desiring its outcome or taking pride in serving others. In the latter case, it is alleged, worldly life is essentially meant for enjoyment. Even a desire to carry out one's social duty is, at the most, guided by the thinking that such enjoyment must be available to all. It thus limits itself. Tilak concludes that the *Gita*'s ethics is superior since it is propounded from a universal and higher level of spirituality. It is not bound by any social system.

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[46] GR, p. 236.
[47] BG, 5.18; GR, p. 427.
[48] GR, p. 40.
[49] Ibid., p 300 and pp. 406-07.

The *Gita* refers to *chathurvarna* solely because its discourse was delivered in a *varna*-based society.[50]

Let us take a closer look at the ethics involved in what is described as the key message of the *Gita*—sticking to one's given duty. What immediately strikes one's mind is the arbitrary restriction it places on social mobility. Besides, any ethics that takes rigidity in social duties as its basis cannot stand up to the scrutiny of history. The social mobility seen in Western capitalist countries stands in sharp contrast to the rigid social structures that were seen in their feudal pasts. Every specific division of labour is determined by the socio-economic structure prevalent in a given society. Though all societies need one form or the other of division of tasks, there is nothing to insist that a particular division of labour is inviolable or permanent. One can even conceive of a future society, where, given a higher level of productivity, a formal division of labour would itself become unnecessary. Furthermore, the whole argument underlying the concept of "given" social duties is itself quite problematic. Who gets to decide this? How is it determined? The *Gita* didn't have any problem in handling such queries. In its view, both of them were answered by the divinely given *varna* and *karma*.

For Tilak, living in times when both *varna* and caste were being challenged, the going wasn't so easy. Hence we see him advancing quite contradictory explanations for social duties given by a division of labour. They are described as given by religious scriptures ("shastrathaha").[51] They are also considered as duties chosen according to varying inclinations, where this is possible.[52] Both are obviously opposed to each other. For Tilak, the crux lies in "sticking to one's duty" no matter if it is given or chosen.

Tilak notes the progress of humanity through various forms of social ordering or grouping. However, the rigidity of his thought process leads him to deny their historical determination and the progress of humanity through them. According to Tilak, we have arrived at the realisation that all humanity is one through a lengthy process. Humanity passed through

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[50] GR, pp. 299-300.

[51] Ibid., p. 299.

[52] Ibid., p. 300.

stages or periods of pride in one's clan, then caste, religion and country. This categorisation raises several questions. But what is more critical is his insistence that these groupings should be retained. The argument is that every generation must necessarily pass along this trajectory in order to attain the highest level.[53] An inevitable implication would be the periodic restoration of the outmoded.

The whole history of humanity is witness to a broadening of consciousness. It thus arrived at the concept of the human—not man or woman, of this or that country, or of one or other caste/clan/tribe/class, etc. Presently it is breaking off from anthropocentrism to arrive at a broader view. This locates humans among other species. Not a master over them, but as a part of Nature, along with them. This was the outcome of passing through various social stages and forms of social organisations over generations. Reverses have happened. It was not a linear process. However, these slide-backs were not inevitable or necessary for the training of new generations. Each one of them gained from past knowledge and practices through a human construct: culture.

The ethics of Brahmanism takes the permanency of social division of labour (whatever form it may take) and sticking to duties given by it as its basis. It rests its claims about its ethics being eternal and universal on this foundation. Its claim is negated by the fact that every division of labour is transient. Moreover, the division of labour of every exploitative society mainly serves the interests of exploiters. Hence it is oppressive for the masses. It can never be equally good for all members of the society.

To sum up, when guided by its concepts of *atma* and *nirgunabrahma*, Brahmanism fails to give any definitive guidance for ethical action. When it relies on *karma* and *varnadharma*, it fails the tests of eternality and universality. Brahmanism's ethics is thus nothing other than a legitimisation of class, caste *(varna)* and gender oppression. There is nothing differentiating it, in essence, from the ethics of any other ideology serving exploitation. It is only a particular instance of the bankruptcy of the ethics based on idealism.

By its very nature, idealism can never derive principles of ethics from human existence in all its diversity and concreteness. It must necessarily

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[53] Ibid., p. 242.

resort to impositions. This can come in varying avatars. It could come as a god, a nebulous supreme power or an absolute idea. Whichever it may be, ethics then comes from edicts or pre-determined principles supposedly given by that supra-human entity. In the idealist view, the ordering of society and the positioning of individuals within it are invariably projected as something divinely sanctioned. Along with other ruling ideological forms of that society, its ethics also serves to legitimise the existing state of affairs. It thus furthers and secures the interests of the class, which stands to gain from that particular social structure at the expense of the great majority.

The Limits of Absolute Monism

"Like a jackal trapped in a lion's gaze, all other sciences cower before Vedanta". Such is Brahmanism's boast about its core philosophy.[54] However, the history of conflicts and contestations among various South Asian philosophical schools belies this arrogance. Most of these schools were idealist. Materialist ones like Lokayata and Carvaka were suppressed. In fact, what we know about them mainly comes from the counter-narratives given by idealist schools in the process of negating them. Despite this dominant sway of idealism, *Advaita (Vedanta)*[55] could enjoy supremacy for only brief spells, all the way until the advent of colonialism.

Some of the basic precepts of *Advaita* comes from the Vedas. However, their elaboration as theological philosophy arrives with the Upanishads, dated to approximately 800 BCE. Parallel to the Vedic tradition, what is known as the Sramana (non-Vedic) tradition also developed over this period. It seems to have influenced the progress from Vedic ritualism to the metaphysical plane seen in the Upanishads. Just a few centuries after the Upanishads, the Sramana tradition gave birth to the Bauddha and Jaina religions with their distinct philosophies. Among them Buddhism dominated South Asian theological philosophy for approximately eighteen centuries (6 BCE to 12 CE). Though Adi Sankara (788-820 AD) is reported to have overthrown its reign and re-established the supremacy of *Advaita*, the fact remains that Nalanda, the leading centre of learning in the sub-continent until its destruction in CE 1200 by Bakhtiar Khilji, was Buddhist.

Over this long stretch of time, and further, no one theology enjoyed total domination to the exclusion of the others. Besides, Buddhism and Jainism underwent considerable transformations. Vedic schools of thought co-existed with them. Kingdoms guided by Brahmanical principles emerged. The transition from *varna* to caste was formalised. The

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[54] Strictly speaking, Vedanta refers to all schools of philosophy that take the *Brahmasutras* as their foundational text. But it has usually been employed as a synonym of *Advaita*, as it was in this quote taken from Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Gita Rahasya*.

[55] *Advaita* means "non-dual". It is termed by some as monism. That is not accurate since *Advaita* represents only one type of monism.

Brahmanical moral code was compiled and elaborated through texts like the *Manusmriti*. All of these factors, along with internal degeneration of the Bauddha and Jaina schools, led to their accommodation of a great deal of Brahmanical values legitimising caste and other social constructs, originally inimical to them. The dominant version of Bauddha philosophy even anticipated much of the *mayavad* expounded by Sankara.

The dilution of Buddhism's core concepts was one of the factors aiding Sankara in his assault on it. Brutal force, literally decapitating the principal votaries of the Bauddha and Jaina schools, buttressed it. It would have played a significant role in complimenting Sankara's rhetorical skills and aiding his ascension. But hardly 200 years had passed before *Advaita* was challenged and dislodged from its prime position by Ramanuja's (1017–1137 CE) *Vishistadvaita*. It was followed by Madhva's (1238–1317 CE) *Dvaidavada*.[56] Both of them rejected *Advaita*'s absolute monism. They brought back dualist discourses onto the main stage of *Vedanta*. Continuing the tradition, several other schools followed them. Each had their interpretation of monism and dualism. Notably, all of them worked out their theses within the frame of Brahmanism's sacred texts—the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*.

So what does this account tells us? Over three millennia, from the Upanishadic period until its revival in the 18th-19th centuries, *Advaita* enjoyed philosophical supremacy only for a brief spell. Throughout this stretch of time, either Sramana or Astika schools of thought that proposed one or the other form of combining monism and dualism held sway.[57] The "rediscovery" of *Advaita* as the core philosophy of Hinduism, was a construct of colonialism.[58] It was a component of the Orientalist

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[56] Vishistadvaida is "qualified *Advaita*". *Dvaidavada* is dualism.

[57] It may be argued that *Advaita* remained a living tradition through various Bhakti schools during the Middle Ages. Its insistence on "oneness" would have been an attractive proposition for these streams opposing the Brahmanical caste order. Yet, in actuality, their bases were versions of modified *Advaita*, with emphasis on worship of a God and the philosophical implication of making room for dualism.

[58] In the centuries immediately preceding colonial rule, the Nyaya-Vaisesika School enjoyed prominence in the new interpretations and lively debates going on in the South Asian philosophical realm. Jonardon Ganeri's *The Lost Age of Reason* gives a good introduction to this period. The British role in appointing *Advaita* to the prime position of South Asian philosophy was noted by Trevor Ling in his *Karl Marx and Religion*.

presentation of an Aryan golden age with its high philosophy and spirituality. Reformers of Brahmanism, such as Raja Rammohan Roy and others gladly embraced this. Over the centuries it has been further consolidated, so much so that *VishistAdvaita*, *Dvaidavada* and other theologies have been edged out, more or less completely, into the rarefied realm of esoteric philosophical discourse. Even then, the question remains—what was the impulse underlying their fresh interpretations of Brahmanism's sacred texts, steadily departing from *Advaita*? I would argue that these arose from multiple fault lines in *Advaita*—theological, philosophical and sociological.

Advaita insists on a monism that is absolute. The only "real" for it is "nirgunabrahma", which is formless, quality-less, indescribable, undefinable and eternal. Everything else is "maya" or "midhya", illusion. *Maya* does not mean "non-existent" in *Advaita*. The existence of a sensuous universe is acknowledged. But it exists only for the sensory organs. Hence it is considered unreal, untrue. Beyond it lies *nirgunabrahma*. This alone is real and true. By this logic god also is *maya*. Adi Sankara in fact argued as such. He was consistently applying an Upanishadic stream of thought. God, heaven and such were declared to be minor compared to awareness of *nirgunabrahma* and the unity of one's "atma" (soul) with it. Such awareness, "jnana", was hailed as the path to "moksha" (liberation) from the otherwise ceaseless cycle of "jani-mriti", i.e. birth and death.

The monism seen here certainly represented a higher level of abstraction, of synthesis. However, in spite of such philosophical and spiritual merits, it would be immensely unfulfilling at the level of religious thought. Any theology must necessarily address the social role of religion, of solace, social communion and ethics. This then is the space of god; the award of heaven and retribution of hell. The absolute monism of *Advaita* doesn't allow this. Amends had to be made. Therefore, despite its strident monism, *Advaita* has always summoned up god, even if it is done as *maya*. Similarly, it makes room for the diversity, the multiplicities of the world; once again as *maya*. However, the logic employed to introduce such contortions opens up several doors of doubts in the philosophical realm.

Take the classic example offered by Sankara, of mistaking a rope for a snake. This was supposed to demonstrate the "adhyaropa" (superimposition) caused by an illusion that emerges from *avidya* (ignorance) of the sole real, i.e. *nirgunabrahma*. Thus, similar to the "rope as snake" confusion, the ignorant err in thinking that the sensuous world is real and fail to go beyond it to *nirgunabrahma*, the "really real".

A rope and snake do form a plausible pair capable of causing confusion. But, one could wonder, what if the encountered object was a stone? Whatever may be the confused perception, it would certainly not be of a snake. The reason is rather obvious—dissimilarity of shape. We thus see that Sankara's conclusion does not logically flow from the comparison. Rather, the example itself constitutes the logic. It already presupposes the observer's acquaintance with both rope and snake, of their shapes and, most importantly, their differing implications for humans. By extension, to superimpose various qualities and forms on *maya*, we must first be aware of them. Where could that come from?

Proponents of *Advaita* have produced an endless series of explanations to account for the world of objects registered by our sensory organs. We will sample some of them, referring to Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Gita Rahasya*.[59] To the question of how a quality-less entity *(nirgunabrahma)* can produce diverse qualities (objects), Tilak takes shelter in sophistry. He claims that the question itself doesn't arise since nothing is "produced". What are sensed as objects are only illusionary representations.[60] But, whether produced or not, *Advaita* must account for the diverse, sensuous, objects surrounding us. Tilak relies on an example of sound and colour spectrum of sunlight to satisfy this need.[61] Physics instructs us that the former is caused by motion in the air or some other medium. The latter are electro-magnetic waves. But Tilak leaves out all such particularities and presents them simply as "motion". He then goes on to assert that our ears and eyes register them as sound and colour because they have superimposed these qualities on what is actually one and the same thing,

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[59] GR, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition, Pune, 2015.
[60] GR, pp. 143-144.
[61] Ibid., p. 144.

i.e. motion. *Maya* similarly causes us to "see" diverse objects, when what really exists is only *nirgunabrhama*.

Let us unravel this by beginning from the concluding assertion. We see an object only if reflects light. Our ears hear sound only if air or some medium is set in motion. Neither of them depends on our sense organ. No matter how we name the phenomena, we can never superimpose any other quality on them arbitrarily. They are natural phenomena, each with its own particularity. Besides, our eyes cannot be willed to hear, nor can our ears see or smell. These and other sensory organs can only register those specific types of sensation for which they are suited. Finally, even if all this is ignored, the question of why at all our sensory organs get this urge to impose various attributes, where it comes from, remains. Tilak's answer is stark in its dogmatism—the senses did so "because" they themselves are part of the web of *maya* woven by *nirgunabrahma*.[62] So much for *Advaita's* claim to be scientific!

An escape from this philosophical dead end of absolute monism was sought by borrowing Sankhya's "prakriti-purusha" dualism. According to this ancient South Asian philosophical school, *prakriti* is unmanifest, yet laden with the potential qualities of "sat, raj, tamas".[63] Through manifesting these qualities in various permutations and combinations, in the presence of the inert *purusha*, *prakriti* brings into existence diverse qualities (sensuous objects). Further combinations lead to the emergence of new objects from existing ones. *Advaita* employs this scheme to explain the sensuous world, all the while insisting that *nirgunabrahma* remains unmanifest, lying even beyond *prakriti* and p*urusha*. It is claimed to be the root cause of both of them. They, in turn, are said to be outcomes of *maya*[64]. There is a glaring contradiction in this argument. The Sankhya *prakriti*, though unmanifest, is attributed with qualities held in potential. It is therefore determined and it makes sense to conceive further generation from it. But this cannot be true of *nirgunabrahma,* which is not

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[62] Ibid,. p. 145.

[63] Samkhya philosophy regards the universe as consisting of two independent realities, purusha (consciousness) and prakrti (substance). These two realities exist parallelly, without affecting each other. According to Samkhya there are three gunas (innate tendencies)—*sat* (goodness), *raj* (activity) and *tamas* (negativity).

[64] Ibid., p. 145.

only unmanifest but is supposed to be quality-less, infinite, eternal, etc. It thus evades determination and it makes no sense to speak of something following it or caused by it.

Moreover, why at all should *nirgunabrahma* give rise to *maya*, *prakriti* and *purusha*? The answer given by *Advaita* is a non-answer. It simply states that this is an unfathomable "leela" (play) of *nirgunabrahma*.[65] The *Gita* has Krishna informing Arjuna that when even the gods don't know the answer how can we expect this of humans?[66] Tilak calls in the Nasadiya Sukta of the Rigveda as substantiation. That *sukta* speaks of the "nothingness" from which everything came. It further states that no one, perhaps not even that which caused this, knows why this was done or why it happened.[67] This *sukta* has been used to "prove" the generation of *maya* as something unfathomable. But it could also be used as an argument for spontaneous generation, thus ruling out any role for an extraneous power in the creation of something from nothing!

Advaita's summoning of god, even if as a part of *maya,* and its relying on some of Samkhya's key premises, amounts to smuggling in dualism. This is quite visible in texts as varied as the *Gita* and Patanjali's *Yogasutra*, to name a couple. Tributes to absolute monism are repeatedly seen in the *Gita*. Yet, it also attests Samkhya dualism. The *Gita* is supposed to be the advice given by a God, Krishna, to Arjuna. He claims to have created *maya* as "parameshwara" (supreme god, a term used interchangeably with *nirgunabrahma*). He also states that he himself (as a god) is *maya*. Metaphysics aside, what comes through is the uneasy relation of *Advaita*'s monism with a borrowed dualism.

The *Gita*, being the advice of a god, must necessarily acknowledge this duality. But that is not so for Patanjali's *Yogasutra*. This text elaborates the process of meditation aimed at attaining union with *nirgunabrahma* through realising it as the sole truth. It defines "yoga" as the freeing of the *atma* from all sensory encumbrances. Therefore, the *Yogasutra* could very well have insisted on the absolute monism of the *Advaita*, the philosophy that it adheres to. Yet, it too ushers in duality. On the one hand,

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[65] Ibid., p. 160.
[66] *Gita*, 10.2; GR, p 156.
[67] GR, p 153.

it proposes meditation through chanting "Om", which is equated with *nirgunabrahma*. *Yoga* is declared as a method through which "sadhana" (union with *parabrahma*) can be attained, <u>without</u> calling on a god. On the other hand, it also states that the worshipping of a god can help one attain *sadhana* "sooner".[68]

The active, operative, aspect here is faith in a god and the mental concentration it could facilitate. Duality is thus accepted as necessary in the passage to monism. One arrives at monism through duality. The latter then has its own space and action. The commentator of the *Yogasutra* text I have relied on explicitly states that *yoga* is useful only until a certain stage. Beyond that *Samkhya* is a must for attaining *sadhana*.[69]

What is explicitly acknowledged in the *Yogasutra* is implicit in all the interpretations and treatises of *Advaita*. Absolute monism cannot but drag along dualism. Its absolutist stance deprives it of any possible elaboration from within itself, on its own terms, that could account for differentiation and the sensuous universe. Whichever may be the text of Brahmanism that posits or elaborates *Advaita*, the stubborn presence of dualism is all too noticeable. Yet, it is forever the embarrassing intrusion. This has implications beyond the concerns of philosophy.

