

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Vinay Lal and Roby Rajan (eds), *India and the Unthinkable: Backwaters Collective on Metaphysics and Politics*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), ISBN 0-19-946686-6 pp 228, Price: Rs.850/-**

**George Thadathil** is the Principal of Salesian College Sonada and Siliguri. He is the author of *Vision from the Margin* (2007) and has edited and co-edited number of books besides contributing to a number of journals and edited volumes on Philosophy, Literature and Social Science. He is the founder Director of Salesian Publications, Salesian Research Institute and Salesian Translation Centre.

In the preface Vinay Lal, draws attention to the history of ideological transitions with regard to the making of modern world and the contemporary reliance on the enlightenment values as the only voice and only language to speak and to be written about. However, he cautions at the attempts and efforts to stand outside its frame and look at what has happened to world history and Indian history by locating oneself in one small cosmopolitan corner of Kerala and what transpired there during the 'colonial phase' of India's making and marching of the colonial empire as something that might help retrieve some knowledge outside the purviews of knowledge production we are hitherto familiar with.

Roby Rajan in his introduction brings in Narayana Guru of Kerala and the social transformation the communities therein achieved over a century in the light of the post structural, deconstructionist reading of history initiated by Derrida and Heidegger. The survival of a set of community based relationality as subsuming and predating the arrival of modernity and modern nation states with an attempt to create master narratives as faltering when seen through the prism of community transformation initiated through non-dialectical process that Narayana Guru was adept at ushering in.

Both Vinay and Roby are through their preface and introduction creating the space for the Backwaters Collective to come on stage with the assertion that for all that is ill in the world and for all failed theories and ideologies there are yet quarters of quiet responses to the passing phenomenon of cataclysmic changes in the human history that can be delved into before we despair and give up. It is this cosmic confidence that brings the collective together and the Tao of things made it happen for seven consecutive years.

Taking on Vinay's proposal Sarukkai's "Is metaphysics possible?" attempts to create an alternative metaphysical foundation for the key ideas of politics which are generally accepted to be of European origin and emerging out of different metaphysics than the Eastern. He goes to Navya Nyaya and the notion of pervasion (vyapti) as elaborated by Dharmakirti and Dignaga to open up this space. He attempts a comparison with Dignaga's condition of 'counter intention' in order to establish the 'necessity' of truth: the non-occurrence of fire in places where it is not to be, like ocean or lake full of water. He transcribes this logic and says, 'public' is a space accessible to all and defined to be or understood to be so when the access is denied. "It only attains the idea of public space when somebody is denied entry into it - the third condition of Dignaga". This reading of the third condition of Dignaga by Sarukkai is faulty. Public space is a public space

precisely because it has access to everybody. The 'denial of entry' highlights not the notion of public space but its restriction to a non-public space. A non-public space is that space wherein 'entry is denied', and therefore, not a public space. The problem with Sarukkai's reading of a metaphysics of politics lies in this attempt to create an alternative to the prevailing notion of public space from an Indian/Eastern route by relying on Dignaga's Navya Nyaya logic which is distorted when he goes on to say that "the essential definition of 'public' will then be about non-entry and not really about entry to all". The definition of 'public', to be so has to be precisely the opposite - providing access to all. Sarukkai's attempt to create an alternative metaphysical possibility in rethinking for instance the role of 'individual' and 'person' in the western and eastern tradition needs further perusal. The assumption behind an individual deserving the human rights and the individual becoming a person vis-a-vis a family, community to which s/he is intrinsically related becomes a matter of concern.

The concerns of the collective are carried forward in the study that Ashish Nandy the political scientist cum psycho-sociologist does on Damodar Savarkar's political career and ideology. An Ideology that gave birth to the two nation theory, with emphasis on the need for 'hatred and violence' in contrast to the 'non-violence and appeasement' strategy of Gandhi as the route for a future India. Their radical differences being so wide that Savarkar loathed Gandhi and was implicated as having masterminded his assassination. However, Nandy's psycho-social analysis of the formation of the personality of a young traumatized youth reaching England and falling in admiration for Mazzinian nationalism becoming a victim of a pathology that has gripped southern societies almost absolve him of any culpability and places it instead on the ideological formations that shaped nationalism and secularism in Europe and almost by osmosis having spread to all other societies via colonialism. He quotes Joan Robinson, saying that 'the only thing worse than being colonized was not being colonized' (p.22) without full analysis of its intent and implications, if read from the perspective of subaltern history of India. If enlightenment, rationality, science and nation-states as promised did not deliver or delivered at the cost of massive violence, pain and loss, the need to search for alternative routes of future redefinitions, a task that bring the collective together has been concretely posed with the life of Savarkar and its soft-critique by Ashish Nandy.

