

Vinay Lal (ed), *India and Civilizational Futures: Backwaters Collective's Metaphysics and Politics II*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), Rs.1050, pp. 318, (ISBN: 19-949906-3).

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The ten chapters of this edited volume bring together five chapters of theoretical concern and five of persons who intervened to mutate Indian Civilizational flow as they encountered other cultures and civilizations. The selected individuals for study - Sri Narayana Guru, Ranade, Sankrityayan and Ambedkar, Gandhi and Tagore feature as leaders showing the way to a new phase of human civilization, from within the Indic matrix. These mutation personalities negotiate the east and west owning the colonial language and occupying an 'indigenous global space'. These are in a way a continuation and an addition to what Romila Thapar demystifies in her *Indian Culture as Heritage: Contemporary Pasts*,¹ by pointing out that it has always been a history of cultures in the plural, with often the dominant one's only getting written about. The transitions of the dominant rulers whether it was from Mauryan to Gupta or Islamic Mughal to Christian Colonial enterprise there has been continuity in the way cultures persisted and the diversity retained itself within the dominant structures. She accounts for the fact that the Brahminic Sramanic contestation gave way to the Mughals and later in the construction of the modern knowledge system it was the Brahminic collaborators who had the say in the knowledge production and sustenance of the system by creating and keeping alive the colonial structure and its persistence to-date. Her study of the

¹ (New Delhi, Aleph Books, 2018 reviewed in EPW May 25, Vol LIV, NO.21, p.22-24)

archaeological evidences, artifacts and architecture, the reference to time and science in its pre-modern version all provide deep insights into India's civilization making with mutual and constant interpellations and cross cultural exchanges. The Backwaters Collective is on a trajectory to trace potential futures for an India without 'Caste', taking to heart the call of Sri Narayana Guru of Travancore State in Kerala. The persistence of caste system despite its volatility and susceptibility to change on behalf of the powerful (shudra Kings given kshatriyahood) on the one hand, still continues to exclude women from upanayana and the 'untouchables' to be relegated for menial works. The caste phenomenon has persisted despite millennium long attempt by both Islam and Christianity in the Indian subcontinent, not to forget the Buddhist challenge to the structure even earlier.

Vinay Lal in his opening chapter "India and the Challenge of the Global South" foresees, taking on from what happened in the 50s in Bandung the possibility of an alternative voice emerging from Asia and Africa to challenge the dominance of modernity holding roost for more than half a millennia the world over. He calls it the possibility of 'a civilizational dialogue' (p.18) He sees Bollywood playing the role Hollywood did in recreating the assertion of a cultural difference and uniqueness through the syncretism of Buddhism and Hinduism and the varieties of Islam available in India and Indonesia as against the rest of the Islamic world. This uniqueness and alterity of the Asian civilizational force making a comeback to re-inject new hopes into the western worldview and modernity at its fag end, as it were, is taken on by Vivek Dhareshwar more forcefully. The Western categories of thought have 'insulated' the eastern mind from creative internal reflection is the ardent claim with which he begins. He goes on to assert that what is common to all Indian intellectual traditions is the relationship between learning and happiness (meta-training path) sidestepping in and through this premise that he is already excluding a whole lot of people who do not in the Indian tradition come anywhere near the ambit of 'learning' as an intellectual pursuit let alone discover thereby 'happiness'.

What raises caution about his head on attack on the modern knowledge system is an apparent ignorance and an unwillingness to own: first, that if the pre-modern knowledge system was something that was inclusive and liberating, it would not have suffered the loss of the 'golden era/first spring/millennium of Buddhist egalitarianism 'that reigned and lingered'; secondly, that the alternative knowledge system being foisted on modern knowledge was itself debilitating for a vast section of population who were not producers of knowledge nor conscious of knowledge; instead were mere slaves for the 'producers and carriers' of the very system being attempted to be rebooted.

