

‘Vulgar Gandhianism’ and the Lure of the Indigenous

Notes for a Symposium on the work of Rajeev Bhargava, October 2021

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Rajeev Bhargava introduces the term “vulgar Gandhianism” in his essay “What is Secularism For?” published in *Secularism and its Critics* (Bhargava 1998); the term reappears in the Introduction to *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution* (Bhargava 2008b). Both of these edited volumes are important, among other things, for trying to make space for systematic normative theorising in these areas; a topic which has exercised Bhargava on more than one occasion, such as in his polemical essay “Is There an Indian Political Theory?” (Bhargava 2010).

In this short note I would like to sketch what I take to be the tensions between normative theorising of a kind familiar within the tradition of political philosophy in which Bhargava was trained; and the set of concerns marked out as “vulgar Gandhianism” on the other.¹ My focus in the latter case is on the question of *indigeneity*, and the associated claim that at least some of the concepts and theories of the Western tradition are inapplicable in the Indian context because they are not truly ‘Indian’ – a claim which Bhargava calls the “cultural inadaptability thesis.”

I do not know enough of Bhargava’s corpus to know if he has discussed the possibility of “sophisticated Gandhianism.” But his writings on Ashoka suggest that he, too, is concerned with the question of whether there is a specifically *Indian*, indigenous tradition of religious tolerance; one might see this work as congruent with writings by Amartya Sen and Romila Thapar, for instance, who have also wanted to argue that there are Indian traditions of dissent and debate, which they are trying to recover (Sen 2006; Thapar 2020).

I am interested in three questions. First, what are the specifically *intellectual* stakes in the possibility of showing that such traditions exist, regardless of questions about historical accuracy or anachronism, and regardless of the possibilities of political mobilization, e.g. in service of a Nehruvian “idea of India”? Second, what is shown, normatively speaking, by the existence or non-existence of such traditions? Third, what does it mean, philosophically, for a thinker or writer to belong to one tradition rather than another? What makes it the case, for instance, that Ashoka can get to be part of *our* tradition, while, say, John Stuart Mill cannot?

I should say that the broader context in which I situate these claims is one that I have come to see as a pathology of Indian political life. This is the attempt to resolve or address contemporary political problems through the lens of the past. Did the Vedic people eat beef? Were the Aryans invaders? Were the Indus Valley people non-vegetarians? Was there a temple where the Babri Masjid stood? Did the RSS participate in the freedom movement? Did Nehru give due respect to Bhagat Singh? What was the precise character of the Moplah rebellion?

These have become live questions today, as the Hindu right seeks to ‘rewrite’ Indian history in its image, and write out of that history elements at odds with its current political project – at the academic end of this project, I have in mind the writings of figures such as Vikram Sampath, Sanjeev

¹ I leave aside entirely the propriety of using this term to describe Gandhi’s actual thoughts on these questions.

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Sanyal, and Tripurdaman Singh (Sampath 2019; Sanyal 2015; Singh 2020).² Along with these, we have the associated projects of memorializing events such as the Moplah rebellion as a ‘Hindu genocide’, undermining the claims of figures such as Tipu Sultan to be members of the Indian pantheon, and, most recently, attempting to memorialize the ‘Horrors of Partition’: all attempts at rewriting ‘nationalist’ histories, and firmly placing Muslim villainy as a central element of Indian history.³

These projects have not gone uncontested: we have a new range of writings which seek to combat Hindutva on the terrain of history: Audrey Truschke on Aurangzeb; Tony Joseph on Indian pre-history, and so on (Truschke 2017; Joseph 2018). One might see Bhargava’s work on Ashoka as part of this genre, though it pre-dates the current Hindutva wave. Recent writing on the Indian constitution, and the repeated insistence that the RSS was not part of the freedom movement, might also be seen in this vein.⁴

The Hindu right, the Gandhian (vulgar or sophisticated), and the ‘Nehruvian secularist’ are all united it seems in thinking that the question of what ‘Indian civilization’ *really* is like is an important question upon which the character of the Indian polity must hinge. I disagree. To my mind, *insofar* as we are concerned with the question of how to live amongst ourselves in the present, these historical questions are simply irrelevant at best and a distraction at worst. They should not be, as they are now, a battleground on which the Hindutva vs liberalism debate is to be fought.

While this is a point that requires a longer elaboration, one route into it is to ask: what would change if Indian history was actually as the Hindu right describes? Would that change the norms and principles by which we ought to relate to each other today? Ought it to change the character of the Indian state, or of the Indian constitution? How could it?

Rather, I believe that what we need is much more of the explicitly normative theorising in political philosophy of the kind Bhargava opened up in the 1990s with his writings on secularism. I see my current intervention in this Symposium to be part of a larger argument to the effect.