We have seen that *Advaita* considers god to be part of *maya*, the untrue. However, in its social avatar, as the ideological core of the ruling class, Brahmanism could not but engage with god; that too in their teeming *crores*[70] (33 *crores* by one count)! The spread and elaboration of the caste system made this even more vital. Hegemonic assimilation unique to Brahmanism was accompanied by an enthronement of tribal gods or totems in subordinate positions in the Brahmanic pantheon. Obviously, the *Advaita* philosophy, declaring gods as unreal, wouldn't be of use here. Its denial of "trueness" to gods was of course equally applicable to the Brahmanic trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva. But "equality" of denial wouldn't be satisfactory for the vast masses of assorted believers. They needed their gods to be real, real enough to heed their prayers and grant

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[68] *Patanjali Yogasutra* with commentary by Nandlal Dashora, Randhir Prakasan, Haridwar, 2009, p. 38 (in Hindi).

[69] Ibid., p. 39.

[70] *Crores* are a unit of measurement. One *crore* is ten million.

them solace. Making gods "true" thus inevitably emerged as a pressing issue of Vedanta theology.[71] It was further aggravated by the struggle against caste.

There is a long tradition in South Asia of religious, social reformers who, in their confrontation with the caste system, tried to undermine it through fresh interpretations of Brahmanism's sacred texts. Much of this centred on *Gita*. The *Gita* allows for three paths to *moksha*: *jnana, karma and bhakti*. The *jnana* path is that of acquiring awareness of *nirgunabrahma* through meditation. Naturally, proponents of *Advaita* like Adi Sankara claimed it to be the purest, most appropriate one. For this very reason, in the eyes of the reformers, it could not be a solution. Similarly, the path of *karma* (action) too was compromised. Brahmanism conceives *karma* as carrying out binding duty preordained for every *varna* (caste). What remained was *bhakti*, devotion to and worship of god. *Bhakti* had the potential for social levelling and the elimination of intermediaries.[72] However, this requires that the gods be true, not unreal *maya*. Thus the stage was set for breaking the absolutist mould of *Advaita's* monism. Duality had to be given a formal entry in the Vedantic tradition. It had to be acknowledged as a necessary, inherent component of philosophical and theological discourse.

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[71] Brahmanism has a tradition of declaring the "god" concept as something designed for the "less intelligent", i.e. those incapable of gaining *jnana* through contemplation of a formless, quality-less, *nirgunabrahma*. But the real theological, sociological need underpinning it is seen in Tilak's explanation of why a "prathyaksha roopdhari" (one who has visible form) is necessary and his enumeration of its qualities: "…One who speaks to me, who has affection for me, who guides me on the path of righteousness, who will condone my errors, whom I can call mine, who protects me like a father". (GR, p 252.) In other words, someone who can give solace—including to those with "higher" intelligence!

[72] Tilak admits the role of *bhakti* in addressing the spiritual needs of women and the *varna (Shudra)* excluded from gaining *jnana,* as an "additional" factor, apart from being suitable for the "alphabudhi samanya jana" (less intelligent common masses) [GR, p 267]. He draws attention to a *sloka* of the *Gita* (9.32; GR, p. 468) that states that "those who put full trust in me even if they be women, *Vaishya, Shudra or Antyajas*, can gain *moksha*". While this seems very generous, the next *sloka* puts it in perspective when it adds "then what would be the case of the pious *Brahmin* or *Kshatriya* who are my followers *(bhakts)*?" (9.33; GR, p. 468) Though Tilak tries to stretch the former *sloka's* meaning and claim *bhakti* to be a levelling factor across *varnas* (GR, p 237) the *Gita* evidently did not have this view. The interpretation and deployment of *bhakti* as a social leveller was a contribution of the Bhakti movements challenging Brahmanism.

Ramanuja was the first to expand this through his *Vishistadvaita*. He argued that "jeev" *(atma)* and "jagath" (sensuous universe) are both contained within "easwar" (supreme god). The *easwar* of *Vishistadvaita*, which takes the place of *nirgunabrahma*, is thus unitary but differentiated. The duality of *jeev* and *jagath* it contains are as true as it is itself. The multifarious universe and *atmas* evolved from the original *jagath* and *jeev*. Furthermore by declaring worship of god *(bhakti)* as the path to *moskha,* Ramanuja reduced caste-determined *karma* to insignificance.[73]

With Ramanuja, god became true. But the contradictions inherent in his attempt to legitimise dualism on a monist basis remained. They became the entry point for Madhva's *Dvaidavada*, i.e. explicit and absolute dualism. Madhva reasoned that *jeev (atma)* and *parameshwara (paramatama)* could not be one and different at the same time. Hence, his *Dvaidavada* conceived both to be always different, distinct, from each other. For him also *karma* was only a minor means, while worship of god was the sole path to *moksha.*

Madhva was followed by a number of theologist philosophers. All of them attempted to either amend his dualism or propound yet one more version of linking up *Advaita* with dualism. No matter what, *Advaita* and its absolute monism were displaced from the centre of philosophical-theological debate among the *Vedantis* for centuries together. However, being part of the *Astika* stream, the discourses of the new philosophies shared many basic precepts with it. *Moksha* as liberation from *jani-mriti, maya*, the relation of *atma* and *paramatama* and many other concepts were recurring themes. Their interpretations, of course, varied.

The dethroning of *Advaita* was, in great measure, inspired by the quest to make room for anti-caste reforms. In turn, it gained impetus from the stirrings of the Bhakti movements in the South Indian peninsula. These movements, seen from early middle ages onwards, critiqued Brahmanist concepts, values and its caste system. Ramanuja is known to have broken from Brahmanist orthodoxy and strictures. He taught its sacred texts to *Shudras*, who were banned from even hearing their recital and made them "dvijas" (twice born, allowed to wear sacred thread).

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[73] This account and the one of Madhva's Dvaidavada are based on the brief summary seen in Tilak's *Gita Rahasya*.

Among the Bhakti streams of the thought of this period, Basava and his companions (12th century) take the place of honour. Basava's Lingayat movement was an all-out attack on the oppressive concepts and practices of Brahmanism, such as the caste system and the demeaning of women. One of Basava's trenchant *vachanas* makes fun of the Brahminic taboo on menstruation by pointing to its role in reproduction. Basava did not appeal to Brahmanic texts like the *Vedas*, *Smirits*, *Gita* etc. for his authority. He squarely declared the washer-man, woodcutter and others of the "lowest of the low" as his venerated gurus. Though centred on the worship of Shiva, Lingayat *bhakti* was radically different from other Bhakti movements.

Basava propounded "Kayakame Kailasam". This conveys the message that one's labour is the supreme form of worship. Mocking the ritualism of those who considered pilgrimage to Mount Kailas (the mythical abode of Shiva) as exalted, he sarcastically queried whether their Shiva was a fool to live in that desolate place where even a blade of grass wouldn't grow! In its original vision the Lingayat movement was opposed to temples. They were attacked by Basava as cages imprisoning god. Lingayat priests were commanded to be forever on the move, never tarrying in any place. The logic Basava advanced for these precepts and practices was profoundly dialectical: "All that stands will wither away, that which moves will stand".

One sees influence of Bauddha and Jaina dialectics, apart from Kashmiri Shaivism and the folk philosophies of the labouring classes in the Lingayat world outlook. They went into Basava's forging a radically new school in philosophy. Positioning it as a transcendence of the various South Asian idealist philosophical schools through its rich synthesis is a theme worth exploring. It critiqued many views seen in various idealist schools. For example, it rejected the "karma" theory *(karma-punarjan-ma-moksha),* commonly seen in all the classical idealist schools, including Bauddha and Jaina ones. But this was not an absolutist rejection. The monist tradition and the Sramana tradition's emphasis on motion and impermanence were synthesised.

Unfortunately, its rich discourse as witnessed in the philosophical debates said to have taken place in the Anubhava Mandapa are mostly lost. Only a compilation, the *Sunya Sampadane*, made during the

Vijayanagara Empire (14th century CE) is available. By this time the Lingayat movement had lost its radical edge. Already, it was well into being assimilated by Brahmanism as yet another sect. What started out as a staunch caste-free community itself became stratified with caste division. The esoteric turn of the verses in the *Sunya Sampadane*, their very style, is far removed from the lively, earthy, *vacanas* of Basava and colleagues.

Other than social factors, the idealism of this philosophical school also must have contributed to this slide. Idealism inevitably limits, truncates, dialectical thought. To cite another example, Jaina "Anekanta" (a-singularity) espouses a dialectics that perceives opposites as integral to a single whole. Creation and destruction are seen as a constant ongoing process. Yet the idealism it bears as theology conceives the soul as eternal, imperishable, permanent. Dialectics is thus pushed aside by absolute monism, now brought back by idealism.

This is by no means an infirmity solely attached to idealism. Even a materialism that adheres to absolute monism would be equally inconsistent. Consider the logic of a materialism that posits some primordial matter as the source of all animate and inanimate sensuous phenomena. This absolutist concept of matter chokes off the possible emergence of new qualities. Not only that, essence and appearance, quantity and quality, in short everything, must be attributed to it from outside. The diversity of material existence must also be explained by external causes. This would necessarily be subjective and arbitrary, thus bringing in idealism! Quite unsurprisingly, all of this gels well with the categories of *Advaita*: *nirgunabrahma* as the single source, the superimposition of qualities and so on.

The leap from idealism to materialism is not a matter of simply replacing "idea" with "matter" as primary. Consistent materialism insists on grasping "matter" as a philosophical category. It is an abstraction from the essence and appearance of the multitude of objective phenomena, animate and inanimate, populating the universe. The monist view was a momentous leap in philosophy. It allows us to recognise the identity, unity of various phenomena and grasp their interconnectedness. Thus, the dialectical materialist position, "All that exists is matter in motion", comprehends the whole universe. However, monism, when taken to the

extreme, becomes its opposite. Absolute monism denies objective existence to duality or diversity. As a result, it is forced to surreptitiously make room for dualism.

An important lesson that emerges loud and clear is that seeing similarities between philosophical systems merely on the basis of their monism would be widely off the mark. This, in fact, was the case with the CPM theoretician, the late EMS Namboodiripad, hailing the monism of Adi Sankara's *Advaita*. The errors of *Advaita* were solely identified in its idealism, its *mayavad*, leaving out the contradictions of its absolute monism. Such fractured views arose from EMS' mechanical materialist approach.

The undivided CPI, and later CPI and CPM, miserably failed in identifying and drawing on the rich dialectical legacy of South Asian philosophical schools. Rather, instead of focussing ideological struggle on Brahmanical schools of thought, they were valorised, as seen in the case of *Advaita*. Long before their formal abdication of the revolutionary path, they had laid the foundation for collaboration with the ruling classes. The lone exception, in the field of philosophy was Rahul Sankrityayan who did much to bring out the teachings of Buddhist dialectics. As could be expected, he was side-lined.

The mechanical materialism of the CPI and CPM buttress Brahmanism. Their extolling of the Brahmanic precept of "unity in diversity" is a telling example. Presenting a pose of accepting diversities, its real thrust is to reduce all diversity to mere manifestations of some unique, single entity. As noted earlier, to see the unity (unifying factors, interconnectedness or identical elements) among diverse phenomena is an advance made possible by monism. It rescues us from remaining restricted to appearances and viewing objects in isolation from each other. A dialectical understanding of monism helps us comprehend this unity as derived from, abstracted from the interconnectedness of diverse phenomena. Its very objectivity is given by the objectivity of the real, material elements comprising the diversity. But Brahmanism's absolute monism turns this on its head and insists that only the "unity" is real. Diversity is a mere outcome of its projections, manifestations.

Advaita terms concrete objects in the sensuous universe as "namarupa", i.e. that which has name and form. As seen in Tilak's expo-

sition, this philosophy goes on to insist that, since these "namarupa" keep on changing, there must be something beyond them that remains unchanged.[74]

This assertion is easily contradicted. Though a number of material phenomena are fluid, volatile, there are so many more that are relatively stable. Even those that are fluid have a certain stability, which differentiates them from other phenomena. The assertion of ever-changing *namarupa* is made by *Advaita* to bring in its supposed opposite, a permanent "something" beyond them. *Namarupa* are pictured as a thin film on water. "We are compelled to state that the many *namarupa* are like a film on some singular, root, material. …We are pushed to the inference of this essence, which though unmanifest, cannot be sensed …never becomes non-existent"[75].

Tilak gives the example of various types of ornaments made of gold as proof of this assertion: "If there is nothing at the root of the sensed manifestations then …there won't be any basis for our knowledge that despite being different [these ornaments] have been made from a single [thing] gold…. Gold is that which forms the basis of all the different ornaments".[76] Gold is a natural element. Even in its purest form, as for example an atom, it can still be detected. It is thus a *namarupa*, to borrow *Advaita*'s language. This is precisely why we can distinguish an ornament made of gold from a fake. Contrarily, the *nirgunabrahma* of *Advaita*, the "something" that is supposed to be beyond everything, can never be sensed; by definition itself. It forever remains a supreme figment of imagination. The unity it is said to represent thus turns out to be an imagined construct. It is not an abstraction derived from concrete reality. Quite significantly, one of the accusations made by Brahmanism against South Asian materialist thought was that its insistence on many essences denied the singular unity asserted by *Advaita*.[77]

Carried over into the ideological make up the ruling classes, "unity in diversity" is a prominent element of the hegemonic consensus evolved by

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[74] GR, p. 131.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] *Gita*, 16.8; GR, pp. 516-517.

them. Whether it be the Gandhi-Nehru Congress stream or the Savarkar-Golwalkar Hinduvadi stream, "unity in diversity" underpins the reactionary notions of national integration and Indian nation, denying the multinational character of the country. It is employed to deny *Adivasi* people their ethnic identities.

The CPI-CPM leadership has become staunch proponents of this Brahmanist precept. They acclaim it as the "strength" of the Indian polity. There is, however, a notable difference in emphasis. The CPI-CPM leaders stress on "diversity" in contrast to the RSS insistence on "unity". But it is still firmly placed in a common frame set up by Brahmanism. This causes a blunting of the ideological, political attack on Brahmanic Hindu fascism. Worse, it traps many who wish to join this struggle in a pretence, a superficial opposition, allowing the ruling classes to contain it within safe channels.

To repeat, for dialectical materialism, the primacy of matter over mind as a defining principle of materialism means the primacy of objective reality in all its diversity. It rejects any notion of some entity termed "matter", which forms the permanent source, basis or material of objective reality. Dialectical materialism, as opposed to the absolute monism of *Advaita*, does not dismiss duality, diversity. It transcends both absolute monism as well as dualism. As Lenin puts it, dialectics is "the splitting of the single whole and the study of its opposites"; the study of their interrelation and struggle. Thus, a synthesised view of singularity and duality in their unity and opposition is achieved.

We saw how a materialism that embraces absolute monism complements idealism. Taking this as guidance, the critique of absolute monism can be fruitfully extended to achieve greater clarity on Marxist analytical categories. For example, how should the primacy of class in social analysis be grasped and applied? Often, at times spontaneously, class is treated as some self-existent material phenomena. Class analysis then becomes a matter of matching social groups with various pre-fixed criteria and their subsequent classification. This is really of no use in grasping the actual dynamics of the society under study. Social reality is a complex ensemble of relations that are generated, sustained, reproduced and changed through social practice of the individuals who are part of that society.

Class is an abstraction made from this social reality. Its material basis is the position of people in the process of production and distribution of the surplus.

Though one of the most basic ones in social existence (the other being reproduction), production is not the only social relation humans enter into. Individuals belonging to a class are also differentiated by various other social relations. In our context, to name some of the prominent ones, they included those of caste, gender, ethnicity, regionality, nationality and religious community. Class, therefore, is mediated through all of them. Furthermore, each of these have their specific dynamic that impinges on that of class. Such nuances must necessarily be grasped if we are to carry out a comprehensive class analysis of a society, if we wish to make a concrete analysis of its classes, their interrelations and social consciousness. On the contrary, if class is taken in isolation or if its mediations are grasped in a linear, absolutist manner, then the social view being generated would be subjective and truncated. At an extreme, it would lead to crass forms of class reductionism.

Guarding against absolutist tendencies, the analytical categories of Marxism must be grasped and applied with full awareness of their limits as abstractions. "One divides into two" is equally applicable to them, just as much as to material phenomena. Such foresight is of greater importance in the case of a category like class, which is more determinant. Otherwise, rather than illuminating reality it will obscure it.