Vivek then goes on to highlight the patriarchal matrix within which meta learning as a knowledge production of *anubhava* or self consciousness, as realizing of atman or 'stating one's awareness' is common to all. Yet he seems to belittle such notions of perfection within the western Christian tradition including sainthood.(p.36) This caricaturing continues into wider canvas when he attributes to many and even us 'as those playing flue only for the attention it brings and not because violin or sport or specific engagement is a task one enjoys irrespective of its outcome in terms of praise or blame , success or failure'. His notion of 'parasitism' is an elaboration of the deficiency in appropriation of knowledge, rather than inherent contestation of the western knowledge system. One could revive live argument that the pre-colonial knowledge system itself created the burden of deficient assimilation as the 'practitional matrix' and the theoretical knowledge structures built on them were for dialectically different groups of people in society (and therefore not for all). This deficiency is not a flaw of the modern knowledge system but rather its deficient assimilation due to cultural constraints. There is a misplaced and erroneous conceptualization of experience vis-a-vis *anubhava* by Vivek when he falsely accuses colonialism as having undermined 'the very integrity of experience'. Experience if its worth the salt can never be undermined, it can be falsely reported and/or not acknowledged for what it is worth. The knowledge frame is what gives the name, the possibility of reading, defining, understanding and articulating, all of it can be honest and true or

concocted. The cause of the indigenous knowledge base is carried forward in the next chapter.

Ashis Nandy's piece 'Another Cosmopolis' draws on the anthropological work he did on Cochin as a city making the argument that there have been ways and means in which pluralism and diversity have been accommodated and lived through by peoples even before the nomenclatures and theories of pluralism and homogenization arrived on the scene through globalizations of knowledge structures. He carries this notion forward drawing from the stories unearthed and brought to limelight by the scholars of partition recalling the nostalgia vividly communicated by the victims and at times even perpetrators of violence. In the aftermath of partition these narratives recalled the idyllic times of harmonious coexistence with the other. These ways of negotiating differences and accommodating the other, despite haziness and oppositions, operated in non-rational and yet internally intelligent mode of transactions across communities. Into this trope Nandy wants to throw in a doubt as to the clearly defined researched outcome of the caste system as the villain that brought disrepute to the subcontinent culminating in the violence of partition itself, paving the way for the slow three decades long move towards the majoritarian logic relegating to the margins and periphery the minorities, tribals, dalits and women. He is consistent with his stand for the pre-modern intelligence and conceptualization of the reality of south Asia overrun by the technocratic knowledge structures of the systematized disciplines making one almost forget the 'accommodation and their own indigenous rationality' that operated in keeping alive the civilization.

It is interesting and highly thought provoking to place Roby Rajan's recourse to TRV Murthy's reliance on *Madhyamika* as the traditional Indian philosophical stance to grand 'experience' / *anubhava* as rightfully claimed by Vivek. If there is no 'atman' as against an 'atman' for the *adhyatma* on which Vivek is grounding the critique to colonial/western knowledge where would it take us. This of course keep alive again the disappearance of the Buddhist/Madhyamika '*anatma*' logic of experience from scene and the

need now to resuscitate it only against a denoual of the western knowledge as well as a non-spiritual appropriation of the *atmavada* (p.98-99). Roby's reference to Nandy's ontologization of community and avowal that 'although the communal substance is kept alive entirely by the activity of individuals comprising the community', why the substance is minimally 'objectivized' and cannot therefore be rid of in the classical Marxist style of 'individuals recognizing behind it the product of their own activity' is highly pertinent to be posed to the formation of practical matrix of Vivek' (p.103). Roby's question to Vivek is whether the co-destiny is a project for which he is game or not and if so from where did the diverse pasts emerge?

Vivek speaks of 'an audacity and profundity' of the Indian tradition to organize social and natural spaces, relations and events/acts as learning experiences'. Yes the audacity is evident in the segregational logic. As he rightly points out little later, 'shastras' are induced practical knowledge of how behaviour/actions are to be structured and thereby deepening the segregational logic of space, caste, health, erotics. While he bemoans the parasitism of the colonial knowledge system he is oblivious of the parasitism the practical matrix created, or rather, perfected in the form of specific tasks and location and mobility restriction for varied groups depending on the knowledge structure dominated by the elite, the knowledge producers and administrators.

What colonialism did to India needs a serious reconsideration if the journey forward is not to be yet another mistake. Vivek draws on Gandhian and Tagorean criticisms of the arrival of modernity with a new scientific knowledge base onto the Indian shores, but draws a conclusion probably they themselves were less sure about, going by the way their engagement with it nourished and energized them. While forgetting the catalytic role it played for them in bearing their doubts and denunciations, the continued possibility of a mutually fecundating cross cultural engagement and future of a people are being denied.

The ability to direct a culture speaks inherently its goodness and on the contrary, its inability to define the good, in not being able to direct it to the future. For instance, while excessive cleanliness and observances surrounding it dating to the days of the plague in Europe, might need rethinking, the inability to treat dirt as a problem and contain it within the limits of self, family, village and society other than by 'letting it be' is indicative of a way and manner in which the inherent civilizational weakness gets manifested. If at all it has been addressed or attempts are being made there is an invisible link with non-India civilizational approach coming to invest in the practice.