The Backwaters Collective's dynamics and logic for its very formation is unveiled and outlined by Roby Rajan in his 'Backwater Disclosure: Ontological Politics and the Dialectics of Intercommunitality'. He takes off from the grand philosophical narrative of Heidegger's Being and Time ending in his own blunder of supporting or making space ideologically for the state sponsored pogrom of massive dimensions. He outlines the German-Jewish conflict that led to the elimination of the other (the Jews) as emerging out of a metaphysical engagement - an outcome of the 'nationalism' and the aspiration of a people to find their place in the sun - and contrasts it with the alternative possibility by scrutinizing another conflict ridden situation in another part of the world, closer to his home. He moves onto contrast this sacralization of the state and its evils with what happened in the backwaters of Kerala with the arrival of Narayana Guru who led the way for a new consciousness of a people to emerge by making the new religious symbolization challenge the traditional order and by moving out of an unwholesome religious sedimentation that the community had been subjected to.

Roby Rajan's reference to the 'self-voidance' of the community and the formation of the community itself using the philosophical concepts of Heidegger needs to be pursued. The Izhava

community is the outcome of the daring act of SNG to dislocate and displace the umpteen earlier gods and to create a situation of 'now what': Who or what becomes our new Gods? The appropriation of the Gods of the dominant communities pantheon was resisted and yet this act of appropriation as reversal and as reform and as avowal is what Roby tries to show as the foundational experience of the community. The role the Guru plays in claiming that he is not Hindu and the cultural symbols he uses from the lore of the region being now appropriated as the 'Hindu' and the problematization this creates forms the subject matter of the study.

The void he refers to as the daring stand of SNG to dissociate with the old and provide space for the new emerge. This new in its throes is what the community waylaid by the right and the left is attempting to salvage and stay on course. The Izhava is more than Guru-devotees, SNDP and SNDS and SNF and NGs. The community is asserting at different levels. What happens when you have a superior claim to truth? In the religious scene when there are multiple claimants; to dare to neutralize all is the 'truth act'. The protestant Christianity as the true Christianity vs. the concept of the mother church and claimants to that role. The process of admitting the divergences and the attempt to canonize the texts and interpretations through dogmatization are processes that ensure as of old in the new 'daring to create/own truth'. In the void you confront 'God', 'rationality', 'self', 'community'. The 'being there' as 'being with', 'being for' as Being. What the Master does to the disciples, what the disciples do the Master and what the people do with the Master and disciples is a story that gets repeated. Does the way Roby takes the trajectory of the community vis-a-vis the Guru play out into the right wing agenda of making him one more god in the pantheon and contain the resistance and punch of the Guru vision?

In this avoidance of the old and the rejection of sanskritic he finds the void he created and from this void a new intercommunality being made possible. This project is on its way and has marked a career in contrast to the unwholesome invocation of a nation-feeling sensibility that eschews the other under the prevailing dispensation. Keeping alive the differences and yet working for unity deserves a model and probably the way for regions like that of Darjeeling, with linguistic and ethnic diversity, looking for a congenial communality. Commenting on this Kerala dynamics he ends the paper saying: "all too absent... (the) temptation... to view the state as a quasi spiritual 'self-conscious ethical substance' in which 'freedom enters into its highest right' so that a volk may realize itself" (p.87). SNG's dictum "*oru jati, oru matam, oru daivam*" (one caste, one religion, one God for all) is a project to replace not exactly the state but to conjure up the people with an alternative to what state promises to do. This is the beginning of the project of Backwaters Collective, or the 'disclosure' that gives the momentum for the collective.

The Fourth Chapter, "The Politics and Metaphysics of Intellectual Practices: Ashis Nandy and UR Ananthamurthy in Conversation" is an edited and annotated version of the dialogue between the two that took place at the second conference of the collective by Vinay Lal and included herein because Ananthamurthy who was to have participated in the third conference unfortunately could not do so, due to ill health and shortly thereafter passed away. Part of the Dialogue which led to an hour long discussion among the participants besides what is transcribed as the present text highlights the knowledge frame of thinking prevailing in India. The Western Knowledge horizon overshadowing on the one hand and the Indian Sanskrit knowledge frame overshadowing equally on the other. The perspective on these two domination schemes will have to be that of the lesser privileged, the lower castes and the victims of the dominant

worldviews. How this can be done by looking at thinkers and ideologies sprouting in locations hitherto unvisited by the academia is the avowed concern of the collective. In other words, does a critique to the Indian tradition and its history of subjugation of the majority through the means of casteism, stratification of society and the elimination of all oppositions to the agenda of the brahmanic elite also come to have an answer for the ills ailing the world?