Every tendency of one-sided mechanical thinking has an absolutist core. There is an insistence of the "this and this only" sort, a refusal to view the matter at hand from multiple angles. The inherent presence of the opposite side is either ignored or denied. No law, no analytical category, can grasp the pulsating, dynamic complexity of objective reality in its completeness. That is why Lenin pointed out that they "freeze reality". This is an unavoidable infirmity in the process of knowing. But that doesn't make such "freezing" worthless. By identifying the key features, the principal one among them, the contradictions driving them, our abstractions allow us to grasp a phenomenon in its essentials. Guiding our practice, this, in turn, helps us to delve deeper into its complexity, which is both inherent to it as well as a product of its interconnections

with other phenomena. Yet, we cannot forget that the problems inherent to any "freezing" are also true.

Not just categories and laws, ideology, itself is subject to this. Ideology, understood as a worldview, is universal. In its actual development it is the totality of ideas associated with revolutionary praxis in both the practical and theoretical spheres. Praxis always addresses a particular concrete situation or issue. Hence, the dialectics of particularity and universality is ever present in ideology. This must be kept firmly in mind while applying it. What was particular to a situation, what is universal in the received ideology—much hinges on a correct assessment.

For example, in the view of Marx and Engels, derived from then existing conditions, proletarian revolution was expected in countries where capitalism had developed. All through the Second International period, this was taken as a basic position. Leading theoreticians—Kautsky and Plekhanov and others—were citing it to justify their opposition to the proletariat leading a revolution in Russia, which was still quite backward. In a sense, they were "standing firm" on ideology. In actual fact, the emergent reality of imperialism and the new potential for revolution it offered were being denied. In their received ideological consciousness, the pre-imperialist world condition remained "frozen". Its vision now came back as an imposition on the new reality, inserted through their ideological understanding. Ideology as guidance turned into ideology as false consciousness. It took a Lenin to rupture from the redundant in Marxism and develop it to a new height through revolutionary theory and practice.

Objective and subjective conditions change over time with the working out of inherent contradictions. Class struggle is part of this. The revolutionary praxis of the proletariat is guided by its ideology. But that very practice sets up and unleashes a dynamic between revolution and counter-revolution. This in turn brings about significant changes in the conditions of practice, especially when the class struggle is a long drawn out one. Major contradictions, on which the strategy of practice was firmed up, may well remain. But the emergence of new facets, or the waning of some earlier prominent ones, is inevitable. And this has great significance for further advance. If these are not identified in time and ideological, political positions and practices are not developed accordingly, the earlier

ideological understanding and practice will become fetters. They will be generating false consciousness. This potential for transforming into false consciousness is ever present in ideology. "One divides into two" must be applied to guard against it.

Monism was a leap from the "both this and that" confusion of dualism. Dualist thought hampered—blinded—synthesis and the deepening of knowledge. However, to be consistent, monism must be dialectical, that too on a materialist basis. This is the great achievement of Marxism. It drew out the full potential of monism by pointing out that "every single whole is a unity of opposites". Nothing exists by itself or in and through itself. Everything exists in interconnection, interpenetration. This must be addressed by monism. While insisting on oneness, singularity, it must simultaneously accept multiplicity. Any monism that refuses to do so, such as the absolute monism of Advaita, will inevitably end up as an eclectic mash-up with dualism.

Going Beyond the Toleration Paradigm

November 26, 2015, commemorated as Constitution Day, became an occasion for a two-day debate in both houses of Parliament. Secularism was one hot topic. Pushing the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) line, Home Minister Rajnath Singh tried to rename secularism "panthnirapeksh". He was opposed by the Congress and others. They insisted on continuing with "dharmnirapeksh", as termed until now. All hues of the ruling class political spectrum broadly agree that secularism is to be understood as "not differentiating among religions". The RSS tries to buttress its views by citing this: since "dharm" means religion in general, it demands it should be replaced by "panth".[78] "Panth" refers to a specific religious belief. Therefore, the RSS argues, it is more appropriate to convey the meaning of "not differentiating among religions".

This is a devious argument. "Panth" connotes something more than a separate religious belief. Take the case of the Vaishnava, Shaiva Panths or the Shia, Sunni ones. Despite differing from each other in many significant ways, both of these pairs come within the broader belief systems of Hinduism and Islam. Therefore, though "panth" is a distinct belief, it is still within, a part of some religion. So why is the Sangh Parivar trying to switch "dharm" for "panth"? It is preparing grounds for formally replacing secularism as presently seen in the Constitution with the Brahmanist notion of toleration. This merits deeper probing. But before taking that up, let us first examine the official Indian conceptualisation of secularism.

Whether *dharm* or *panth*, the crux of the conceptualisation is contained in the second half of the word— "nirapekshak". This can be loosely translated as "regardless of". We can then expand "dharmnirapekshak" as "no matter what the religion may be". That is, the state will deal with all citizens equally, irrespective of their religious faith. That, of course, is well and good. But isn't this a matter of democracy, where all citizens are supposed to be treated equally? By principle, such equitable treatment

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[78] The word "dharm" has many connotations. It has been used to denote social order, as well as *varna*-ordained duty. Besides meaning religion in general, a narrower definition, such as the "Hindu Dharm", indicating a specific religion is also seen in authoritative texts.

should not be restricted to religion alone in a democracy. Regardless of their economic status, race, caste or gender, a democratic state is constitutionally mandated to treat all citizens as equal. In other words, equal status and rights for citizens of different faiths in a democratic state is not a matter of secularism. It is the application of democracy.

So what does it mean to declare that secularism means being "nirapekshak" of something or the other, whether *dharm* or *panth*? It means gutting secularism of its specific content; removing that which makes it distinct from other general principles of democracy. Secularism solely addresses the relation between the state and religion. Secularism demands the separation of religion from the state. It insists that religion must be made a purely personal matter. A secular state should have nothing to do with the religious belief (or non-belief) of a citizen. The state should have nothing to do with religious institutions either, other than the regulatory role it has over all institutions, private or public.

Evidently, the official Indian rendering of secularism has nothing to do with its real meaning. On record, the most it demands is that all religions and their believers must be treated equally. In practice, even this principle is violated, more often than not. The Indian State's bias favouring *Savarna* Hindus and persecution of Muslims and other religious minorities have been repeatedly seen throughout the past decades. This is not an aberration. A common world outlook informs both the gutting of secularism and the pro-*Savarna* Hindu bias of the Indian State. They stem from the Brahmanist conception of toleration which privileges itself even while accommodating the "other". What is touted as the Indian form of secularism, "the equal treatment of all religions" is essentially a "modernised" version of an age-old notion unique to Brahmanism.

The co-existence of religious minorities along with a dominant community is certainly not particular to South Asia. Though interspersed with bouts of persecution, every majority religious community has allowed such co-existence, made necessary by worldly concerns. What is unique to Brahmanism is the space it can allow to other religious faiths within its theological frame itself. This sets it apart from monotheistic religions such as the Semitic ones, Buddhism and others. The theologies of these faiths cannot, in principle itself, allow room for any other religion. Their

claim to "godly Truth" rest on their insistence on being the "Sole Truth". Brahmanism too insists on being the Sole Truth. But it lodges this claim with a strikingly different logic. This is epitomised in its precept "ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti". That is, "the truth is one, the sages speak of it differently".

Thus, there may be several "speakings" or renderings, each different from the other. But all of them reveal one and the same truth. This would also imply that every one of them are equally legitimate. At a first glance, this rules out privileging any specific "speaking", including that of Brahmanism. On a closer look, one will see that such eloquent liberalism itself provides Brahmanism with the means to stake claim to superiority. The "single truth" it projects is nothing other than its own concept of "ultimate liberation". While there will be diverse paths to its revelation, what is or needs to be revealed is this concept, Brahmanist to the core. The case of "unity in diversity" too, much touted as the essence of the Indian "national" ethos, is similar. The unity posited here is not monolithic. It is a unity of diversities. The individualities of the elements producing diversity are apparently recognised. However, by that very act, their distinct separate origins and trajectories are denied. That which individuated them is eliminated. They are thus reduced as mere manifestations of a single element, "the unity".

Such theological precepts give Brahmanism remarkable accommodative flexibility. As seen earlier, it is by no means open-ended. Brahmanism assimilates and dominates through accommodation. In this it sharply differs from monolithic religions. These religions strive to totally eliminate all features of a pre-existing faith while bringing its believers under their own fold. Any trace that remains is given a thorough make-over. The rigidity this gives rise to is all too evident. To give an example, no matter how liberation theology may interpret it, core Christian precepts flatly deny salvation to all those who do not seek it through Jesus Christ. But there is also another side to the matter.

In the process of establishing their singular vision and faith, these religions also impose their values (both spiritual and material) and morality among all those brought under their sway. Quite inadvertently, this can become an enabling factor for the believers. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

had drawn attention to this aspect. Very different from this, Brahmanism thrived on what was termed by him as "graded morality". This meant differentiated values, beliefs and rituals, even gods. What was granted to the Brahmins was denied to others in increasing degrees, going down the caste order. The denial of its sacred texts to the bulk of those brought under its fold was a hallowed norm. Despite many changes, much of this differentiation remains. Even where they are no longer visible, they persist, particularly through the notion of considering Brahmanist norms as the ideal.

As a corollary, this graded denial was inevitably accompanied by the granting of some space to the beliefs, rituals, deities of the pre-existent faiths, while absorbing their followers as castes. Elements of those faiths were differentially incorporated within the Brahmanist belief system. Such was its unique mode of proselytisation. Its heterogeneity, ranging from animism to contemplation of a formless, quality-less, abstract Absolute, was founded and embellished on this graded allowance. This has also forced it to leave room for the sustenance of non-Brahmanist outlooks and values as living traditions. Drawing on them, powerful anti-Brahmanist critiques and movements have come up time and again.

We can now arrive at a proper assessment of the Brahmanist notion of toleration. Accommodation and denial both go together in it. The RSS trumpets its accommodative stance to argue that this makes specific reference to "secularism" redundant. In its view, Brahmanism has already assured this. Will the demand to go beyond toleration and insist on respect of other faiths suffice as counter to the Sangh Parivar? No. In a manner, such "respect" also can be accommodated in the Brahmanist frame. Allowing space to the "other" also implies a degree of respect. The late Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, by no means a die-hard, gave an explanation for the range of faiths and rituals existing within the Hindu belief system. He presented it as an adaptation of its 'lofty' principles to the differing intellectual and spiritual levels of its adherents. There is no disrespect for the "lower" or even "crude" forms of worship even while the attainment of pure contemplative, spiritual oneness is posed as supreme. Toleration and respect are thus easily accommodated, without yielding a bit on supremacism!

So long as the counter to the RSS is posed in terms of the toleration/respect paradigm, it will remain within the frame of Brahmanism. We will have to be satisfied with a "more or less" toleration solution, i.e. one of degree rather than substance. The official version of secularism as inscribed in the Constitution and propounded by liberals, the Congress, Socialists and the parliamentary Left, is as much firmly within the Brahmanist frame as that proposed by the RSS. To make a substantial separation from this, the debate must be focused on the real meaning of secularism and how it can be realised in our context.

To be truly secular, religion must be separated from the state and made a personal matter. Therefore, the accurate translation of "secularism" in Hindi would be "dharmether" or "nidharmi". That is, a secular state is one without religion. It has nothing to do with religion. The RSS has argued that such separation is irrelevant in India. Nothing similar to the Catholic Church's domination over royalty in Europe or the explicit and indissoluble link between religion and state power in Islam, ever existed here. Personal communion with an "Ultimate Truth", without the mediation of temples or priests, was well accepted by Brahmanism. Yes, all of that is true. But it still doesn't settle the matter.

Authoritative texts on state craft like the *Arthasasthra* of Kautilya have clearly put forward the key role of Brahmanism in the state. A Brahmin was a must for royal coronation. A king, in turn, took his crown and throne pledging to protect the cow and the Brahmin *(go-brahmana pratipalaka)* and prevent the mixing of *varnas*. Islamic influences conveyed through Turk, Mogul and Afghan rule, as well as socio-economic compulsions of the near modern period, made the association of religion and the royal power even more pronounced and firm. Thus we see Marthanda Varma, an 18th century Thiruvithamkoor King, "offer" his kingdom to the deity of Padmanabhasamy temple, declaring that he rules merely as the Lord's servitor. He thereby gave the stamp of supreme, total divinity to the rule of the Thiruvithamkoor royalty.[79] Evidently, the separation of religion from state is as relevant here as it was in Europe.

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[79] In the process "sanketams", centres of absolute Brahmin control that existed up to that time were superseded. The Travancore royalty gained control over *sanketam* lands, mostly lands controlled by the respective temples.

Given the diffuse character of the Hindu belief system and Brahmanism's permeation of the state, how can this realised? What exactly will it entail? Since Brahmanism is intrinsic to the ideological make-up of all factions of the ruling classes, one cannot realistically expect the realisation of secularism without confronting them. However, even a forceful attempt at secular separation of the state and religion will be truly radical and sustainable only if some specificities are addressed. The specifics of religion and its ties with the state and governance, concretely obtaining here, must be identified and dealt with.

In our caste-ridden society, the religious experience and its social location are quite unlike what exist elsewhere. Whichever may be the religion, the relation of an individual to it in all of its dimensions—belief, rituals, worship and community—is mediated through caste. Whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian or whatever, the believer imbues faith and lives out religion through caste. A Hindu becomes so precisely by being born into a caste.

Ironically, this overwhelming meditation of religion through—and only through—caste was brought sharply into focus during the so-called "ghar wapsi" ("return to home") campaign of the Sangh Parivar. Its declared aim is to "remake" Christians and Muslims as Hindus. The "reborn Hindus", however, find themselves in a bind. Being in an undefined and undecided caste status they are unable to build communal ties with their newly acquired Hindu brethren! None other than Vinay Katiyar, head of the Bajrang Dal, an RSS outfit, publicly rued that their marriages were proving to be a big problem.

The situation of the Christian, Muslim or Sikh is not exactly identical to that of a Hindu. But, even then, the caste one belongs to has primacy. It is acutely experienced by the *Dalit*, *Adivasi* and Backward caste members of these religious communities. The casteist existence of these faiths reveals itself right from differentiated entry and seating in centres of worship to graded positioning in the priesthood's hierarchy.

In Europe, religion had a direct role in state functioning, in governance. Caste has played a similar role in our context. If religion is to be separated from the state and made purely a personal matter, *then the personal must first be liberated from caste*. So long as the social existence

of the individual is predicated by and through caste, religion can never be made a private affair. Thus, the annihilation of caste acquires a vital role in the secularisation of Indian society. Along with broader issues of democratisation, the anti-Brahmanist struggle has thus a specific relation to the task of achieving true secularism.

During the vigorous debate on secularism in the parliament, most of the speakers referred to Dr. Ambedkar. The BJP's invention of a Constitutional Day was itself part of the RSS' game plan to construct a Brahmanised version of Ambedkar to serve its fascistic agenda. Yet, not one of its detractors had the sense to counter this with Ambedkar's attack on Brahmanism, to his declared position on the need to dynamite it in order to annihilate caste. But then, given their loyalty to core Brahmanist values, that is their sense.

To Be in Communion with Our Social Selves

> *"Religious distress is at the same the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress".* –Karl Marx

Globalisation is driving the hunger for material goods and luxurious consumption to extremes. Cheap imitations of costly gadgets and clothes are now widely available. This craze thus engulfs even the poorest sections of society. Status and life's fulfilment is measured by the number of "latest" "branded" gadgets and dresses one owns.

Simultaneously, the religious sphere is also thriving. The numbers thronging temples, churches and mosques greatly increase year-by-year. Poojas, yagnas, prayer meets, urs, pilgrimage—each and every ritual is multiplying. Youth form a large share in all of this. Apparently, all of this stands in contradiction to the galloping greed for material goods. Yet, in its essence, there is a striking similarity. Religion is also being consumed, much like a commodity. The thrust is on the ostentatious. There is less religiosity and more of glitter and pomp, the grander the better. Religious ceremonies are now "event managed". Even the private act of prayer must be embellished with the latest accompaniments—flashy idols, LED lamps, 3D photos and more. This showiness is prominently seen even among those who lay claim to superior spirituality; a Sri Sri[80], for example.

Despite this booming, hedonistic consumption, spiritual and material satisfaction remain out of reach. The more the greed for goods and fervent prayers, the greater the alienation. A dull feeling of lack remains and grows.

Dissatisfied with this state of affairs, an increasing number of people search for real spiritual solace. Often, this leads them to meditation. Meditation and the spirituality it promises is certainly preferable to the religious commodities being peddled today. At the minimum, it can be

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[80] *Sri* is a conventional title of respect in many South Asian languages. Not satisfied with one *Sri*, this double appellation is used by the Hindu religious preacher Ravisankar (nowadays quite active in the global NGO business of crisis resolution) to crown himself.

a thankful diversion from the cross commercialisation of the spiritual. Even for the non-religious, meditation can give peace of mind, mental relaxation. For the religiously minded it offers "godly bliss". Neuroscience gives scientific understanding of the brain activity triggered by meditation and explains its positive outcome. However, even this peace of mind, spiritual solace or religious bliss, is still problematic.