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Let me begin, then, with Bhargava’s own description of vulgar Gandhianism (“VG”). He introduces the notion in his discussion of the Madan-Nandy thesis on Indian secularism (Bhargava 1998, 529–30):

...The Madan-Nandy view is that secularism is invalidated where and when religion is of immense importance to people. But their attack on secularism obscures that, with all its inadequacies, secularism was invented for precisely those conditions where different religions mattered equally deeply to people. Modern secularism arose because the resources of tolerance within traditional religion had exhausted their possibility. Now that it appears to be faltering, we cannot innocently return to resources with proven inadequacy. True, ultra-procedural secularism cannot do justice to an important set of human motivations, but the slot left vacant by its rejection cannot be filled only by religious

² For critical reviews of each of these authors see, in order, (Tripathi 2021; Visvanathan 2021; Burra, Arudra 2020)

³ For a direct mobilization of this kind of view in service of the Hindu right, see for instance a recent op-ed by Balbir Punj (Punj 2021))

⁴ I do not mean to suggest that these historical interventions – on either side of the political spectrum – are new; they are iterations of older battles.

tradition. Why do Madan and Nandy believe that it can do so? I believe this is due to a strong whiff of vulgar Gandhianism in their views.

What is “vulgar” about vulgar Gandhianism – which Bhargava takes to be an “ideal-typical ideological system” – is that “rather than pursue a richer, subtler, more promising Gandhian strategy of developing an alternative modernity, it succumbs to a motivated blindness towards all forms of modernity” (ibid., 532). He is particularly concerned with three of its features: (a) a sentimental attachment to notions of community in the past; (b) an “inconsistent pluralism” which is willing to embrace and learn from a variety of traditional civilizations and faiths, but is unwilling to extend this attitude to modern civilization; and (c) its insensitivity to the fact that there are features of modernity (e.g. the nation-state) which are irreversible.

It is the second of these features which is of interest to me. Why deny to the modern West what we hold out as possibilities for traditional civilizations? A natural answer is that the relevant concepts and arguments, originating from the West are not ours, and cannot be made our own. Bhargava calls this the “cultural inadaptability thesis,” citing Madan as an example of someone who holds this sort of view (ibid., 522):

The impossibility argument [that “if secularism is viewed as a shared credo of life it is impossible in South Asia”] depends upon [Madan’s] claim that the distinction between the sacred and the profane, crucial to secularism, is either unavailable or available only when encompassed by the sacred. Under cultural conditions of hierarchy, the domains of the religious and the secular cannot have equal validity in their separate spheres. If so, secularism, born out of a dialectic between Protestant Christianity and the Enlightenment cannot take root in India.

It is useless, then, to talk about secularism in the Indian context, because it is an alien concept which does not have deep roots in Indian soil (the organicist metaphor comes quite naturally here).

In his introduction to *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution*, written a decade later, Bhargava points out that similar moves have been made with respect to the Indian constitution (Bhargava 2008a, 30–31):

[This criticism] alleges that the Indian Constitution is entirely an alien document, borrowed article by article from Western constitutions, and thus sits uneasily with the cultural ethos of the Indian people. This is what in a different context I have called the cultural inadaptability thesis, one that I associate with vulgar Gandhianism. In this view the Constitution of India is deeply flawed because its cultural and normative vocabulary is totally at odds with the cultural and normative grammar in terms of which the real people of India conduct their life. One member of the assembly claimed that the ideals on which this Draft Constitution was framed have no manifest relation to the fundamental spirit of India. He predicted that such a constitution would prove unsuitable to the Indian context and break down soon after its operationalization. Another member called it a slavish imitation, a surrender to the West. A third put it more sensuously ‘we wanted the music of veena or sitar but here we have the music of an English band’.⁵

⁵ Bhargava adds a further criticism (ibid):

The more specific charge against the Indian Constitution is that it reflects a model of Western liberal democracy that might reflect the values and ethos of the tiny Westernized upper caste but is radically different from the cultural system with the help of which the Indian people make sense of their life. As such it can only be imposed on these people from the outside, probably through coercion by the state.

Bhargava identifies a variant of the cultural inadaptability thesis, more specifically directed towards liberal-democratic or Constitutional ideals:

A weaker version of the cultural inadaptability thesis also exists. This variant does not argue for the impossibility or general difficulty of modernity's entry into India but claims that despite the efforts of early social reformers, the discourse of liberal-democracy could not, entirely for contingent specific historical reasons, be implanted on Indian soil. For example, the discourse of rights was disengaged in India from its original individual moorings and attached to religious communities.⁶

I should say that I think there *is* a grain of truth – perhaps many grains of truth – to the culturalist/nativist critique expressed by the thesis of VG combined with the cultural inadaptability thesis. The very fact that it has engaged so many minds across the ideological spectrum is one reason to think that it captures something of enduring importance. In any case, the fact that one version of it is grist for the right-wing mill is not a reason to abandon the critique entirely, though I think it needs to be more carefully formulated.