The Fifth Chapter, by Julius Lipner a Bengal Scholar on "A Marriage Made in Heaven?: How Metaphysics Transforms Politics - A case study" looks at the emergence of Indian nationalism among the Bengal intellectuals in the late 19th century by focusing on the writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Rammohun Roy and their influence on the Brahmo Samajists, Vivekananda and Gandhi in giving shape to what later develops as full grown Hindutva. He traces the emergence of advaita as a theoretic core around the political nationalism churned from the Indian resources challenged by the altruism of Christian religious interventions in India and spread of Biblical literature and as an antidote to it by highlighting the inner-outer dimensions of cultural identity built around inner spiritual soul and the material external realm of science, technology and progress giving shape to political identity. His case study of Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda and Gandhi in having developed their political philosophies around this metaphysical unity of advaita giving shape to the empirical action in the material world for the welfare of the 'imagined to be constituted nation' as drawing from Upanishads, Gita and the purified version of the puranas shows the flexibility of Indian polycentrism of culture and its tenacity and resilience to take on colonialism. His concerted attempt has been to show how the metaphysics of advaita underpin the political effervescence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rendering Hinduism and the anti-colonial nationalism. He fails however to give attention to the possible alternative history of the people seen from a non-dominant or non-brahmanic perspective.

Manu Chakravarthy's "The Transmutation of Metaphysics and Politics in Literature", the sixth chapter makes a journey through the pre-and-post-independence contemporary Indian novels with a philosophical perspective provided by the contemporary Indian philosophers Daya Krishna and BK Matilal. Manu shows the discord between the past and present, between ethics and philosophy, politics and metaphysics. He draws attention to the fact that end justifying means was applied as early as 6th century text of Visakadataa's *Mudrarakshasa*, a drama posing Chanakya and Rakshasha in rational discourse. Manu's reflections arise out of the philosophical discourse repeated in the literary imaginations and from the personal contemporary evolution of political experiences and the underlying metaphysical assumptions. The India that was imagined by the authors of *Gora and Ghare Bhaire*, Kanthapura and Bharatipura, the position taken by Gandhi and Narayana guru, Tagore and Ambedkar feature in these reflections and the attempt to weave a story of progress from the pre-colonial medieval and pre-medieval India to the post independence texts are very sensitively touched upon. The nation being implied as a space for all - dalits and women; minorities and tribals - being engaged by individuals and communities in their ethical choices being not easily accepted and the rejection and the ambiguity such situation creates for reimagining the nation forms the thrust of the essay. To quote Manu: "Bakunin's treatise on the state as an immoral, cruel, and divisive entity that justifies all methods of deception 'for reasons of State' is anticipated in *Mudrarakshasa* in the sixth century AD itself...It is not a coincidence that the impersonal state, which is a political construct, is nurtured by the reality of a caste and class consciousness that advocates features

of purity in relation to pollution.” This chapter thus debunks the argument built elsewhere in the book that the real culprits of Indian contemporary decadence have been the colonial forces and none else.

The Seventh Chapter is “Moving in the Double Bind: Reconfiguring Indian Reflective and Creative Traditions Today” by Venkat Rao is an argument to reroute the local and traditional creative engagements which he associates with the spread of caste communities across the subcontinent and thus having had an inherent logic which was disrupted due to the colonial interventions and rational approach to ordering and controlling social groups at the local and pan Indian level. Applying the insertion point of view of Manu one could affirm that the binary Venkat is trying to create borrowing on Balagangadhara as evidently false. Because he seems to make a case that the colonial intervention solely ought to be made accountable and responsible for the dwindling of the mnemonic aural cultures as the stress shifted to written recording of the artistic and aurally transmitted cultural resources. The question would be whether the mnemonic cultures themselves have not starved of patrons in a changing economic political situation. In such a scenario those who preserved their arts, if not in its full aural excellence but partly in its lithic (written) form being for posterity, are to be welcomed or not. Besides, had they desisted probably its archival preservation would not have happened either.

Similarly Venkat’s notion of community (jati) as the carriers of mnemoculture, forced to surrender their heritage and lineage into the ‘dark and dusty’ archives of the museums and modern colonial repositories sans their acoustic performative resonance is to be pitted against the community of Roby Rajan (chapter 3) who willingly gives up the gods and goddesses of a tradition and lineage in order to create a void from which something new is to emerge. One would wish Venkat instead of decrying the modern carriers of knowledge preserving to their best ability the heritage and legacy on decline (for he does not say why out of the 400 estates only 2 survived to the mid twentieth century) could be seen as inviting the very interstices of that acoustic genius to re-perform and re-script the preserved edicts of a past for a new future which is what Manu’s utilization of Samuday and Samuh more positively and responsibly are willing to open up to.