There is something going for the project of Vivek and Venkat and it takes me to the days of being presented with and attempting to understand and grapple with Tagore and Vivekananda, Gandhi and Savarkar. There is a partial perception of their attempt to interpret their Indianness in western garb, frame and worldview. They are riding a tiger and that process continues even in making sense of the contemporary attempt to continue or restate a new paradigm. This is the hope on either side. Arvind Sharma's poser that the villains of the puzzle being on the one side imperialism (the perception that everything wrong with India is arising from the Imperial interventions and the imperial aspirations playing out through colonialism and neo-colonialism) and the other being Indian cultural features such as caste and religion which sucks into the quagmire of inequality rather than help preserve a sense of equality, inherently.²

The personal unity and the actional frame vs the cognitive fame with which Vivek is attempting to position intellectuals like Tagore or a thinker like Gandhi is directed implicitly to show the colonial arrival of modern knowledge and critique of tradition as misplaced, as having dissociated a philosophical coherence of simplicity of the civilization and having corrupted it and made punitive etc needs to be thought through from the very reasons of the failure of such a perception implicitly and those who took advantage of it having

² cfr. Hal W french & Arvind Sharma, *Religious Ferment in Modern India*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981).

failed miserably to create a lasting and widely acknowledged sense of 'happiness'. Why did colonialism have to take root? Why was there a yawning gap of disparities prevalent in society which it took the colonial intervention to expose and a modernity to attempt to rectify in the form of the outline of a path in the constitution? This onward progress, misplaces and displaces the traditional superiority of a class/caste and therefore the re-creation of an (anti) war on modernity.

In his argumentation there is this overwhelming sense of defending a terrain. While he refers to and exhorts the kind of argumentation that happened between Buddhists and Vedantins, Advaitins and Dvaitins, while referring to Gandhi-Tagore debate an equal space of the possibility of the arguments from modernity too as asserting a position to wellbeing as does the practical knowledge structure intends is not accepted or included, rather excluded, and one wonders for what reason or purpose than a fear of the other who cannot be tamed, and therefore, the exclusion (p.50). While he correctly captures the uniqueness of the moral consciousness and its linkage to truth of the person and his or her sexuality, in Christianity, he fails to see the merging of the practical and the cognitive experience frame in the more-rational combination giving rise to moral optics (p.53).

The core argument runs into a Foucauldian discourse of 'sexuality' as a key defining feature that truncated pre-Christian worldview for the Christian. The same is being applied to 'caste system' as the outcome of a western reading of the pre-modern 'sociality' of India. It therefore needs to be divested of this superimposition for the non-western or the indigenous rationality to emerge. It sounds radical and explosive for it leads to dumping a whole history of 200 years of enculturation on Indian soil and the reversal of that process with a 'return to the past'. The question, however, is whether this exercise is to unleash more creative potential, or, bring back the demons of the past? This is the wager of modern India.

The politics of the 'pagan': In anthropology, in recent times there is a return to the term 'animistic' as that which designates best the

traditional indigenous, non modern notion of the approach to the sacred that characterized the totemic societies and the tribal cultures. On its wake there is the attempt to resuscitate another term 'the pagan' (originally referring to the rural, or non city dweller) and later in the Christian world as referring to the non Christian, still later coming to mean within the colonial frame with a pejorative connotation, is now being reclaimed as the pre modern past of the European Christian world - the age of the savage and the barbarian and the 'wolf-man culture' of Europe and that naturalism being linked with the ancient order of the Hindu, and reclaiming the 'Hindu Pagan' as the past of the Christian Europe, for a regeneration of the secularized Europe. This is the etymological trajectory being reintroduced via SN Balagangadhara and Koenrad Elst by Venkat in his chapter. The said project is resuscitated through the praxial-theoria connection being shown as non-universal, and therefore providing room for alterity, as in the case of the mnemopraxials of Indian art traditions and the communities that practiced them giving rise to their own *theoria*. When Venkat quotes Derrida to establish for Greeks 'theoria' as the only highest form of praxis and the mode par excellence of 'energeia' (work) he forgets the parallel in the Hindu (Pagan) scheme of Indian knowledge were too the highest form of praxial activity was the theory making of learning-study-chants restricted to one and only legitimized 'elite', the Brahmin.