However, my concern is with Bhargava's own response to this challenge. This is what I turn to next.

III

I see in Bhargava's writings three sorts of responses to the charge that liberal-democratic concepts are 'alien' to Indian soil and hence unworkable or inappropriate. The primary response is to stress the distinctiveness of *Indian* secularism as a normative enterprise – stating that while it might have origins in the West, it is far from a 'slavish imitation', and involves features which are highly context-specific. 'Hyper-substantive' and 'ultra-procedural' forms of secularism are indeed problematic (we might add: whether borrowed from the West, or not), but these are not the only possibilities. The alternatives – 'contextual' and 'political' secularism, for instance – are developed in a number of writings.⁷

Since my concern is not with secularism per se, I leave this line of argument aside to consider two other kinds of responses found in his writings. The first arises in the context of his discussion of the Constitution. Here his claim is, quoting Austin, that while the Constitution is *non*-Indian, it is not *un*-Indian (Bhargava 2008a, 30). For one thing, Indians such as Raja Rammohun Roy had already begun to make claims to be Western over a century before the Constitution was adopted; it was a move which could be adopted as a form of protest by those who felt shackled by their own tradition (ibid, 37). Bhargava points, for instance, to the use made of the new legal system by untouchable communities to bring suits against their landlords in the 19th century.

On one interpretation of this point, the claim might be that after the moments of 'first contact', Indians used theories and practices associated with Western modernity to further their own ends, in the process making them their own. At the point at which decisions had to be made – say about some particular constitutional formation – the relevant concepts and practices had *already* been Indianized, and were a familiar part of the landscape. The cultural inadaptability thesis doesn't hold, then, either because the culture has already adapted to this Western construct, or the construct is

⁶ Ibid. This view he ascribes to Kaviraj, Khilnani, and Hansen. With respect to Hansen, Bhargava also attributes an even weaker version of the cultural inadaptability thesis: "though the language of negative individual rights, defined in opposition to colonial power, existed in India, it was eventually subordinated to the rights of communities." It is not clear to me why this should be a form of the cultural inadaptability thesis in the first place.

⁷ See e.g. (Bhargava 1998; 2007)

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part of the culture in some hybridized form. The passage of time, on this view, reduces the pressure of the question of origin.⁸

I will return to this possibility below.⁹ For the moment, let me make three points. First, note that someone who takes the question of indigeneity seriously need not be terrifically bothered by this move. They might agree that some forms of ‘Indianization’ from the West are harmless (tea, cricket?), but claim that this is not so for others (English, the law courts?). It might depend, for instance, on what has been displaced or distorted by the Western import.

Second, appeals of this sort to past encounters with the West carry with them the dangers of a regress. One might be prompted to ask: was Raja Rammohun Roy, for instance, justified in *his* encounter with the West? (Gandhi, for instance, was qualified in his appreciation for Roy). As long as one is confident of the “Indian-ness” of the first contact, perhaps one can get away by bootstrapping one’s current engagement with the West onto earlier histories of engagement; but the question of the Indian-ness of that first contact can also be challenged by later generations.¹⁰

Finally, note that one can make the converse point. Whenever we have an intermingling or borrowing between traditions there will be a first point of contact. Why should that contact not be in the present? Why does it have to be sanctified by past practice?

IV

Let me turn then, to the third line of response to be found in Bhargava’s writings, though he does not develop it directly in the context of the challenge of VG and the cultural inadaptability thesis. This is to provide an alternative genealogy of these concepts which are, in fact, Indian. The two figures he discusses in the context of religious tolerance are Ashoka and Akbar; I focus on the former.

Bhargava introduces the possibility of this alternative genealogy in “What is Secularism For?”, when he points out that even European secularism can be seen as arising from two alternative historical models: the “church-state” model on the one hand, and the “religious-strife” model on the other. Madan’s mistake is to see the church-state model as the only available one from which a theory of secularism can be constructed, and then to reject it as alien (Bhargava 1998, 525–26), emphasis mine:

⁸ This might be true, one might add, of tea, the harmonium, cricket, the English language...all ‘alien’ to begin with, and Indian now.

The question of the “Indian-ness” of the harmonium has been resurrected of late because of the desire by Mr. Nitin Gadkari to mandate that horns on vehicular traffic be replaced by the sounds of Indian musical instruments (The Hindu 2021). Should harmoniums be included? Vishwas Gaitonde notes that the “anti-harmonium” (because non-Indian) view dates back to the partition of Bengal in 1905; it was banned by All India Radio from 1940 to 1971, and is now allowed to be broadcast only when it is part of orchestral music; solo harmonium recitals are still prohibited (Gaitonde 2016).