One could also ask why Venkat bemoans only the loss of the cultural in the form of the artistic/literary and not also of the jatis that preserved the technology of the past - the kumars (pottery), julohas (weaving), madigas (leather works) etc.? Though he mentions 64 arts, does not name them all and in these pragmatic arts/technology the problem of aural performance would definitely have not been the cause for the loss brought about by having had an archival desire or museumisation. (Museum’s do have a problem and a possibility as some of the modern Museums do show by transferring the responsibility to preserve art and artefacts to the community itself and making it an actionable and alive source of contemporary knowledge of a past owned and interpreted by them) One needs ask Venkat to explore as to what kind of mnemoculture valuation prior to colonialism did create the social stratification that excluded them to the fringes of the very villages and estates that survived on their labour?

Reading Venkat, (and listening to him even more) one is urged to do a thought experiment: first, as to whatever happened to the hairsplitting logical discourses between the naiyayikas and the mimasikas and madhyamikas? In the way the essence of the discourse is available to us

do we regret the passionate and contestational word-mongering except for the loss of Buddhist insights and the negation of a practice of lived heritage of egalitarian communities? And if so who is to be blamed except the resurgent Sanskrit tradition on the labours of the Brahmin households/class he bemoans as not recorded along with their scripts and texts in the archival museums. On the futuristic front, on the other hand, in this thought experiment, what will be made out of the ‘colonial’ wrangling presently engaged in as to whether the preservation of the texts in the archival form - be it of medicine or theology, chandas or sutras -- help posterity or not when the civilization itself be flourishing on the colonized landscape of Mars or beyond? If human intelligence has a progressive transcending role to play, does critic of the past beyond the reference of identifying the transition and the good it has accomplished, taken instead to wrangling, serve the cause of knowledge or justice is a matter of concern.

Drawing Alisdair MacIntyre’s insightful reading of European culture and the role of Catholicism therein he decries the European scholars and administration not having had the sensitivity to identify jati as the carrier of culture in India. However, he fails to acknowledge the reason, or look for the possible reasons why there was this myopic vision, as he sees it. He seems not aware or intentionally oblivious of the reasons other than colonialism for the decadence of artistic traditions and the prevalent discriminations of which we have daily reports to date; and fails to note or respond to the leader of mnemonic cultures, Dr Ambedkar’s reading of how the jati has been proliferated and used as a means of oppression and control. (p.175)

One could equally wonder as to whether what is bemoaned is a colonial disruption or the loss of the control over the jati knowledge/culture base by the sanskritic/brahminic control mechanism which was overshadowed with the arrival of new language and a manner of freeing the jati-knowledge/culture base as egalitarian - accessible to all and sundry, and thereby disciplining the hierarchical superiority of the Brahmin as the knowledge preserver and producer par excellence.

One could well agree with Venkat that cultural differentiation is to be preserved and the monocultural globalization, to which all elites and dominant classes have succumbed and are in a way responsible due to the economic gains it brought them, needs to be resisted. However, the mode of doing this preservation and promotion of local and indigenous cultures need not be by denying the past and the way it has happened: firstly, precisely because colonialism which Venkat decries would not have happened if an elite had not had complicity with it, at a point in time when welcoming it was seen as advantageous, and linking the culture with other cultures and modes of knowledge and power; secondly, because, cultures are constantly on the evolution and transition, be they local or global; thirdly, the idea he reiterates of Hinduism as fluid and as something that has been superimposed via the mediation of colonial language, English, and its administrative acumen for naming and categorizing a normal process of mixing of ‘communities’ (comunitas) instead of castes (castas) is only to tell half the story. The community formations are not the outcome of naming rather naming is the consequence of there being communities to be so named. Cultural exchanges are never one way and not even the exploitations are one sided as for instance the very homogenization of a Hindu identity intended for the culturalization of the non-Hindu (a problematic notion in itself going by the definition of ‘Hindu’), into a false sense of majority. In present day India the very same strategies of estrangement of the minorities, tribals, dalits and women in the name of homogenization under the majority community for the sake of control are ongoing stratagems.