Meditation demands a withdrawal into oneself. This is a precondition, even if it's only for the duration of meditation. Obviously, that cannot be sustained by those who lead an active life. The moment they return to that life they will be assailed by all the conflicts, tensions and needs of their ordinary existence. The state of affairs from which solace was sought through meditation awaits them. For argument's sake, let us assume that an individual who has attained meditative bliss will now be able to face up to this impassively. Even then, the material, social reality that gave rise to tensions and stress remains. All that has been achieved is the mental respite of an individual. Forgetting the contradictions of society, even if everyone were to achieve this state of mind, it would still be the respite of individuals. But the individual can only exist in union and contradiction with society since humans are social beings. Therefore, a sustained spiritual respite, either for an individual or for all, as individuals, separately, is an impossibility.

Meditation allows one to attain a state of mind, a feeling of being one with all others, with the world. Neuroscience demonstrates that this emerges from the promotion of activity in a specific region of the brain and the simultaneous muting of activity in another region related to self-reference. However, this state of mind, this sense of communion abruptly ends the moment that person returns to his or her class, caste, gendered existence. To give an example, a capitalist may be in communion with his workers in the meditative state. But he cannot be so in normal conditions, while remaining a capitalist. To achieve such communion in real life, he must cease to be a capitalist. But that too won't be a solution. So long as that society remains capitalist, this individual ceasing will only lead to the closing down of his factory. The condition of labour of that group of workers will be eliminated. They and their dependents

would be thrown into misery. Rather than joining him in communion, they would be cursing their ex-boss.

To sum up, meditation can ease mental stress, grant spiritual bliss and give a sense of communion. But it cannot give a lasting resolution since it avoids addressing the material, social sources of stress and conflict. Besides this, in its Brahmanist version, it also suffers from a basic flaw.

Brahmanism presents meditation as a means for the "atma" to become one with "paramatma". It argues that the ego and desire are obstacles hindering this union: they must be eliminated. Therefore, the process of meditation advanced by Brahmanism is one in which desires are given up. This must finally lead to the elimination of the ego itself. In this state of mind there is no "I" separate from the "paramatma". The sense of "I", as a separate entity, is revealed to be a product of ignorance. The realisation that "I" is only a part of "nirgunabrahma" is achieved.

For Brahmanism, the ego is a creation of ignorance about the "atma" and its indissoluble relation with the "paramatama" as a part of it. The ego is seen as the root cause of all emotional, psychological, spiritual problems. Its elimination is a pre-condition for the attainment of supreme bliss. Meditation is advanced as a means to achieve this. As noted earlier, neuroscience actually does show how meditation causes significant decrease in brain signals from regions associated with self-referential, egoistic thought. But, rather than proving Brahmanism's claims, this scientific knowledge only goes to refute it. At the minimum, it shows that self-referential, ego-centred thought is brain activity. It has a material base. Therefore, it is not an illusion that has emerged from the identification of "atma" with the physical body, as explained by Brahmanism.

What if the existence of this specific region in the brain and its activity is itself the product of such illusion? Can't we then assume that not only self-referential brain activity but even the brain region where it takes place can eventually be transformed through meditation?

Science has identified regions in the human brain not seen in other animals. It has shown how they were later growths that came through evolution. Unlike animals, social and cultural practices have played a major role in the further evolution of humans and their brains. Engels points out the role of labour in this process. As a result, the human brain has

evolved into a complex, differentiated organ. Correspondingly, specific brain regions and types of brain activity have emerged, including those related to the ego. Every organism distinguishes itself from everything else, animate or inanimate. If it doesn't do so, material existence, the reproduction and thriving of the species would be impossible. Self-awareness has its roots in this. The human ego is an advanced type of self-awareness. It is structured and deeply influenced by social existence. It has evolved with the development of human society.

It is evident, then, that the elimination of the ego, as demanded by Brahmanism, is neither possible nor advisable. It is an inseparable part of human existence and consciousness. That does not mean that we should not concern ourselves with the ego. The human essence is an ensemble of social relations. One's ego invariably also carries the imprint of these relations. In the present world, private property, exploitation and the relations of domination and oppression they give rise to, anchor the ego in selfishness. This definitely is a shackle on social consciousness. It hinders the struggle for radical change. We must address this through developing social awareness and consciousness. A sense of commitment to society, to the people, must be developed in close relation to the struggle to transform the society. This is not elimination of the ego as proposed by the one-sided viewpoint of Brahmanism. It is its transformation. It is the subordination of the self to the larger interests of the people. Selfless service to the people replaces self-seeking.

Controlling the mind through concentration, withdrawing one's consciousness from sensory impulses, is necessary for advancing to the meditative state. However, the matter cannot be simply left at that. Brahmanism conceives lack of mental concentration as a product of the mind's "fickleness". The mind is pictured as a monkey on a fruit tree, jumping from branch to branch. Its "fickle" nature is said to arise from attraction to external objects. To overcome this, one must control and concentrate the mind in order to draw the consciousness away from external objects and sensuous desires towards the internal essence, i.e. the "atma".

Evidently, in this perception, the "fickle" nature of the mind is simply treated as an altogether negative characteristic to be rid of. Is that correct? If we examine the functioning of our mind, we can trace out chains

of thoughts. They usually lead us away from what we were thinking of at the beginning. Each thought is linked to the preceding and succeeding ones, somehow or the other. I hear a song. That leads my thought to the occasion when I first heard it. This reminds me of a person who was there. I then recollect a novel we were talking about. This brings to memory a character in that novel. I notice some similarities between that character and the person now sitting near me and so on. I started from a song heard in the past and ended up with the behaviour of somebody in the present.

All of these thoughts were either memories or immediate perceptions. One led to another through something they shared—either a context, outcome or characteristic. Within the brain these associations were made through synapses. A synapse is the connection made between brain cells. The brain has millions of brain cells; most of them remain unused during the lifetime of an individual. But even the small share in use has the potential for a huge number of synapses. This is the material basis of the mind's "fickleness", its jumping from one thought to another. For Brahmanism it is simply a negative trait.

On the contrary, this quality of the brain and consequently, of the mind, lies precisely at the very base of human creativity and innovation. It has given humans immense capacity to go beyond perception and conceive of entirely new things. A computer functions with pre-set programmes. Even those with artificial intelligence function within some boundaries. But the human brain has no such limitation, other than its physical one. It can make totally new associations and come up with unique insights. The same objective reality can be subjectively appreciated and represented in diverse forms. The associative capacity of the brain gives us the ability to make abstractions. A large number of particularities can thus be subsumed under a universal category. Ironically, the very quality of the mind damned as negative by Brahmanism has allowed the conceptualisation of its own precepts! To sum up, we must certainly be able to concentrate our minds when required. But this must not be taken up in an absolutist manner denying the positivity of its roving nature.

Whether ego or mind, in both the cases, Brahmanism projects a one-sided view that originates from its idealism. It is incapable of grasp-

ing the material basis of mental phenomena. Though, nowadays, it often tries to "prove" its claims by drawing on advances of science, its arguments only serve to contradict itself. Even its highest claim about having the best understanding of spirituality falls flat.

Marxism does not deny the spiritual side of humans. But it negates views that bracket the spiritual solely with religious belief. This Marxist position is substantiated by neuroscience. Electrical stimulation of a particular region of the brain brings up a state of mind identical to religious/spiritual feelings. The material underpinning of religious spirituality is thus revealed. Simultaneously, we are also educated that the religious experience is something real. It is not a mere illusion or a product of ignorance as argued by rationalism. Marxism considers it to be a part of the spiritual mind of humans. Communion with fellow beings, morality, consciousness, the aesthetic sense and the contemplative mind, all of these are part of the spiritual. It is inseparable from the social existence of human beings. It is not something given, some permanently set human quality, but a product of historical development. The religious experience is only a particular form of expression of the spiritual.

One can surely prepare a long list of the negative fallouts of religious thinking. Yet, it is also undeniable that it has performed two positive roles, right from its origins until now. One was (is) as a moral adjudicator, serving the needs of maintaining, promoting and reproducing social cohesiveness and stability. The other as a rationaliser, helping to make sense of the contrariness of human existence and its end in death. Thus, it has played a major role in the development, shaping and sustenance of humanity. Yet, it has not remained the same in its content or manner of expression throughout the ages. A very significant, qualitative change took place with the emergence of class society. Various types of social divisions such as class, caste, gender, etc., exploitation and private property, shattered the material, social and spiritual communion of humanity.

In primitive societies, the rationalising role of proto-religions primarily dealt with the nature/human contradictions through worship of nature, animism and ritualistic magic. Forces of nature, lightening, wind, water, animals, trees, mountains and so on were attributed superhuman powers and worshipped. The aim was either to mitigate their life-threat-

ening powers or draw out their supposed life-enabling qualities. In their moralistic role these beliefs addressed the needs of stability and cohesiveness of specific tribes vis-à-vis others. Kinships, blood relations, moral codes and so on were defined through totems and taboos.

Unlike this, in class societies the dual role of religion must address sharp social contradictions. Most fundamentally it must deal with the harsh reality of the increasing aggrandisement of the few at the expense of the vast majority and the oppressions accompanying it. The social communion lost in real life must be recreated as a transcendental union mediated through some omnipotent power named god, vital force or Brahmanism's *nirgunabrahma*. As Marx noted, it must function as the "heart" of a "heartless" world. This is the strength as well as fundamental weakness of religion as a provider of spiritual solace in class society.

Religion certainly does offer solace in a world made inhuman by exploitation and all sorts of oppression. But, the more it does so, the more it becomes a prop, a legitimisation of this inhumanity. In the beginning, a new religion may also be suppressed by the ruling class. But that changes when it gains wider acceptance among the people. The rulers themselves start associating with it and become its believers and patrons. Over time it becomes a consciously sustained tool that helps keep the masses subdued and thus serves the task of maintaining the existent ruling order. Social divisions get replicated within it. It thus suffers an erosion in its capacity to be a salve for despairing minds. The conditions are thus prepared for a new interpretation, a new savant or a new belief system. Its roots lie in the spiritual, theological, philosophical crisis of the extant religion, all of which, in turn, have some very material undercurrents. The new religion invariably also follows the same path as its predecessors. The "heartless" world can never really yield space to a "heart" offering solace.

Idealism always accuses materialism of being concerned only with the physical body, with material desires, of ignoring the spiritual side. However, as seen above, even the religious experience is itself limited in its capacity to address the spiritual. We must go beyond it to satisfy the spiritual needs of human beings.

In his *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx criticised mechanical materialist thinking for failing to address the "active side" of human existence. By

this he meant mental activity, the inseparable relation between consciousness and human practice. He pointed out how this lapse has been capitalised by idealism to present itself as the sole representative and proponent of the mental, thinking side. Lenin, in his notes on dialectics, made a similar observation. He noted how idealism emerged from material life. It grasped one aspect of reality and then took it up in a one-sided manner, thus cutting it off from the flow of life and causing it to shrivel up. Incidentally, this also shows that idealism is not just humbug. It has identified and tried to address a real aspect of human existence, even if it does so in an upside-down manner, denying the primacy of matter.

These insights of Marxism help us understand the material base of the spiritual. For members of a primitive tribe, communion was conceivable only with others of the same tribe. Beyond that, no one was even worth consideration as humans. Today, such an attitude would be considered inhuman. Even if only at the conceptual level, all of humankind is now granted the right to a human existence. And this acceptance itself brings out in sharp relief the denial of minimal human conditions for billions of people by a tiny section. One remembers that evocative picture of Ayan Kurdi, the young refugee child, washed up dead on a beach. Capturing the pitiless stillness of his death yet bringing to mind the playful time he could have spent on those sands, it thus spoke volumes of the possible and its cruel denial. The cry of revulsion and anger, the tide of empathy that swelled up all over the world, showed us the immense dimensions of spiritual oneness thirsting for expression, as well as the material barriers choking it.

All religious teachers have talked about the power of love. Love for one's fellow human beings is indeed powerful. But, as an African-American saying reminds us, "When hunger steps in through the door, love flies out of the windows". There is resignation to the cruel truth of the lives of the poor in these words. There is also pain, bitterness, at the enforced loss of love, of humanness. There is wrath. Should we soothe this spiritual dissatisfaction with mystic retreat into oneself, or should we fan it up to energise ourselves in burning anger? We must hit out, hit hard against the inhuman conditions of the existing world that deny us spiritual satisfaction. We must end this wretchedness. Only then can we proceed towards

achieving "peace of mind", the full blooming of human faculties, material and spiritual, to live as social beings—in communion with our fellow beings, our social selves.

On Reclaiming Our Scientific Heritage

Mythologies of all ancient civilisations have abundant instances of grand flights of human imagination wherein they transcend natural limits and attain supra capabilities. If Rama and Sita flew down from Lanka on a *Pushpakviman*[81], the Greek Icarus accompanied his father in self-propelled flight. It is said that he soared up until he got his wax wings melted by getting too close (too uppity?) to the Sun.[82] The sheer audacity and poetry of such myths, the thinking of the unthinkable of which they speak, is indeed something to marvel. But flights of imagination are not science. Citing mythical stories to make claims about our ancestors' scientific acumen, is, simply put, a lot of wind. It would make better sense to stop spinning yarns and get down to the hard work of seeking out the science in our pasts.

From the Vajpayee government onwards, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its cohorts have been wasting precious public money in a meaningless quest. They have been trying to track down references, even remotely linkable, to science and technology in the books of antiquity and pin them to one or the other scientific theory. Even a tiny fraction of that effort devoted to a systematic study of our ancient texts would have greatly benefited us and the whole world by culling out whatever knowledge they contain. As such, that task has been undertaken over the years by a number of historians and scientists, usually attacked by the RSS as less "Bharatheeya". They could do so because they applied some very modern methodologies, quite "Western" in origin, including that of Marxism.

Thanks to them we are better informed today about the great advances made in the sciences in South Asia. They include weighty contribution in

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[81] A *Pushpakviman* is a flying vehicle said to have been owned by Ravana, Rakshasa king of Lanka. Ravana had abducted Sita, Rama's wife. He was defeated and killed in war by Rama, Prince of Ayodhya, considered an incarnation of Vishnu, one among Brahminism's Trinity. The epic *Ramayana*, narrating Rama's life, is considered a venerated holy book by Hindus. It has been criticised by progressives and Marxists for its overtly patriarchal, casteist, racist, Brahmanical discourse.

[82] In Greek mythology Icarus and his father sought to escape from Crete by means of wings that his father constructed from feathers and wax.

several branches of mathematics, in astronomy, medicine, pharmacology and metallurgy to name a few. These sciences thrived in an atmosphere of lively contention between a number of schools of thought ranging from the materialism of the Carvakas to the absolute monism of *Advaita* idealism, the dialectics of Jaina and Bauddha schools and the logic of Nyaya. The application of the sciences was seen in many spheres—building observatories to further astronomy, marvels of architecture and construction, plant and livestock breeding, innovative agricultural practices, rocketry, surgical procedures and even rudimentary forms of vaccination. So where and how did we lose this scientific tradition so closely related to practical application?

The Hinduvadis have a stock answer. Not just the RSS but the whole lot of them blame it on "Muslim invasion". This, they claim, pushed the region into a "dark age". Invasions were certainly destabilising and disruptive. Destruction of great centres of learning such as Taxila and Nalanda[83] surely caused big setbacks in the flow and dissemination of knowledge. Invasions, however, were never the sole prerogative of Huna, Afghan, Turk or Mongol marauders or conquerors. The founding of empires, such as the Mauryan or Gupta, their expansion through aggression and forceful assimilation of countless tribal people, were also disruptive of many knowledge systems. Apart from this, some other factors also demand consideration.

In antiquity and the Middle Ages, invasions and conquests were also important means of disseminating and exchanging knowledge and cultural practices. The Arab scientific tradition was well developed by the Middle Ages, during which many of the invasions into South Asia took place. It was carried along with the spread of Islam. Along with devastation and disruption, those invasions must also have given many positive inputs. Under the Mughal Empire spanning roughly three centuries, large parts of South Asia were under a single, more or less, stable

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[83] Nalanda was an ancient Buddhist monastery and renowned centre of learning situated in the then kingdom of Magadha (presently in Bihar, India). It is believed to have functioned between the 5th and 12th CE, when it was finally destroyed by Mamluk King Bhaktiyar Khilji's forces. Taxila, founded during the First Persian Empire in 6 BCE, is presently in Punjab, Pakistan. It was one of the earliest universities in the world. Taxila is believed to have been ransacked and destroyed by invading Huna people in 5 CE.

rule. By the middle of the second millennia, South Asia was one of the most affluent regions of the whole world. Moreover, the *Brahmin/Kshatriya* elites were forever part of the ruling dispensation, no matter what its religious banner was. That in itself should have been a conduit for the preservation and passing on of previous knowledge. Besides, large parts of the Southern peninsula continued under the traditional *Savarna* Hindu Kings throughout this period. Finally, there are many recorded instances of Muslim kings' patronage of Sanskrit knowledge. For all these reasons, the sooner we abandon the false assumption of Muslim invasions being the prime reason for the doom of South Asian scientific traditions, the closer we will be to seeking out the actual factors.

The development of the sciences has always and everywhere been closely related to experimentation and practice. This was true of our ancestors as well. The Aryabhatta legend in Keralam recounts that the great astronomer and mathematician would lie on the banks of the Nila for nights together, engrossed in star gazing. Caraka and Sushruta, eminent physicians, were reputed to have dug up and dissected bodies to learn human physiology. Caraka is said to have criticised the younger generations for failing to pursue this practice. Bharatha's *Natya Shastra* is testimony to the efforts he made to collect and collate information about the diverse forms of performing arts from all over the sub-continent. Brothels were a source of information on sex practices for Vatsyayana, author of the *Kamasutra*. So how was this scientific temperament lost?