Venkat emphatically avers the non-institutional/statist position of the Greek schools, without any substantiation for the claim. The Greek plays and the critique these made of the statist ideology including the democracy of a plutocracy of Athens and the pro statist stance of these schools testify otherwise. Venkat seems to bemoan the dogmatic hold of reason over the human sensibility and through it over the institutions that sway through them and for them. However, he is reluctant to admit the dogmatic hold of the praxial mnemonic knowledge production's body related inclusion-exclusion, purity-pollution logic that sways over the jatis and the varnas, the svadharmas and the kula dharmas, the gunas and the sadhanas.

Venkat's claim that "no other alien invasion in the common era has ruptured and displaced traditions of learning of India as decisively as the one initiated at the hands of Europeans" needs a deconstruction of the kind he himself attempts on received notions: firstly, it was not an uninvited invasion, if one is true to reading history, from facts; going by how the battle of Plassey was a schemed to give away to Clive or and every other battles, where Indian rulers mistrusted one another and looked on the foreigner as their saviour against one another (think of Tippu's claim to have ousted British had Marathas stood by him); secondly, the knowledge system would not have given way to Anglicization had not the elite of the time saw through the future of India and the World coming in the shape of present day globalization of the English language and (therefore the choice for English over Sanskrit or Persian) as had the British for the first 150 years of their stay and governance; thirdly, the local governance of the British needed collaborators and they were Indian, who bore with it, and gained from it, and when the opportunities for greater gain arrived on the scene created the move to shove the Europeans. This battle for the land and its culture already fought and lost earlier, (think of the arrival of Buddhism and its decimation, or the arrival of Islam and its mitigation) for which the newer entrant plays the mediatory welcome role, which later becomes a targeted one; finally, the knowledge being recovered from the embers as it were was a system built in order to promote and preserve sectional interests and exclude a vast majority from the learning opportunities is to be investigated (especially because, if it was a vibrant knowledge system that engaged all equally, it would have had the power to withstand the onslaught of an alternative knowledge system differently and more ably than what is happening now); the modern industrial complex that continues with the post indigene post colonial, dominations favouring some and degrading the others are not anymore Europeans, but at best the neo capitalists and the brown sahibs of an indigenous variety. Similarly, he downplays the critique that Buddhism brought to the evils unleashed in society due to the mnemopraxial relative knowledge structures and exclusionary logic that prevailed and against which the first spring of Indian civilization flourished

(Abraham Eraly p.143) The Vedic traditions of the dharma are an offshoot of the Buddhist thinking that prevailed and often brought low to secluded enclaves rather than the reverse.

Asking for return to the pre-modern is another way of killing progress. Vivek and Venkat seems to presume a knowledge production built around a community and refers to it as 'us and our own'. The representative voice of the 'us' includes whom and excludes whom all is not declared, recalling the call to 'co-destiny' posed by Roby in his Chapter. Interestingly while Venkat notes that the detailed practices based on the body differentiation is encountered in Manusmriti, he in the same breath dares to say it has no jurisprudential normative status. Yet, one knows too well that it is the very reading of the kind of practices as prescribed in manusmriti that dehumanized women and sudras and religiously sanctioned such practices. There was the need for an alternative knowledge to perceive such injustices for all the camouflaging attempted to hide the same. Therefore, India needed a knowledge system outside of its hegemonic structure, which came to happen with the modernity to provide the possible critique to what the mnemopraxial knowledge had entailed and as to who controlled its production (p.145) As he himself observes little later, precisely that mnemopraxial learning is not dependent upon surrogate bodies (scriptoria, library, museum etc.) these heinous things written in manusmriti too were the structures of the learning (146). Precisely for that reason, despite a modern constitution and two hundred years of partially successful and partially failed modern education these practices survive and even more are transported to London and New Jersey and have reached the level of raising aspiration to reintroduce as world saving new mantra against the eco-destructive modern scientific establishment to which the new subscribers are the proponents of these menmopraxial leaning originating from the wisdom traditions of the Hindu (Pagans).

Secondly, with the glorification of mnemopraxial learning and knowledge how does one relate to and juxtapose the rich literary heritage of the Indian philosophy, literature and poetry, Natyasastra and Vakyapadiya, Kalidasa and Anandvardhana? Therefore, the

civilizational futures being offered by indic civilization cannot afford to retrench neither Indian nor other societies into a pre-modern dark age of segregated knowledge production and consumption as some new route to salvation from modernity.