The critique of colonialism proliferating in contemporary academia, can be seen as the academic version of the 'foreign hand' that is ever present in politics, economics and international relations as an excuse to the many culpable omissions or commissions of various agents and departments. However, agency on the part of the forerunners of modern day academia, the knowledge preservers of erstwhile era, wanting to have access to power and wealth through the new knowledge systems arriving via colonialism and lapping it up in order to master the changing fortunes of a Mughal empire in decadence and as the way to create a new future cannot be nullified and the entire fault - with creation of caste, to depletion of resources and arts and artefacts - be landed onto the European missionary or traders who dared the seas and came exploring not always and only with plundering in mind but also to welcome exchange and contribute to the cultural civilizational growth. This is what the Kerala local histories and the project of Devika is unearthing. Or what Manu has done in looking at the literary compositions and the imaginations at work in creative minds. This transition and its contours is what also Lipner exposes through his study of Bengali classicists and their classics. Are we then in an either/or position: returning to the sanskritic worldview downgrading English, or, retaining the English worldview eliminating the sanskritic as Ambedkar envisaged, or is there a middle ground?

Towards the end of the essay Venkat gives hope of a progressive outlook and proactive stand. Though the negativity he feels towards the colonial institutions is uncalled for, the Indigenous identity of the manifold communities (mnemocultures) of India deserves acknowledgement for letting free the creativity inherent in them. The mode of regenerating as he says calls for strengthening the institutions and unearthing their creative potential. If this angle of recovery and forward journey is pursued then the epistemic rupture of the colonial era becomes a non-issue. The merger between the archiving done of the past and re-introducing this as a re-creative force into the universities whose student body is representative of these manifold communities could help revamp the knowledge system. It would in turn be a fitting tribute to the very institutions and their past personages who meticulously nurtured the archives in good faith and as labour of love wanting to imbue new hope to new generations.

The last Chapter, 'Unarv' is an ardent plea, drawing inspiration from the poetic works of Narayana Guru inspired by the friendship with his contemporary, Chattampi Swamikal to bring back poetry to politics. It is when poetry flourishes in a culture that the politics becomes humane is the underlying assumption. Narayana Guru evoked a transformative force in the Kerala comity of communities because he befriended Chattampi Swamikal and together unleashed a new pantheon for a people to bypass and trespass the structures of tradition and reinvent the options before them to accomplish what people and being a people are meant to accomplish. Unarv or awakening happens when poetry sprints into the layers of politics and vice versa, when metaphysics allows for regrouping of politics.

A lifetime is too short to evaluate the contributions and repercussions of an individual's life. There are those who keep growing in the valuation of a people and peoples across the world. This happens because they perceive the progress and direction of humanity and their contributions are similarly projected as that prism through which world and human consciousness keeps making sense providing meaning. The volume under review attempts as stated in the preface to bring together the interests of scholars on Gandhi and Narayana Guru together in order

to address the contemporary issues of conflict (as it originated from the ashes of LTTE, in Colombo, in 2010) and seeks answers from Asian societies that have been swept through by the modernity wave of knowledge production, dissemination and critique. These scholars attempt to recover and forage into these local traditions to see if there are remaining hearths of indigenous knowledge systems and approaches to knowledge production that can overcome the windfalls of destruction that the enlightenment story has brought forth. As there is a new enlightenment arising out of the disquiet and disillusionment with European modernity within Europe itself, the backwaters collective is an effort to look for sources for world regeneration within Indic civilization.

Though Vinay begins with Gandhi and Narayana Guru, the group has dared to look into others - Ambedkar, Lohia, Sankritayan, the Warkari movement, literature of UR Ananthamurthy, Raja Rao and others. A serious engagement with the intellectuals who were enlightenment products and yet rooted and grounded in addressing the issues of modernity that India (Bharat) itself craves for and the mode in which it should be welcomed and allowed to resuscitate the genius of the civilization in its comprehensive (inclusive) character. The critique of the past and of the elite who owned and controlled through the sanskritic overvaluation all that was deemed credible and worthwhile pushing to the margins many who began to suffer oppression as their space in the comity of communities got shrunk, receding beyond all boundaries surfaces throughout the book.

The project of Backwaters Collective and the very first volume 'India and the Unthinkable' carries through it a creative tension: how to make sense of the last 300 years when Indian cultural heritage encountered western cultural intellectual arrival, reception glorification and eventual negation - and yet it lingers on and can it or has it done its part? and therefore to be got rid of and cleansed off at the earliest? Or, is it a dire necessity to retain its illuminating and liberating vision enshrined in the constitution of modern India despite all that the pundits of yesteryears privilege dreaming of a return to some inglorious past might convince all and sundry? Is there a vision of modernity that needs to fecundate the Indian matrix yet? This tension is seen running through all of the chapters. The reader, be s/he a philosopher or political theorist, sociologist or historian, psychologist or poet will begin to unearth the unthinkable in India.