These words of Al-Beruni are eloquent:

> The Hindu believes that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no saints like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and stolid. *They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from a foreigner....* Their haughtiness is such that if you will tell them of any science or scholar in Khorasan and Persis, they will think you to be an ignoramus and a liar.[84]

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[84] Quoted from *A Farewell to Arms*, Alok Sheel, EPW, Vol. 51, No 31, p. 117; emphasis added.

Conceited thinking and privileging one's own country above all others was (is) by no means unique to "Hindus" (most probably he meant Brahmins). But restrictions of caste on the dissemination of knowledge was certainly so. And that supplies the answer to our query. Outweighing everything else, Brahmanism and its caste system were by far the most harmful of all in stunting, dampening and even destroying the continuous growth of the sciences in South Asia.

Take the case of plastic surgery, the real type (not the idiocy peddled citing the elephant-headed *Ganesha*[85]). Meeting the demand for reconstruction by those suffering the loss of their noses (a form of punishment in those days), Sushruta developed a simple, but effective, procedure. He made a nose shaped incision on the patient's forehead, pulled the skin flap down and shaped a "new" nose. Sushruta designed a number of instruments for this and other surgical procedures. But later, this specialised line of treatment went out of practice and was practically lost for centuries. It was "rediscovered" by a British officer. He came across this procedure and the instruments used for it… as practiced by a blacksmith! Evidently, it must have been passed down over the centuries as part of the manufacture of the instruments. The method, skill and instruments survived as a blacksmith's specialised craft, but by rote. It remained where Sushruta had reached it.

Brahmanism went well beyond all other ruling-class ideologies known in world history in the segregation of knowledge and its denial to the oppressed, including women. Its reactionary stance cleaved apart manual and mental labour, causing great harm to the advance of science and technology The direct sources of empirical knowledge were restricted to the labouring castes. This shrivelled up theory, monopolised by the elite castes. Quite naturally, practice floundered in repetitious ruts, bereft of new theoretical insights drawn from direct experience.

Already shackled by the caste system, what remained of South Asian scientific traditions suffered a deadly blow with colonial conquest and rule. This was the invasion that really caused an irreparable rupture. Colonialism brought the modern sciences and technology to South Asia.

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[85] Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, son of Shiva and Parvati, is a prominent figure in the Brahmanic pantheon.

But this was not value-neutral. It was stamped by a colonial, racist outlook that dismissed all previous local knowledge as primitive beliefs and superstitions. Colonial contempt for South Asia's scientific tradition was in inverse proportion to extolling its mysticism and *Advaita*. The one reinforced the other. A firm belief in the superiority of Western thought and science from ancient times onwards was a common basis for both. Scienticism, born of the European Enlightenment, complimented the colonial rubbishing of regional knowledge systems.

How did the South Asian elites respond? There were those who took up the modern sciences. Facing heavy odds and discrimination they succeeded in making major breakthroughs in their respective fields and demonstrated that the South Asian mind is equally capable of scientific brilliance. One recalls with pride Jagadish Chandra Bose and CV Raman, to name two who were among the pioneers. But they were the exceptions.

The *Savarna* elite overwhelmingly responded in a typically Brahmanical manner. It almost matched the caustic observation of Al-Beruni (above), but with a significant difference: colonialism was constantly tutoring them on the inferior status of their pasts and the present. This was internalised by them as adulation of the Western as the "modern", as an aspirational model. Yet that haughtiness, remarked on by Al-Beruni, would be of service. Preening over old glories and "discovering" the modern sciences in their ancient texts, they assuaged their inferiority complex. Simultaneously, the new sciences were summoned to establish, or explain their own philosophical views and religious beliefs. These were "shown" to have "scientific" basis. This remains in an unbroken continuity from colonial times, through various shades of Hinduvadis, of Brahmanism, all the way up to the current nonsense dished out by RSS propaganda.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Gita Rahasya* gives abundant examples of the methods employed to use the modern sciences in service of the contemporary needs of Brahmanism. There may be more sophisticated pseudo-scientific interpretations of Brahmanic views and rituals. Yet, Tilak's work remains as an authoritative source, given his erudition and systematic exposition. Moreover, some of his arguments will be seen to be quite familiar and almost replicated in those articulated by contemporary propagandists of Brahmanism

Claiming that Kapila's Samkhya philosophy anticipated the modern theory of evolution, Tilak states, "Modern materialist science can say nothing much more than Kapila on how diverse and manifest creation emerged from the unmanifest [*avyakth*] *prakriti*".[86] The Samkhya *prakriti* is one aspect of its primordial duality, the other being *purusha*. (See footnote 63) *Prakriti* cannot simply be equated to Nature. Even if we allow such liberties, where has modern science said that all the elements, geological features, flora-fauna and life forms have emerged from a single, unmanifest, primordial matter?

The terminology Tilak employs, "manifest" and "unmanifest", is taken from Samkhya and *Advaita*. They are founded on the belief that every objective phenomenon is already contained in "potential" in its causes. The emergence of new qualities are ruled out. A usual example given (even today) to justify this is the making of curd from milk. It is argued that the curd was already contained in the milk. The proof offered is the fact that we can't make curd from water since it does not exist in "potential" there. We surely cannot do that. But that doesn't prove anything. The chemical composition, structure and nutritional qualities of curd were not pre-existent as an "unmanifest" in milk, its constituents or the bacteria causing curding. This is a new, emergent quality. Samkhya and *Advaita* refuse to accept it.

Tilak further argues, "Modern physics too has affirmed that no matter how much any substance undergoes change, the total of mass and *karmashakti* [energy] will remain the same".[87] This is cited as proof of the truth in Samkhya's denial of new qualities. Mass can be converted to energy and vice versa. But that only speaks to the quantitative aspect. The law of conservation of energy and mass has nothing to say about new, emergent qualities. Modern physics, chemistry, botany and zoology teach us countless instances of new qualities emerging.

Asserting that modern physics has arrived at the view that everything, including the elements, has emerged from one, single, matter, Tilak equates this to the Samkhya *prakriti* with its three *gunas* (qualities).

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[86] *Gita Rahasya*, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition, Pune, 2015; pp. 91-92; brackets added.

[87] Ibid., p. 93.

By the time he was publishing his work in 1915, modern atomic sciences had already gone beyond concepts of some single primordial atom as the single basic building block. But he preferred to ignore such advances, or rather, he was blind to them. Tilak was not wilfully misrepresenting them. His arguments came from a deep conviction, whose roots lie in the absolute monism of *Advaita*. Let us examine the logic of this world view.

Adi Sankara's example of the snake and rope, cited to establish *Advaita*'s key concepts of the ultimate real, *(nirgunabrahma)* and the unrealness *(maya)* of the material universe is a good place to start from. He equates the illusion of *maya*, said to be caused by ignorance of the all prevailing oneness of *nirgunabrahma*, to someone mistaking a rope for a snake. Notice that his conclusion does not logically flow from the comparison he makes. Rather, the example itself constitutes the logic. It conveys the sense he argues for precisely because the equation is made between objects similar to each other and familiar to the observer. Substitute any other dissimilar, unknown pair and the whole argument will fall flat.

Advaita does not reject outright the existence of a universe, one external to the observer. It asserts that the visible universe is *maya* (unreal) as opposed to the *nirgunabrahma*. The reasoning given is that the latter is the indestructible, undifferentiated essence that lies beneath the universe of objects with name and form, which is transient.[88] *Advaita* accepts that objects external to the observers underlie the knowledge about them. However, it argues that there is yet another independent thing external to the observer that lies beyond these objects. This is the *nirgunabrahma*.[89] It is "eternal and true". It can never be sensed, but can only be realised by gaining knowledge of the unity of the *atma* and *nirgunabrahma*. The visible universe is actually "unreal" *maya*. Thus, the acceptance of an external world of objects becomes a formal gesture, literally devoid of any substance. The monism it argues for, the "unity in diversity" it speaks of, is not derived, abstracted, from independently existing diverse material phenomena. It is attributed. In fact, this is the real *adhyaropa* (superimposition) executed by *Advaita*, not the one caused by the "maya" it posits.

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88 Ibid., pp. 132-133.
89 Ibid., p. 134.

The logic of *Advaita* draws a distinction between "jnana" (awareness) and "vijnana" (science). The former rates above the latter. It is the knowledge coming from the awareness that "…there is a singular, unmanifest, primordial substance within the numerous (diverse) manifest objects…" seen in the sensuous universe. *Vijnana* is the understanding of how "each one of the different, multiple, manifest objects were created from the singular primordial, unmanifest, substance.[90]

This sets up an unsurpassable barrier in the study of material phenomena. Rather than guiding that study towards grasping the essence underlying appearance, it forces it to remain at a superficial level. It insists on a pre-existing unity among all phenomena which is to be discovered. Inevitably this ends up in imposing preconceived notions or qualities and inverts the process of conceptualisation. All of these aberrations emerge from *Advaita*'s false determination between a "really real" *nirgunabrahma,* the immutable essence, and the "unreally real", i.e. the sensuous universe.

The disastrous consequences of this logic is seen in Tilak's attempt to "prove" a unity underlying diversity and human capacity to gain awareness about it. A comparison is made of the difference between an animal's and human's comprehension of the same phenomena. The example given is that of telling time from the tolling of a bell. Tilak argues "Even if an animal has awareness of several [sensory] impressions it does not achieve a realisation of the unity in diversity"[91], i.e. the totality of these sounds indicating time. Quite true. But leave alone animals, even a human does not tell time, conceiving it as a "unity" contained in the "diversity" of separate sounds. 12 strokes of a bell are taken as indicating 12 o'clock in an associative context passed on through culture. In societies that have not arrived at such a denomination of time, it would only be understood as a grouping of a particular sound. Even in cultures where the tolling of a bell is used as a method of conveying time, in a different context, say a sound lab, it would only be taken as a batch of sound samples. In all these cases, the meaning comes from "conceptualisation", not as the manifestation of some unity "inherent" to the tolling of a bell.

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[90] Ibid., p. 102. This is based on *sloka* 13.30 and 18.20 of the *Gita* given in pp. 501 and 503 of the *Gita Rahasya*.

[91] Ibid., p.80.

Posing a rhetorical question of how humans can live if only the manifest *(vyakt)* is accepted, Tilak goes on to argue:

> True, the particular object, mango and rose plant are visible. But the common noun plant does not show any visible or manifest object and all of our [practical] conduct goes on like this. It is clear from this that some or the other manifest object must be there before our eyes in order for our minds to be conscious of any idea of some unmanifest. *But the manifest itself not being the final step, we cannot take even a step forward without relying on the unmanifest, nor can we complete even a sentence.*[92]

The terms "manifest" and "unmanifest" are already coloured by the preconceived notion of something lurking behind or below objective reality. If we keep aside this loaded terminology, the matter discussed by Tilak concerns the relation between the particular and the general (universal). The general resides in the particular; that is, the notion of general is derived from numerous, particular, objects. In this case they are the various species of plants. The particular, in turn, is contained (represented) in the general. The essential commonness shared by this category of objects is captured, expressed, by the general—in this case the common noun "plant". Tilak accepts the former only to flip it over and end up with an unfounded attribution or assertion that the particular cannot even exist without the general. The dialectics of the material, concrete reality and its abstraction in concepts or categories, a key foundation of sciences, is thus brutally violated by the arbitrary imposition of *Advaita*.

If this is how the use of thought categories ends up choking off scientific thinking, one need not be surprised to see science itself being declared as "a matter of faith". The example Tilak gives is that of sunrise. Since it has been observed to regularly happen in the morning it is considered that this will go on. Apparently that knowledge seems to be beyond doubt. But, Tilak argues, a closer look will show that the mere fact of your (or your ancestors) seeing sunrise every morning is no reason for its repetition tomorrow. The sun neither rises because you have seen it

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[92] Ibid., p. 304; emphasis and words in brackets added.

do so until today, nor does it do so for you to see it. The reason underlying sunrise is something else.

He goes on to conclude:

> After realising that the order of something is, without fail, the same over a long period of time, to believe that it will remain so forever in the future too is a form of faith. Even if we qualify this with a big sounding word "deduction", this deduction is not of the nature of knowable cause-effect but is essentially a matter of faith.[93]

Observation, no matter how prolonged, cannot be a reason. But when a phenomenon repeats itself, we can draw some inference from our observations. If they get verified through experimentation, then we can formulate a law. We can define the observed phenomenon independent of the observer. We see "sunrises" in the East every morning, because the earth revolves around its axis. So long as this cause remains, the effect characterised by us as "sunrise" will continue, regardless of our faith.

What stands out throughout Tilak's attempt to give a "scientific" visage to Brahmanism's world view and logic is his denial of the primacy of matter in motion. Proceeding from his idealist premises, he has given an explanation of the scientific method. It is declared to be a matter of showing (through a process of logical arguments that considers the pros and cons) how the basic principles of the issue under examination can be derived from things (positions) naturally understood by all. Geometry is summoned as a model of this method to assert that the logic seen in the *Vedantasutra* is scientific.[94] Euclid's geometry proceeds from axioms. But they are grounded in observations of material reality. Tilak, following *Advaita*, starts from and remains in his mental constructs.

Advaita's idealist, absolute monism blocks scientific enquiry. Not just Brahmanism's caste system, its very logic, worldview, philosophy, have played a major role in the throttling of South Asia's scientific traditions. It continues to do so, insidiously promoting itself, while taking

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93 Ibid., p. 248.
94 Ibid., p. 269.

refuge in pseudoscience. In the present age even the most reactionary, repressive, thinking must clothe itself in the garb of science.

Some may question this conclusion by pointing to the advances in science made in the past by people who were Brahminst in their thinking. The example could be given of Sushruta himself, the eminent surgeon and physician. His *Sushruta Samhita* unapologetically reproduces and applies *varna* biases in categorising body types and setting out regimes of treatment. Even so, such warped views were not unique to South Asia. One can count any number of modern day scientists who simultaneously subscribe to idealism, and even the fallacies of religion. Yet, it remains a fact that their contribution to the sciences were not born of their idealism. It came from being materialist in their practice of science. The same was true of Sushruta. The variety of surgical procedures he developed came from a materialist knowledge of the human body. They did not flow from any faith he may have had on the *nirgunabrahma* and *chathurvarna*.

Breaking away from the slavish mind-set that makes us disparage our own past, a mental condition instilled by colonialism and fostered under neo-colonialism, is a prime condition for any endeavour to regain our great scientific traditions. Along with that, we must also confront and root out Brahmanism and its worldview, which prefer to revel in hollow claims and unfounded assertions. The imperialist, scienticist worldview and that of Brahmanism share common ground in sneering at the knowledge of the people, of those who are a major source of direct, empirical knowledge. For imperialism all science is European in its origins. Every other knowledge system was (and is) dismissed as primitive, seriously lacking in scientific spirit and methods. For Brahmanism, all ancient knowledge, whether in the sciences or arts, were the benevolent boons of its gods. It keeps pace with imperialism in scorning local knowledge systems and practices.

Making the old serve the new, imbibing the best in modern sciences, we must reclaim and build on our scientific heritage. We must do so always keeping in mind that the generation of knowledge in any region of the world never took place in isolation. It has always gained from external influences, while contributing to the common pool of human knowledge. We, in South Asia, should surely take pride in the scientific achievements

seen in our common heritage. Not in meaningless competition staking claim to being the first, but to remind us of what was achieved, what can be done and what remains to be done.

Probing Niskamakarma

"Nishkamakarma" (desire-less duty) is a key precept of Brahmanism. It can be explained as "doing one's duty without seeking its benefit". That, of course, doesn't mean being unconcerned about the outcome. Duty must be done to the best of one's ability with the aim of getting results. But it must be done without desire for personal gain. This is the message conveyed by "nishkamakarma". It is projected as a glowing sample of Brahmanism's lofty, noble, ideal of selfless service.

Doing duty without seeking personal gain is certainly selfless service. No one would deny that. Yet, is that all there is to be said about the precept? *Karma*, in Brahamanic ideology, is not simply duty. It was firmly entrenched in the *varna* structure and, later, in the structures of the caste system. The sense of duty it conveyed was pre-prescribed for the different *varnas*. In the caste system it means caste duty. The *Shudras* of the *varna* system were duty bound to serve the other *varnas* through their labour. That was their karma. Expounding "Karmayoga" the *Bhagavad Gita* exhorts, "…the knowing person should carry out the *karma* determined by *Chathurvarna* without desire for its result".[95]

Justifying the *varna*-bound ordering of duty in his *Geetha Rahasya*, Tilak points to the havoc that would be caused in a society based on *chathurvarna* if the *varnas* failed to fulfil their respective duties.[96] No doubt, that would certainly have happened. However, it is equally certain that this would have been quite welcome to the *Shudras*, condemned to drudgery by that social system. For the *Shudra*, "nishkamakarma" could never have been an attractive proposition. The same was (and is) the case for the *Dalits* and other oppressed labouring castes in a caste society.