Milind Wakankar's excursus into Indian civilizational mergers of the Buddhist-Hindu Puranic tales giving way to mystic Sufi and Hindu puranic stories and narrations taking on from the Bhagawat story of Prahlada and making a case for the contemporary trajectory of the Hindu-historiography vs modern history, mythmaking and the implications for the ongoing attempt to create an egalitarian society - be it through Buddhist, Islamic or the Puranic - apparently seems to be a restitution of the Vedantic Brahminism and yet not without space for the Dalit critique being contained. It offers a new revelatory route to the amalgamation of tradition and modernity and the way modernity itself may be superseded into a part of the very history making process itself.

Maya Joshi attempts to reclaim a rightful place for a forgotten figure of Indian intellectual history in Rahul Sankrityayan and placing him and DD Kosambi as vernacular writers of prominence who attempted to resurrect Buddhist critique to Indian society in the wake of the Marxist critique to social class dissonance is interesting parallel. Marxian kind of nihilistic and dialectical critical thinking has been part of Indian Buddhist heritage is what both Sankrityayan and Ambedkar found as seminal to the intellectual history of India. The revival of the interest in Buddhism in the early twentieth century is attributed by Joshi to the skewed interest in it by the foreign scholars especially Russian to begin with and their German and British successors. Though from differing cultural background and educational upbringing both agreed on the creation of 'nontheistic, nonritualistic, egalitarian, and rationally scientific philosophical system that could offer social, economic and political liberation for the downtrodden' (p.195). Conversion is untouchable's swaraj (p.199). Maya Joshi makes the case for Ambedkar and Sankrityayan being influenced by and attracted to Buddhism and sees the continuation of the Marxist critique carrying on in the religion. Critical spirit arrives into public sphere

and political visioning and for it there is source available in both Marxist tradition and also in the Buddhist religious tradition.

From Ranade and Roy, Sankrtyayan and Ambedkar, the attempt to reform Indian culture of its pitfalls opens up the 'either/or' thinking. But given Indian intellectual preference for 'both/and' the route to overcome them dwindle without breaking the backbone of Brahminism. Aparna Devare portrays Mr Ranade the leading figure of Maharashtra reform of Prarthana Samaj as paving the way for Gandhian middle ground: Between the 'Western/Christian' take on Hinduism and its cultural tradition as the debilitating factor, and, the traditionalists who viewed everything about the tradition as good whereas the exploitative judgmental dominant character of colonialism being the only problem to eliminate. Ranade draws on resources of the Bhakti tradition, first as antidote to anti-colonialists to show how aspiration for reform were already there from the Bhakti saints onwards and therefore not all together new coming from an outside western source alone; and second, as having injected seeds of purification of the ritualism of Hinduism through the poetry, prayers and singing of Bhakti (which he initiates in the prayer proceedings of Prarthana Samaj). Thirdly, as a counter to the masculinization of Hinduism to be made robust like European religion he draws on the individualism and egalitarianism of Bhakti as arising from tradition and as a resource to rejuvenate India as achievable rather than by aping the west, a project Gandhi would take forward.

The last two chapters of the book takes the reader to the heartland of the Backwaters and into the realm of negotiating metaphysics and politics attempted by the person of Sri Narayana Guru (1854-1928) around whose ideological rigor the very collective got the inspiration to journey for nearly a decade, bringing scholars together and delivering the second volume (*India Unthinkable* being the first). The significance of the person and the message of Sri Narayana Guru is to be gauged, as George Thadathil avers: first, from the background of over 1000 years of harmonious interreligious coexistence of four major faith communities; second, in his refreshing denunciation of 'narrow boundaries' and daring appropriation of the 'new

horizons', in his dictum - 'one God, one Religion, one Caste for the Humankind'. A notion that takes one to contemplate the very nature of the Being as transcending the human, material, divine dimensions and freedom and happiness as indwelling in such awareness of the 'Self' defined as *atmasukam* (soul-happiness). The action that flows from the arrived status of calm and self disposition of compassion for the other gives rise to a politics that cannot but transform society. Sujit Sivanand hailing from management background, with an artistic flavour has recourse to the imageries of the Guru and uses them to promote his philosophical vision of a one world where there is humanity at its best incorporating the nature and the divine for an amicable journey into the future. This journey is recorded in the iconography of photographs, statues and art objects or physical spaces associated with his life as much as in the word-wisdom, the compendium of his writings, into each of which the seeker/disciple can have access and draw inspiration for his or her own times, to engage with politics in the true vein of a metaphysics that hinges on mysticism.