Apart from its casteist structuring, the duty signified by *karma* has another basic flaw. It is devoid of all human agency. *Karma* is an inseparable link in Brahmanism's theory of the birth-death cycle *(bhavachakra)*. Eternal escape from this cycle constitutes "moksha" (liberation of the soul). This is posed as the highest attainment. But its achievement

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[95] *Gita Rahasya* (GR), Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition 2015, p. 186.
[96] Ibid., p. 40.

depends on fulfilling one's *karma*. The deeds of one's life add up as positive or negative *karma*. When the former outweighs the latter, there is the reward of heaven or a "higher" birth in reincarnation. When negative *karma* dominates, the retribution of hell or "lower" birth follows. One part of accumulated *karma* is worked out during the course of the reborn life. The remaining part gets carried over to the next rebirth. So long as one's *karma* remains, *moksha* is unattainable. In other words, the working out of one's *karma*, the duty done as part of this, is preordained. There is no conscious self-willed application in "doing one's duty" as instructed by "nishkamakarma".

The objection may be raised that the conscious effort that can be made to break the *karmic* cycle and attain *moksha* has been ignored. Yes, Brahmanism does allow this. But the *karma* that can thus be eliminated is strictly limited to the "yet to be carried out" part. That part of *karma* which is already being carried out in the current birth remains. Even if an individual attains realisation of the oneness of "atma" (soul) and "paramatma" (The Absolute), this law of *karmavipakam* (*karmic* outcome) remains unchanged. Hence, the space for conscious intervention is quite limited. Within that narrow allowance too it remains "bound by *karma*". Moreover, even that limited conscious effort is considered by Brahmanism to originate from the agency of the *atma*, not of human consciousness.

Such is the condition of *karma*. What about the "nishkama" (without self-interest) part of the precept? We saw that the duty enjoined by *karma* is pre-ordained. It cannot be determined through conscious choice. By logical extension, the sacrificing of self-interest too cannot be a matter of choice. This is well explained by Tilak's exposition of the famous Gita *sloka*, "…karmanye vaathikarasthe ma phaleshu kadhachana".[97] Tilak points out that Krishna explicitly rules out any right to *karma's* fruits (outcome) even while enjoining Arjuna to fulfil his *karma*. Because, "obtaining or not obtaining the fruit of *karma* is a matter that does not come under your control but of that of supreme god or of your accumulated karma…. Therefore, don't do any duty with the expectation of enjoying its outcome. Whatever was pre-ordained by accumulated

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[97] *Gita*: 2.47; GR, p. 386.

karma will happen. You can neither will its increase nor its decrease. Nor can you will it to happen sooner or later. Hence, to desire the outcome is a futile exercise that will only yield sorrow".[98]

In sum, the "selfless duty" propounded by Brahmanism is really a matter of the self being excluded from any conscious role. This exclusion is equally applicable in the so-called renunciation of any interest in the fruits of one's labour. It is termed so-called because though it may seem that such renunciation is a conscious decision informed by awareness of *karmic* duty, in actual fact that is not true. Going by the logic of Brahmanism's "nishkamakarma" that decision too must be pre-ordained, conditioned by accumulated karma.

The Communist principle of "selfless service for the people" stands in direct opposition to Brahmanism's "nishkamakarma". Communist selfless service is guided by the spirit of self-sacrifice. It is carried out through participation in class struggle. All of these are completely conscious acts.

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[98] GR, p. 69.

Of Bharatiyata and Malayalitham

To give a very rough rendering of a Vallathol verse: "One's heart must swell up with pride on hearing of Bharatam. One must get roused on hearing of Keralam".[99] I wonder how that would square up with the cultural nationalism stridently promoted by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Which culture must one privilege and why? Would it be "anti-national" to even conceive of a Malayalee nationality, let alone take pride in it? These then are some of the questions that come to mind when confronted by the diehard postures of cultural nationalism. The complex pair of *Bharatiyata* and *Malayalitham* (Indianness and Malayaliness, substitutable by any other—Telugu, Bengali, Gujarati, etc.) lies at their centre.

The notion of cultural nationalism or nationhood defined by culture is by no means unique to India. Well before gaining adherents here, it was the dominant theme of Austrian Social Democracy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were driven by their quest to assuage national stirrings of various peoples held within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, they desired to do this without ceding to demands for self-determination and secession. Instead, "cultural autonomy" was proposed as the solution. This would allow the different peoples the right to schooling in their own languages and a host of other cultural rights. Evidently, in that instance, the notion of cultural nationalism was employed to record national distinction without disturbing the territorial integrity of a unitary state. Here, it is heralded to dissolve all such national distinctions into a single, all-embracing nationhood. This is posed as something standing above territorial boundaries, even preceding them.

For Rabindranath Tagore,[100] there was an "India" since antiquity, even though it wasn't as a nation in the modern sense. Its uniqueness is supposed to have been in "…(B)uilding bridges across ethnic and religious diversity". "Bharatvarsha has endeavoured to tie-up diversities in

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[99] Vallathol Narayana Menon was a renowned Malayalam poet of the early 20th century.
[100] A famous Bengali novelist and poet, first non-European winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

a relationship limiting the conflict between opposing and competing elements in a society by keeping them separate and at the same time engaged in a common task that brought diverse elements together". In this "endeavour", society, its structures and functioning were considered by Tagore to have played the role of the unifying factor. "In India, regardless of changes in the state systems, for centuries society had guided and protected people's way of life and provided continuity, till British rule intervened"[101]. The Brahmanist theme of "unity in diversity" resounds loud and clear in this barely veiled paean to its caste system, its values and life principles as "the way of life".

Coming to the present, Sheshrao More, the Marathi historian writes "Though Bharat was not a nation in that sense in which we today speak of a "nation", culturally it was one from antiquity itself…"; "We got the impetus to form a nation due to British rule…. In that sense British rule was a blessing in disguise for Bharat. Of course, the feeling of one nationality could emerge in Bharat because of its essential cultural unity and Bharat could become a single nation".[102] More insists on distancing his "cultural nationalism" from that of the "Right", presumably meaning the RSS and its cohorts. He declares "Even though they call it cultural nationalism, its sense is that of religious nationalism".[103] Yet, quite ironically, when it comes to expounding what he considers to be the foundations of "Bharat's cultural unity" More himself falls back on religion. He argues, "This method of uniting by attaching sacredness to various places in the country or the creation of new holy spots was the third principle of Bharatiya cultural unity". Such a method "… was advanced from time to time, quite consciously, so that all Bharatiyas would consider each part of Bharat as their own, so that they would have reverence and affection towards them".[104] A few simple questions, like who did this "attaching sacredness" or went about "picking holy spots", readily brings out the Brahmanism inherent to More's vision of cultural nationalism.

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[101] As quoted in *Antinomies of Nationalism and Rabindranath Tagore*, Sabyasachi Bhattacharaya, EPW Vol. 51, No: 6.

[102] *Bharat rashtr hoteka*, Sheshrao More, Lok Satta, (translated from Marathi)

[103] *Bharathiyatachya shodh ghyalach hava*, S. More, Lok Satta, January 6, 2016.

[104] *Dharmik kalpanathun sanskritik aikye*, S. More, Lok Satta, April 27, 2016.

This is not surprising. No matter how the case is argued for cultural nationalism or cultural unity as the core of Bharatiyata, one will inevitably end up with one version or another of Brahmanism. It may be argued that one's views on Brahmanism cannot be made the criteria to evaluate the actual role it played and its outcome. Yes, that must be assessed from facts. And they do testify to the role it has played in creating a broad cultural frame through its views and practices of social ordering such as caste, its unique theology and religious motifs. The questions that still remain are about how common, how united this was, its extent and how much it can be taken to signify a nation.

Leaving out all other facets, take a close look at the religious aspect of the declared cultural unity. Is there (or was there) a single or common "Hindu" way of life, worship or culture?[105] The answer is a loud no. This was (and is) true of even those considered the "keepers of faith", the Brahmins. To begin with, there was no such single "Brahmin" caste. What really existed (and exists) is the *Namboodiri*, *Aiyar*, *Gouda Saraswat*, *Chitpavan*, *Kashmiri Pandit* and many more specific castes broadly categorised/considered Brahmin. While these castes do have a lot in common in religious customs and rituals, all of them also maintain many distinctions among themselves in these matters. They even vary in their diets, some being meat or fish eaters.

Such diversity is equally true of the Hindu communities in different parts of the sub-continent. Their rituals, festivals, diets and even calendars display great variety. Holi and Rakshabanthan were, until recently, never part of the Malayalee Hindu's lives. To give another example, "Karkidakam" (roughly July 15 to August 15), is the last month of "Kollavarsham", the Malayalee calendar. This is the "bad" month in popular imagination. On the last day of this month, Hindus (and many *Savarna* Christians) follow the ritual of sweeping out the old in order to usher in the New Year. Meanwhile, going by the *Saka* calendar followed in Maharashtra, the second half of *Karkidakam* coincides with the first half of *Sravan*. *Sravan* is considered by the Marathis to be a very auspicious month, observed with many rituals and fasting. We thus have a roughly

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[105] The term "Hindu", denoting the totality of belief systems broadly adhering to Brahmanist theology, came into wide usage during the colonial period.

identical period of time, but valued and observed in totally contrary ways. While Brahmanist theology cannot explain this, climate can. *Karkidakam* marks the thunderous crescendo of the South-West monsoon in Keralam. Heavy and continuous rains literally shuts people up in their houses. It thus became a month of dire poverty and hardship. The Malayalees had every reason to consider it bad, inauspicious. Apart from such natural factors, customs, beliefs and rituals carried over from earlier tribal times or from previous religions (Buddhism or Jainism) and a host of other elements have joined in making the Hindu communities so diverse.

So what about the "cultural unity"? Does the existence of multiple ways of life, ritual and worship among the Hindus negate it? My answer would be a yes and no. The irrefutable evidence of striking differences emergent from the particularities of their pre-Brahminic past and geography certainly rules out "unity" in the sense advocates of a single, over-arching Bharatiya culture claim. Yet, along with that, numerous elements of commonness are also seen right amidst diversities. They, however, are not restricted to a Bharat—either in the sense of the present Republic of India or of a historic land, Bharatvarsha. It is South Asian. Irrespective of their religion, the peoples of South Asian countries (countries in the South Asian sub-continent) have much in common in their cultures and ways of life. This is equally true for both Hinduism and Islam, the two major religions of this region. Just like the Hindus, the Muslims of all South Asian countries also have more in common among themselves compared to co-religionists in other regions of the world. This is not explained by centuries of centralised Mughal rule. Such commonness is seen even in the extreme South, which was never within the Mughal empire. All of this permits us to speak of several traits common to South Asian countries. But that doesn't make for "cultural unity", much less indicate a nation.

There is nothing unique about this commonness. It can be seen in other regions of the world too. Western Europe is an example. A great deal of similarities in lifestyles, values, cultures, dietary habits, and attire, in fact, far more than in South Asia, exist there. Yet, given the various nations (French, Spanish, German, etc.) and their robust cultures, no one in their right senses would argue for a European "cultural nationalism" or

"cultural unity". The European Union was assumed by some to be a passage towards transcending these nations and advancing to a "Europeanhood". Brexit and the national passions it has stirred up *within* countries should be sufficient refutation of that prospect.

Bharat/India is quite deviously portrayed by the modern proponents of Brahmanism as a core continuity from Bharatvarsha. The mythical Bharatvarsha has been described variously. To give the example of the *Mahabharata*, even if its account is taken literally, the forces arrayed for battle as described in it were never considered to be part of a single country or empire. If Bharatvarsha is taken as a broad geographical-cultural region, instead of a country, one must then admit that its Western and Eastern extremities took off on very different social, cultural trajectories centuries ago. At present, there is very little they hold in common, in cultural terms, with South Asian countries. We must further qualify South Asia by excluding most of the ethnic peoples of India's North-Eastern states. They have more in common with their South-East Asian neighbours. Bharat/India simply cannot be derived from Bharatvarsha. As for the "Akhand Bharat" of the RSS and its offshoots, it is nothing more than a colonial hangover, a claim on British India and vassal kingdoms. Quite symbolically they choose to commemorate August 14, the date of the 1947 Partition, as their Akhand Bharat day. There could be no better proof of the colonial parentage of "Akhand Bharat". Their map of the imagined land includes both Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Yet, the logical step of selecting the dates of their separation from British India was not preferred for obviously communal reasons.

To go back to Bharatiyata and Malayalitham—how exactly do they relate to each other? Is this relation captured by the concept of "unity in diversity"? Should the Malayalee culture be considered a sub-culture, a sub-narrative, a particular expression of Bharatiyata? That is precisely what the dominant Brahmanist narrative claims. Categorising cultural traditions as *Margi* and *Desi* (the former being Bharatiya, superior to the latter), qualifying national languages as vernacular or regional as opposed to Sanskrit, which is accorded the status of "mother language" —there are any number of examples. This Brahmanist narrative is by no means lim-

ited to the Sangh Parivar. All sections of the ruling classes share it. Even those within the progressive camp have internalised it. Sample this quote:

> In providing thick narratives, studies of regions offer the possibilities of unsettling the grand narratives. Nevertheless, integrating these studies to recover the patterns of our *cultural pasts* should be fruitful in so far as they will be perspectives from below, factoring in the variegated *flavours of India. The cultural unity of India* represented in a pool of common ideas, values, symbols and motifs was not naturally inherent or inherited, but derived from the intra and inter-regional cultural transactions, which shaped the formation of these regions during the early medieval period and beyond. So it emerges that regions are a part of the whole and not the whole itself. They are, in fact, *an intermediary category* between the trans-regional and the local, the latter known to us by terms such as Janapada and Nadu in North and South India respectively. While regions shape and are continuously reshaped by trans-regional/pan-Indian cultural strands, the sense of shared traditions engendering the experiences of belonging to a felt community in a spatially distinguishable and culturally identifiable entity evolves historically.[106]

The tension of ambivalence is all too palpable. There is the acknowledgement of our cultural pasts, i.e. not one but several cultures. And, then, there is the astonishing reversal where all of them are shepherded into being simply "flavours *of* India" (not *in* India). The logical conclusion follows: submergence of the initial premise of "several cultures" in the official shibboleth of "cultural unity of India". However, the contradictions stick out. Amends are now sought by accepting the role of the "regions" in giving form to the declared "cultural unity of India", which is admitted to be a derivative. This is, of course, a welcome break from the Brahmanist grand narrative which insists on the unilateral, top down "naturally inherent" or "god-given" nature of its claimed "cultural unity",

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[106] *Writing Alternate Histories*, Bhairabi Prasad Saha, EPW, Vol. 51, No. 18. Emphasis added.

its Bharatiyata. But Saha quickly gives up his oppositional stance. Declaring "regions" to be "part of the whole", mere "intermediaries" in the transition to the "whole", the dominant narrative of Bharatiya nationhood is placated. How should one understand these swings of logic? Perplexity in accounting for cultural commonness in the midst of the multinational character of present India? Or shying away, for political reasons, from squarely accepting our multi-cultural, multi-national pasts and present?

Let us set aside the reality of our multi-natured existence for the time being and examine our equally real cultural commonness. In the quote we just saw, this commonness (mistakenly portrayed as "unity") was expressed as a derivative from below. Brahmanist narratives present it as just the opposite—flowing from above and shaping those below. The actual dynamics arose from neither of them separately but through the interplay of both. More than inter and intra-regional "cultural" transactions, interactions between the ideas, values, symbols and motifs of dominating, subjugating Brahmanical ruling orders and those of the subsumed and assimilated tribal peoples were determinant. In the South, Buddhism and Jainism preceded Brahmanism as subjugating ideologies. Though Buddhist, Jaina and Islamic influences went into the evolution of the commonness in customs, culture and values, etc. seen here, the principal one was that of Brahmanism.

The shaping of regionally specific caste structures as part of emergent caste-feudal social formations and the marking of distinct cultural regions with their specific languages were two major historical transitions towards the evolution of nationalities in the sub-continent. Regional specificities ensuring unique identities had tribal roots. Their systematisation into social structures, further promoting the growth and spread of distinct cultures, ways of life and languages, were greatly influenced and ordered by impulses of Brahmanism. But all of this only provided the potential. In most parts of the sub-continent, the actual leap to nationalities, national languages and cultures came through the Bhakti movements. Coming from below they were either openly anti-Brahmanic or, at the very least, striving to reform it. However, this process was not taken forward to the formation of nations. National cultures remained mediated through caste and religion. And that continues.

The dialectic of the local/tribal and the Brahmanic generated both the national bases and the elements of cultural commonness seen in our country. It is this dialectic that explains their paired presence even in regions of the country that had never been under a single ruler throughout centuries until the British rule. Not just national distinctions, Brahmanism itself was shaped through this dynamics. Its very conceptualisation of Bharatiyata, as it came to be fleshed out through the Middle Ages, has been shaped by the diverse regional/ethnic influences it interacted with while spreading and tightening its grip over the sub-continent. This can be seen over a whole range, including the appropriation of sacred spots, tribal rituals and deities, advances made in science and of the aesthetic. As could be expected of any superseding ideology, Brahmanism claims each and every one of them as creations of its gods or blessings given by them. That remains the dominant theme in official-speak.

This then is the rough outline of the actual emergence of national cultures and cultural commonness in the sub-continent. Yet, it needs to be complemented by the observation that there was nothing inevitable about their trajectories leading to the present. The appropriation of the historically formed cultural commonness as a single Bharatiyata/Indianness too was not foregone. Several chance factors, most importantly British rule, have gone into its making. Colonialism unified diverse nationalities and far-flung regions under a centralised rule. For the first time in history, this covered the whole sub-continent. A material basis allowing the imagining of an Indian nation emerged. Tutoring of elites of the nationalities and cultural regions in the coloniser's language and culture and the weakening of social ranking among them permitted a new type of inter-communication and shared values. Their voices and agencies, informed by European Enlightenment, evoked an "Indian nation".

The arbitrariness of its outcome resides in the fact that there was nothing inevitable about unified British rule. One can very well conceive of different scenarios. If the British had found their match in the French, there may have been two colonies with distinctly different political, cultural trajectories, and consequently, imaginings. A situation where all the colonial powers had exhausted themselves in the European wars would have permitted the various kingdoms in the sub-continent (the Maratha,

Sikh, Mysore) to vie for supremacy. The outcomes, and imaginings, in that case would have been anything but Bharatiya! Given that the formation of modern India as a single country was only one among several possibilities, the fictitious nature of views that will found a Bharat/Indian nation on some age-old cultural unity is all too evident.

Brahmanism's claims of a Bharatvarsha spanning the sub-continent and beyond actually gained a new life through British India. Simultaneously, through providing a sense of ancient origins, Brahmanism made it possible to conceive of this construct of colonial modernity as the resurgence of a held back past glory. It thus contributed massively to the concealment of the foreign, dependent foundations of "India/Bharatiya nationhood" in the inverted reality conveyed through the false consciousness of Indian nationalism. The anti-colonial struggle dominated by the Indian National Congress became the means to shape/work out this ideological instrument. It was the main agency subverting the anti-imperialism of the masses. It drew them into a hegemonic consensus, which would provide legitimacy to the future Indian State.

Well before coming into power, the present ruling classes made sustained efforts to replace the real nationalities, real nationalisms (Tamil, Maratha and so on) with an Indian/Bharatiya nation and nationalism. They failed. Over the course of the anti-British struggle, a complex intertwining of Indianness and Malayalee (or some other) national identity, the simultaneous strengthening of both, took place. The former mainly captured minds as a sense of unity against the foreign coloniser. The latter flourished as the rooted, living reality of the people. Partition fractured some nationalities—physically in the case of the Punjabi and Bengali, socially and psychologically in the case of Sindhis. It later led to the division of Kashmir. But, for the Bharatiya/Indian identity, Partition's negativity was an enabling factor. It continues to be so with the permanent enemy—the "other": Pakistan.

Following the establishment of the Indian State in 1947, the new ruling classes tried even more to consolidate an Indian/Bharatiya identity. In order to weaken and possibly even eliminate national identities, they retained the provisional boundaries left over by the colonial administration. The British had formed these provinces, arbitrarily clubbing

split off parts of several nationalities. The Bombay province, for example, contained Gujarati, Marathi, and Kannadiga populated tracts. Various national people stiffly opposed the devious plan of the new rulers, ostensibly posed as maintaining administrative continuity. Their struggle finally led to the formal acceptance and physical delineation of national territories in 1956. The whole exercise was deviously termed "linguistic reorganisation of states", quite purposefully avoiding all mention of nationalities. Even for this, the Marathis and Punjabis had to bitterly fight on for several more years. Reorganisation still remains incomplete.

Meanwhile, the rulers have continuously tried to strengthen Bharatiya/Indian identity at the expense of national identities. Hindi is promoted as the national language despite there being no such consideration in the Constitution. The "national" is reserved for Bharat/India, while the actual nationalities are only permitted a "regional" epithet. Over the past few decades, North Indian Vaishnavaite Hindu customs and rituals are being presented and promoted as the authentic "Indian" culture and way of life. So what have they finally achieved? Not much. A few months back Marathi newspapers reported that Raj Thackeray, leader of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena,[107] had drawn attention to the different cultures and languages present in India. A staunch Hinduvadi, the occasion he chose to make this observation was quite revealing—he was commenting on the Brexit vote and its fallout.

Indian nationalism is key to the legitimisation of the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie/feudal lords' rule. Functioning as "false consciousness", it conceals our dependent reality and conveys an image of independence. Externally it serves the expansionist interests of the Indian State. Internally it legitimises the suppression of nationalities and ethnic identities. The only possible expression of Indianness with positive, progressive content is as patriotism directed against imperialism. However, this is again quite complex and problematic.

One type of Indian/Bharatiya identity is the one grounded among the urban, English educated *Savarna*, upper-middle class. They are increasingly becoming integrated as a homogenous social group through

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[107] A Maharashtra based political party known for its rabid Marathi chauvinism and Hinduvaad.

inter-national and inter-*Savarna* caste marriages. Succeeding generations are more Indian than nationality rooted. But their cultural milieu is predominantly comprador. English is mother tongue for them. Aspirational role models, individually, as well as for the country, are firmly anchored in the West. There is also, simultaneously, a strong undercurrent of caste-feudal values parading as their Indianness. This is manifested, on the one hand, as *Savarna* antagonism towards the *Dalits*, *Adivasis* and intermediary castes (OBCs) whom they ridicule as the "reservation-*walas*". On the other hand, it is seen in their increasing identification with Brahmanic Hindu revivalism, politically, as well as in individual religio-cultural practices. There has also been a corresponding strengthening of anti-Muslim attitudes among them.

While compradorism remains their dominant outlook, there is also an element of opposition to the major imperialist powers. A disgruntlement at not being treated as a "power" in its own rights is seen. Unsurprisingly enough, this sentiment has its colonial precedent. In British India, highly educated individuals from the elite and middle classes were similarly upset over being kept out of the higher echelons of the colonial administration.

Distinctly different from this brand of pseudo-nationalism, of comprador Indianness/Bharatiyata, there are the patriotic sentiments of the vast majority. Their Indianness/Bharatiyata resides, is internalised and expressed, through their respective national cultures, mediated through caste and religion. When speaking of national culture these mediations should never be left out. The *Pulayar's* Malayalitham is not exactly identical to that of the *Nairs*,[108] though both are Malayalees. This reflects on the expressions of their Bharatiyata/Indianness. So too, the Marathi's Bharatiyata and that of the Punjabi have their distinct expressions and nuances. Being Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, etc. *and* Indian, the one compliments the other as sung by the poet. And similar to his choice of words and arrangement, the privileging of Indianness/Bharatiyata as the overarching identity, while placing their own national identities at a lower rung, is quite common. This, despite the internalisation of Bharatiyata

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[108] *Pulayar* and *Nair* are two castes of *Keralam*, the former *Dalit* and the latter *Savarna (Shudra)*.

through Malayalitham, Marathi *asmita* (identity) and so on. This tension explodes and their real roots come out occasionally, as violent chauvinist sectarianism directed against the "others", unconcerned over their being fellow "Bharatiyas". Two factors underlie the peculiar ordering seen here. One, the unfinished business of nation formation due to internal weaknesses of their formative processes. This was compounded by the violent disarticulation inflicted by colonialism. Two, an aggressive promotion of Brahmanism in the form of a homogenised Hinduism and chauvinist Indian nationalism.

Ostensibly championing the country's integrity, placing and prestige in the world arena as a "power", the hegemonic ideology of Indian nationalism in fact manifests comprador/feudal subservience to imperialism. The status sought is nothing more than that of a loyal camp follower of one or the other imperialist power, presently the US. There is the basic question of whether any country should ever aspire to be a "power" lording over others. Apart from that, the very thrust of this ideology is totally at variance with the patriotism of the people. The more it is allowed room, the more their patriotism will be weakened. They will be pushed towards serving as cannon fodder for the Indian State and imperialism. They will remain within the hegemonic consensus legitimising it. A Bharatiyata/Indianness that is anti-imperialist and democratic can only emerge and flourish on the foundations given by the various national and ethnic peoples of this country, who unite voluntarily, free from forced integration, free from compradorism and Brahmanism, free from false imaginings of an "Akhand Bharat", free from the chauvinist illusion of becoming a "superpower".

Before ending, let me reproduce a quote as defence, in anticipation of any sedition case which may be in preparation:

Maharashtri Bal dvij–kulaj Gangadhar-suta
Vase punya kshetri Tilak upname shruthirat.

[*The Maharashtrian Bal, son of the twice-born Gangadhar, resident of the blessed place Pune, surnamed Tilak.*]

That was Bal Gangadhar Tilak signing off, in his magnum opus the Gita Rahasya. An honest Bharatheeya, beyond doubt.

The Credentials of Patriotism

In recent years, the singing of "Vande Mataram" has been aggressively promoted as the touchstone of true patriotism. Those who object are branded as "anti-national". The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and various other Hinduvadi organisations are the most active in the business. They, however, are not alone.

"Vande Mataram" was penned by the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. It was the anthem of the "Sanatani" guerrillas of his late 19th century novel *Anand Math*. The song, as it is sung today, has been truncated to its first stanza by Subhash Chandra Bose on the advice of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore had suggested this edit to avoid stanzas that could antagonise non-Hindus. The idea was to sanitise the song, so to say, in order to make it acceptable to all as a "national" song.

"Vande Mataram" was already a favourite of militant nationalists who had taken up arms against the British Raj. It became more popular during the protest movement against the partition of Bengal Province by the British in 1905. Yet its appeal remained restricted due to its overtly Hindu symbolism and message. Hence Tagore's proposal. The first stanza of the song is devoted to a description of the bountiful nature of the country portrayed as Mother. Tagore must have reasoned that this would be palatable to all, regardless of religious inclinations. However, the matter is not so simple.

Anand Math is loosely based on the late 18th century Sannyasi Revolt in Bengal. The Muslim general Mir Jafar who had betrayed Siraj-ud-Dualah in the battle of Plassey, had been installed in power by the British East India Company. The Company became the de facto ruler and adopted harsh measures to collect taxes, despite dire conditions of famine. That was the context of the Sannyasi Revolt. It was mainly directed against the British East India Company. In the novel's narrative this is set within a broader communal attack on Muslims *per se*. Bankim Chandra gave some very graphic accounts:

[The spies sent by the Sanatanis said,] "Brothers, will you worship Vishnu?" Thus gathering bands of twenty or twenty-five

they came to the villages of the Mussulmans and burnt their houses. When the Mussulmans were busy in saving their lives the Sanatanis used to plunder their all and distribute the plunder among the new initiates of Vishnu.[109]

His depiction of the scene after the victorious overthrow of the Muslim ruler is bloodcurdling:

The villagers began chasing the Mussulmans wherever they met them. Some banded themselves together, went to the Muslim quarters, set fire to their cottages and looted their all *[sic]*. Many Mussulmans were killed, many shaved off their beards, smeared themselves with Ganges clay and began singing "Hari Hari". If asked, they said, "I am a Hindu".[110]

Anand Math projected Bankim Chandra's vision for the "Motherland". It would have to be a Hindu Rashtra, hopefully cleared of Muslims. It would realise the re-enthroning of "Sanatan Dharma". Bankim Chandra's *Sanatan Dharma* ("eternal religion", the Brahmanist name for its religion) was a sample of aggressive Brahmanism, in a Vaishnavi garb. Speaking through his protagonist, he differentiated it from the version of Vaishnavism widely seen around him. In the words of his protagonist, "That is the Vaishnavism of Chaitanya[111] Dev. The Vaishnavism which was the outcome of the atheistic Buddhist religion—non-violence is its sign. The sign of true Vaishnavism is the suppression of the wicked and the salvation of the world. Because Vishnu is the preserver of the world".[112]

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[109] *Anand Math*, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, English translation by Sri Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Ghosh, 2010 Reprint by Ashir Prakashan, Ebook (PDF) Edition by Auro e-books, 2016; p 96. Earlier, I had given translations made from a Hindi edition of the *Ananda Math*, available in the prison library. They have been replaced by quotes from Aurobindo's English translation of the novel since I think it's better to be as authentic as possible, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the contents of the quotes.

[110] Ibid., p. 136.

[111] Krishna Chaitanya (1486 – 1533) was a Bengali savant in the Vaishnavite Bhakti tradition. Vaishnava's take one or the other of Vishnu's incarnations as their personal god to whom they dedicate their worship.

[112] Ibid., p. 81.

All of this should be enough and more reason for any true patriot to reject the anthem of the "Sanatanis". It did not draw on national interests. Rather, it was inspired by a rabid Brahmanical communal vision. To portray it as a national song is to mock the people. But that is not all. What exactly was the nature of the "nationalism" projected by Bankim Chandra? Towards the end of the novel there is an illuminating exchange between its protagonist and his mentor. As a follow up to the victory over the Muslim king, the former proposes a further advance to clear out the British in order to establish a Sanatan regime. His mentor opposes this.

He explains:

Unless the English rule this land, there is no chance of the renaissance of the eternal religion…. The true Hindu religion is based on knowledge, not on action. That knowledge is of two kinds—secular or external and spiritual or internal. The inner spiritual knowledge is the chief part of true religion. But unless secular knowledge about the outside world comes the other knowledge about the inner world cannot grow…. In order to restore the eternal religion, at the outset knowledge of the material world must be preached. There is not much material knowledge in the country now, there is none capable of teaching it. We are not adepts in spreading popular education. So the necessary knowledge has got to be brought and introduced from other countries. The English are past masters in the knowledge pertaining to the material world…. They are adepts in the art of teaching. So we shall make the British our rulers. Through English education our people attaining knowledge of the material world will also be made capable of understanding inner knowledge. There will then be no obstacle against preaching the true eternal religion. True religion will, under the circumstances, grow spontaneously. So long as that does not happen, so long as the Hindus do not become wise, worthy and strong, British rule will endure. The subjects will be happy under the British control. They will pursue their religious life without hindrance. So, O wise one! Desist from fighting the

British and follow me.[113]

He went on:

> The English are now merchants, they are busy earning mon-
> ey, they do not care to undertake the responsibility of govern-
> ment. Under the pressure of this Sanatan rebellion they will
> be compelled to undertake the responsibility of governing this
> country…. The Sanatan rebellion has come only to put the
> British on the throne.[114]

Bankim Chandra thus relayed, with all conviction, the "civilising
mission" claims of British colonialism. Deep spirituality is admitted for
the ancient Orient. But it is deemed to be woefully backward in terms of
the modern. To progress, it must be shepherded by the Occident. Tak-
ing off from this Orientalist theme, Brahmanism envisaged its return to
unrestricted power, hanging on to the coattails of colonialism. Diehard
Brahmanism was now modulated by abject comprador adulation of the
colonial master. This newly acquired comprador vision is seen in the
unquestioned acceptance of colonialism's contemptuous dismissal of the
Orient's practical, worldly knowledge. For the colonialists this was inten-
tional. It was an essential component of the colonisation of the subject's
mind. For the Brahmanist revivalist also it was equally intentional; born
of servility in their case.

As we saw in Bankim Chandra's narration, it even went to the extent
of denying the fairly substantial achievements in worldly knowledge by
the sub-continent till the recent past. Hardly a century or two previous to
his novel, the skills, the craft, range and quality of products seen here were
far superior to those of the West. This would certainly have been known
to Bankim Chandra's generation. Yet, leave alone the sub-continent's rich
"external" knowledge, even in the matter of spirituality he needed the
coloniser as mediator. Its very revitalisation, re-establishment is predi-
cated on colonial rule—to eliminate or suppress the Muslim "other", to

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[113] Ibid., p. 161.
[114] Ibid., p. 162.

bring in discipline among the Hindus, and provide necessary "external" knowledge for Sanatan Dharma to flourish.

Bankim Chandra held important positions in the colonial administration. But the views he upheld were by no means restricted to people in similar circumstances. He was one among a new breed of comprador intellectuals. All of them were from the uppermost layers of *Savarna* castes. All of them considered British rule a necessity, even a blessing. In fact, this was a constant theme of the so-called "Indian" renaissance represented by Raja Rammohan Roy and contemporaries. There were, of course, variations. For some, British rule was necessary even for the revitalisation of Brahmanism. For others, the spiritual supremacy of Brahmanism was intact; the West had to learn from it, while the East had to be tutored in its science.

Over the years there was a shift. The "virtues" and "benefits" of British rule continued to be extolled. Meanwhile resentment at being kept away from the levers of power was also growing. It soon coalesced into demands for "self-rule". That didn't mean independence. It was a demand for dominion status within the British empire. This remained the platform of diverse upper-class trends within the anti-British struggle. Even those known as representatives of the "militant" wing remained within this restricted frame. For instance, when Bal Gangadhar Tilak made his famous court statement, "Swaraj is my birthright", what he had in mind was Home Rule, i.e. dominion status. There was no question of independence. His close associate Lala Lajpat Rai's *The Political Future of India* drew on the Morley and Montagu-Chemsfford reports to plead for dominion status. Actually, "swaraj" originally meant independence. For example, the Marathi kingdom established by Shivaji after overthrowing Mughal rule was often referred to as "swaraj". The comprador intellectuals and politicians later gutted "swaraj" of its real meaning. Over time, they established it in popular imagination as "self-rule", as dominion status within the British Empire.

Though part of the "militant camp", Tilak firmly placed himself within the legal stream. What about those who took up armed activities? We have the example of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, imprisoned in the Andaman Cellular Jail for his revolutionary activities. In 1914 he sent a

memorandum to the Governor General, following the outbreak of World War I. Savarkar was professedly trying to take advantage of the dire situation faced by the British. He wrote:

> It was our aim to take Hindustan to the status of a free nation and this remains so. However, we have not taken any oath that the path of bloody armed resistance must be relied on at all costs to realise this aim. Not only that, if there were the possibility of any other solution being fruitful we would not have adopted armed resistance…. Since any Empire which interweaves several races and nations under one rule will be useful for realising that aim (of achieving unity of the human race), we have no desire at all to oppose such an Empire under whose shelter those different nations can enjoy such freedom as can be supportive of their own purposes…. Within Hindustan, which is present in that which is called the British Empire, if the country can enjoy …freedom according to its own nature …we will then consider it our duty to remain committed to that Empire. Such powers should immediately be given to the Hindustan nation so that it can enjoy that freedom. If, due to the war situation, nothing else can be done, then colonial self-government can be given to Hindustan.[115]

While quoting from his memorandum, Savarkar also gave an account of the thought process underlying it. The revolutionaries had long since been looking forward to a war between Germany and Britain; the expectation was that this would give them an opportunity to achieve their aims with German help. Being imprisoned and deprived of that opportunity just when that hoped-for event finally unfolded was a big disappointment. Even then, he and his associates in jail decided to try and make the most out of the situation. But the information that Turkey had entered the war, allying with Germany, caused a big change in his thinking. In his words:

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[115] *Majhi Janmatep* (My Life Imprisonment), Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, 27th Marathi edition, Parchure Prakasan Mandir, Mumbai, 2011; p. 214; words in brackets added.

…[B]ecause of this, the form of the plan (of intervention) I had worked out in my mind was greatly changed. On hearing that Turkey had joined the war against England, it suddenly brought to my mind, well acquainted with the hidden Pan Islamic ambition of the Muslims, the fear of a new danger which could be seen looming up against Hindustan. Because of Turkey's entry into the war, the possibility of Germany's hand reaching Hindustan and putting British rule in great difficulty in Hindustan was becoming possible. Inadvertently, this was favourable to my immediate plan of action. Because, due to the changes, England would face the compulsion to fulfil, on its own, Hindustan's just demands. Otherwise Hindustan would get the opportunity to fulfil its desires by itself in the midst of the Anglo-German war. But, in this intense clash, the locust like Muslim attack on Russia could get tempted to invade Hindustan. The evil efforts of the Hindustani Muslims to re-establish lost Muslim rule in Hindustan could then become somewhat fruitful.[116]

This was the thinking behind the memorandum. Following it to its logical conclusion, Savarkar specifically informed the British that he and his associates would be willing to join the army to defend Hindustan against the foreign Muslim forces like the Turks and Afghans.[117] Evidently, in Savarkar's "patriotism" the main concern was not the overthrow of existent British rule. Even a remote possibility of rule by some Muslims was taken to be far more dangerous. Foreign rule could be accommodated, even defended. But that of some Muslims, even if they are "Hindustani", could never be tolerated. Such were his views. They really had

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[116] Ibid., p. 283.

[117] Ibid., p. 285. Incidentally, supporting British war efforts was standard policy of all shades of comprador politics throughout the colonial period. The 1942 "Quit India" movement and consequent opposition to war efforts was an exception. A build-up of mass anger against the devastating plunder being carried out by the British Raj to support the war was one factor underlying it. The other was a growing thinking among Congress leaders that Japan could soon become victorious. The CPI opposed the war when it broke out. But, after Britain allied with the Soviet Union against the Axis Powers, its leadership abandoned this position and supported British war efforts in India.

nothing to do with patriotism or nationalism, even of a narrow chauvinist type. It was the rabid communalism of a compradorised Brahmanist Hinduvad. The unwavering continuity from what we saw in Bankim Chandra's "Sanatani" dream is all too obvious.

The Indian National Congress (INC) under M.K. Gandhi's leadership advanced a moderate version of Brahmanism, in place of the Hinduvadis aggressive stance. Yet, so far as the matter of independence was concerned, he too was content with dominion status. Standing opposed to the servility of these compradors, the slogan of independence was raised by the revolutionary nationalists and communists. Since, "swaraj" no longer meant independence, a new term "poorna swaraj" (meaning complete independence) had to be coined to convey it. It caught on with the masses and became a popular demand. The rise of various non-Congress movements from the bottom layers of society added strength. Threatened by the possibility of losing hegemony over the anti-British struggle, the INC also adopted this slogan in 1930.

"Poorna swaraj" as formulated by the revolutionary nationalists meant a total break from British imperialism. The communists further deepened it. They called for a rupture from the whole imperialist system and destruction of feudalism. None of this was meant by the INC. Its adoption of "poorna swaraj" as a slogan was a tactical ploy. It was intended to mend its frayed image and keep the masses away from the path of national liberation.

Though it is claimed that India became independent on the 15th of August 1947, the truth is something else. Even as a matter of formal status, it was actually a dominion in the British empire until 1950! If not for the high tide of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggles of that period, it might well have remained so. The declaration of a sovereign republic in 1950 settled the matter of formal subjugation to the British empire. The undeclared, indirect dependence on imperialism as a whole goes on without fail.

This then is the reality of the ruling classes' idea of patriotism. How does it get transmitted through the institutions of the Indian State? Let us have a look at one of them—the armed forces. It is portrayed as the most patriotic one among all state institutions. Criticism made against it

is branded as "anti-national". But, again, what exactly is the "national" tradition upheld by it? Some recent events will be of help in assessing this.

The Israeli prime minister's visit to India had become an occasion for Narendra Modi to once again commemorate the Haifa assault. (He had already done so while visiting Israel earlier.) This was a notable battle of the First World War. The Hyderabad, Jodhpur and Mysore Lancers as part of the 25th Imperial Cavalry Brigade of the British Army participated in it. On September 23, 1918 they succeeded in seizing the town, defeating German, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian troops. This facilitated the advance of Allied forces. In military terms this assault was noteworthy in being victoriously carried out by an ill-equipped force against a well-armed superior one. Modi characterised it as an example of the "great Indian tradition of selfless sacrifices and penance".

To serve whom? For what purpose? Sacrifice and penance would hardly have been on the minds of those troops. The ill treatment and discriminatory conditions of service they and other soldiers of the British Indian Army suffered, even when engaged in war duties, is well documented. They were forced to join the army and go to war fronts, purely because of their dire poverty. Shedding blood for the capture of Haifa by the Lancers and other feats of Indian soldiers did not serve the interests of the people of India in any way. It served the interests of their oppressor, the British empire. So what is being conveyed when the service of these soldiers as cannon fodder of the British empire is hailed as a "great Indian tradition"? Is this patriotism or comprador perversion?

The case of those Lancers is not an isolated one. Commemoration of one or the other battle waged as part of the British Indian Army is a well-entrenched tradition throughout all the wings of the Indian armed forces. Even those waged to suppress Indians fighting for their independence are celebrated. This may be compared to its mirror opposite. Not a single instance of rebellion by Indian troops in the British Indian armed forces is commemorated by the Indian State or by any of the leading political parties of the ruling classes. Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders made a big show of defending the Indian National Army (INA) officers accused of treason by the British. But no soldier of the INA was ever taken back into the Indian Army. None of the cheerleaders

of patriotism have seen anything reprehensible in all of this; excluding a sole instance.

Exactly two centuries ago, in January 1818, the British Garrison stationed at Khadki (Pune) repulsed a contingent of the Peshwa's army, nearly four times its size. The repercussions of the battle were far reaching. It hastened the eventual downfall of the Peshwa's Marathi kingdom. The British force was mainly composed of Mahars, a prominent Marathi Dalit caste. A victory column was put up by the British at Bhima Koregaon to commemorate that battle. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar visited it in 1927. He had been vigorously campaigning for reviving the Mahar Regiment of the British Indian Army. Over time, annual gatherings at the memorial on January 1 to commemorate the victory over the Peshwa's army has become a focal point of *Dalit* assertion in Maharashtra. Its bicentenary was celebrated on a larger scale this year. It was preceded by a commemoration meeting having all-India representation. The memorial march on the 1st was attacked by Hinduwadi forces. That triggered off burst of pent up *Dalit* anger in the form of a spontaneous, militant, state-wide bandh. The matter is still live at the time of my writing this article.[118] In the context of the topic of patriotism this article deals with, the Hinduwadis' justification for their opposition is especially noteworthy. That battle aided the downfall of the Marathi Empire and paved the way for British rule over the whole subcontinent. Therefore, they argue, it is anti-national to commemorate it and wrong to portray it as a victory of the Mahars. Is that so?

Many battles were won for the British by natives of the sub-continent. A comparison will show that the Mahar's claim to own the Khadki battle is by far more justifiable than any other. The Brahmin Peshwa regime was most oppressive in its casteist practices. Under Shivaji, the Mahars joined in the fight against the Moguls; they could rightfully claim a role in the establishment of the Marathi Kingdom. But under the Pesh-

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[118] While the Brahmanist instigators of these attacks have been dealt with with kid gloves, human rights activists, poets, lawyers, journalists and academicians—twelve altogether—have been charged with sedition and the UAPA, accused of having been the de facto organisers of the Elgar Parishad, the commemoration meeting held in Pune a day before. Nine have been in jail for nearly two years now. Arrests are continuing.

was they were removed from the army. They had to observe highly offensive practices of untouchability never before seen in that land. For the Mahars, to take on that enemy and defeat it in battle must essentially have been an exhilarating act, even if it was serving the establishment of another oppressive rule. The same definitely cannot be said of any other—for example the battle of Kohima, where a Japanese-INA assault was defeated by the British Indian Army during World War 2. Nor can it be said about the aerial bombardment on rebellious tribal people of the (then) North-West Frontier Province (presently in Pakistan) or independence fighters in Medinipur (West Bengal) during the 1942 "Quit India" movement. Yet, battles like the one in Kohima are commemorated by the Indian State. Participation in such bombardments are honourably mentioned while recounting the service record of Indian officers who took part in them.

Among all the commemorations of British victories conducted annually in the country, Bhima-Koregaon alone is branded by Hinduwadis as "anti-national". For Bankim Chandra and Savarkar, the nation was determined communally. Now it is being further "fine-tuned". It is asserted that the nation essentially belongs, not to Hindus in general, but more specifically to the *Savarnas*. Anything hurting their interests is "anti-national".

This casteist narrative is surely unacceptable to the vast majority, including a considerable chunk of the *Savarnas*. Even then, the playing up of the "foreigner-native" binary by Hinduwadis may get an audience. So let us take a closer look at this. How would one determine the foreigner? The Marathi Empire itself was certainly not "native" in large parts of its territory. Both in its southern and northern extensions, it was a foreign rule for the people of those regions. Its "Hindu" claim also could not redress this. The course of the establishment and expansion of the Marathi Empire had also meant the overrunning of other Hindu Kingdoms. The Peshwas could lay claim on a patriotism to the extent they resisted colonial aggression. But then it should also be noted that this was of a very restrictive type. Moreover, it was very regressive. Shivaji had already set a high standard of inclusive patriotism through the independence war waged under his leadership against the Moguls. It drew

in the broad masses, including the oppressed castes. Reversing this, the Peshwas remained rigid on their Brahmanist exclusivity. Their notion of "homeland" could never belong to the *Dalit* and other oppressed castes. It would be foreign to them.

The Peshwa's resistance to the British was similar to that of Tippu of Mysore, Pazhassi of Kottayam (Northern Keralam), the Rani of Jhansi and many others. Some were more inclusive. Yet all of them fought the British to protect and preserve their caste-feudal social relations and way of life.[119] That was the actual context of their patriotism. However, in conditions of colonialism, their resistance acquired an objective role far different from their subjective desires. They sowed the seeds for the emergence of a new type of patriotism. In proportion to the masses' direct entry into the anti-colonial struggle, this patriotism increasingly cut across geographical, social boundaries. It became more and more inclusive and democratic. Simultaneously, another dynamic was also operating.

The partial transformation of caste-feudalism that took place under colonial rule weakened Brahmanist orthodoxy. It created some openings for the oppressed castes to advance. For them, British rule was a welcome break in the Brahmanist social order. They strove to widen it by all means. There was also the reinforcement or refurbishment of oppressive practices under colonialism, as well as the addition of new ones. This went to create opposition to colonial rule among these sections too. But the neo-Brahmanism of the comprador and feudal elites blocked any possibility of a broad link-up. They counter-posed "national interests" to the democratic demands of the oppressed castes. Leaders of *Dalit* and other oppressed castes who insisted on ending the caste system were accused of pursuing "narrow" aims as opposed to the "broader", "superior" concerns of the country.

For the oppressed castes, a nation that would not have equal place for them was unacceptable. If the end of foreign rule meant a loss of their newly acquired social momentum, they would prefer to stand apart from what appeared to them as an "un-freedom struggle". This sharp fracture was rooted in the sub-continent's socio-economic particularities and rein-

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[119] Unlike the others, Tippu was quite ahead of his times. He had initiated the restructuring of agricultural relations. He had also begun to build up an armament industry with some advanced technology for those times, like rocket science.

forced by neo-Brahmanism. The British did their best to aggravate it. But they didn't create it, even though their colonial rule facilitated it.

For the *Dalits*, the Bhima-Koregaon victory column has long ceased to be a symbol of the British Raj. In their popular imagination it is the symbol of the defeat of the Brahmanist oppressors by their forefathers. It is a memorial to their fighting capacity, valour and tenacity. It is the promise of the destruction of Brahmanism, its structures and values— provided the oppressed stand up and fight back. This narrative shaped by Dalit resistance slices through the false binary of "foreigner-native" erected by the Hinduvadis. To be very much native and yet suffer an enforced "foreignness", excluded from possible public spaces and denied common rights—how can anyone be "patriotic" about this state of affairs?

Brahmanism is a deeply divisive ideology. This is intrinsic to it. The projection of a Hinduness as opposed to the Muslim "other" can at the most temporarily paper over the divisions in which it is rooted. It sustains these divisions and, in turn, is sustained by them. They inevitably leap out sooner or later in all their ugliness. Aggressive Brahmanism gives it an even more ferocious thrust. The present RSS rule by proxy at the Centre and over large parts of the country through BJP governments, attests to these dynamics. The more aggressive the attacks, the fiercer and broader the resistance. This was seen on a number of occasions. The recent outburst of *Dalit* anger, sparked off by the Supreme Court's dilution of the SC-ST Atrocities Act, was the latest. Not just *Dalits*, but also Muslims, the Left, various sections of the society, even from the topmost layer itself, are coming out in opposition. The countrywide mobilisation seen on the Kathua Incident[120] was not just responding to the brutality inflicted on a child. It was additionally spurred on by the exposure of the heinous use of rape and murder by the Hinduwadis to terrorise and drive out a Muslim tribal community.

We are witnessing a very broad stirring up of democratic strivings. Here and there it takes a militant turn. The participation of youth is noteworthy: it demolishes the fake thesis of "de-politicisation of the younger

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[120] The Kathua Incident refers to the rape and murder of an 8-year-old Muslim tribal girl by Hinduwadis in Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir in 2018, a crime committed with the intention of driving away the nomadic herding community of which she was part.

generations". Mobilisation and protest is mostly spontaneous, initiated by small, local groups. Wider participation is gained through social media. More often than not, the parliamentary opposition is forced to tag along. This churning up is yet to take the shape of a new movement, either at the state level or countrywide. Yet it has already become a major factor in the political realm. Every political party has to necessarily take it into account and articulate its response.

This is indeed a significant development. But there is also something missing. The claim being made on the nation by the Hinduwadis is not being challenged at its most essential level. Of course, their cowardly absence from the anti-British struggle, the way they complemented British "divide and rule" through their communal demand for a "Hindu Rashtra" and similar treacherous acts and policies have been wildly criticised and exposed. But beyond all of this there is the most basic issue of defining national interests, patriotism, in terms of rupturing from the world imperialist system. This is the gaping hole in the Hinduwadis' "national narrative". Its lineage goes back all the way to the earliest crop of comprador intellectuals.

An explicit, aggressive entrenchment of Brahmanism, with all of its casteist, communal, patriarchal, racist tones suitably adapted to the present, is the defining specificity of the Hinduvadis' "nation". But Brahmanism is not its sole preserve. It lies at the core of the ruling classes' ideological outlook. Thus the Congress stream also accommodates and promotes it, though more implicitly and less aggressively. Both are united in excluding opposition to imperialism. It is this comprador take on the nation, on patriotism, that should be targeted. Under conditions of the imperialist world system, to be meaningful, patriotism in a third world country must root itself in the struggle against that system. Unlike in the past, control and exploitation are no longer direct. But that hasn't mitigated their toxic effects in the least.

Rather than being fixated on debating growth figures, the very nature of the economy should be probed. Is it making the country self-reliant? Or is it tightening dependence? Are the jobs that are being created (even if at a meagre pace) allowing an all-round expression of our youth's potential? Or are their brains and skills serving to fatten some transnational

corporation or comprador monopoly? Whether the "Made in India" of the Congress or the "Make in India" of the RSS, they neither served, nor will serve, India or its people. As for jingoist talk on waging war on two fronts, a stocktaking of past wars will show how imperialist arms dealers let out their belts while we Indians (and other South Asians) had to tighten ours.

The fracture keeping apart the "national" and "democratic" demands of the people needs to be healed. The two must draw strength from each other and be unified within a single torrent. A powerful counter narrative of patriotism will have a very important role in achieving this.

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