This is a textbook example of what I see as the madness of appeals to indigeneity, and it is useful to be reminded that this has a long history.

⁹ I discuss similar issues in a recent intervention on the idea of ‘decolonizing philosophy’ and the Gandhi-Tagore debates of the 1920s in (Burra 2021).

¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, Rammohun Roy is already a subject of such attacks, by figures such as the actress Payal Rohatgi, who called him a ‘traitor’, and a *chamcha* of the British (India Today Webdesk 2019). The BJP’s avoidance of Roy in the recent assembly elections of 2021 is another instance of this ambivalence (Chakraborty 2021)

Secularism derived from the church-state model cannot accommodate deep diversity and, therefore, must be distinguished from the version of secularism that flows from the religious-strife model. This variant develops first by tolerating religious others, then by allowing them full liberty, and later by granting them equal citizenship rights, by making religious affiliation irrelevant to one's citizenship. The birth of modern secularism—modern because of its commitment to liberty and equality—must therefore be traced back to the religious-strife rather than the church-state model. Because Western practice embodies both these models, the two are rarely disentangled and modern secularism is viewed as emerging directly from the church-state model. This however misrepresents the history of Western secularism. *Moreover, if one conflates these two models one is forever doomed to see secularism as a culturally specific gift of Christianity of no great relevance to India. But the religious-strife model has deep roots and is therefore also valid in India. The absence of the church-state model does not affect the development of political secularism so long as conditions exist for the applicability of the religious-strife model.*

In his essay *Is There an Indian Political Theory*, Bhargava suggests that attempts of this kind are a valuable alternative to the preoccupation with the West (Bhargava 2010, 69):

Hitherto, attention was focused on how concepts developed in the West were used in India, the meaning and inflection they acquired. The more urgent question now concerns the internal structure of concepts evolved in India and what happened to them with the advent of colonial modernity.

Ashoka is introduced immediately after this passage (ibid):

There is much talk of tolerance or toleration in Indian civilization. At its best, what did it add up to? Toleration implies that the one who tolerates refrains from interfering in the morally unacceptable or repugnant beliefs and practices of those who are tolerated even though he has the power to do so. Is this what was practised in, say, Ashoka's times? Evidence from Ashokan edicts gives a different picture. Many of these edicts acknowledge the presence of different religions as natural. All religions are seen to be worthy recipients of respect and support...So, according to Ashokan edicts, all religions are expected to share a space within which they can respect and dialogue with one another. Yet, acknowledging and respecting other religions is not the same thing as according them equal respect. Respect is compatible with hierarchy, which is why the use of the term 'toleration' in the context of Ashokan edicts is partly appropriate. Ashoka's edicts appear to articulate something more than toleration but somewhat less than equal respect for all religions. *Clearly, we are on to a concept that does not easily fit neat categories of western political theory.*

A central element in this project is to investigate the "conceptual spaces" which this kind of historical investigation might open up (ibid):

Much of the present discussion can be seen not merely as explication of concepts in separate periods of Indian history but as contributing to an anti-anachronistic, non-teleological account of the development of modern secularism in India. This account can be viewed as providing a preliminary sketch of how multiple traditions of popular Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sufism, and court Islam opened up conceptual spaces that enabled later generations to forge a distinctive conception of India's secular ideals.

Bhargava is mindful of the pitfalls which may attend such a project (ibid):

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However, these sketchy accounts are ridden with internal problems, of which I mention a few. For a start, there is the danger of being overly triumphalist. Have I laid more emphasis on conditions conducive to the development of secular ideals rather than on those that undermine them? Second, chronological accounts carry with them the danger of teleological bias and an indefensible progressivism. Third, any such account closely resembles the modernist vocabulary implicit in the social reform movements of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. If so, I am guilty of anachronism.

...

Another difficulty concerns the meaning of crucial terms and their translation. When something is translated as equality, what exactly are we to make of that? How do we understand the claim that religious reformers such as Kabir sought to end the caste system? How do we understand notions of individual choice and responsibility? In short, we have to confront the following issue: we need to oppose ridiculous ideas such as notions of individuality, freedom, and equality were invented in the modern West and existed nowhere else. But equally, we must guard against ethnocentrism and anachronism. We must not be tempted to read modern western notions of freedom, equality, or the individual into India's past.

I point to these passages to note that the criticism I wish to develop of this move, below, doesn't depend upon criticisms of this kind. It responds, rather, to a striking line immediately after the passage I just quoted:

Yet, a new language and vocabulary needs to be retrieved, *our buried treasure has to be excavated* so that we can reconsider not only the non-western past and present but also rewrite the story of the western past and present.

My resistance is to the italicized phrase, particularly the assumption that Ashoka is in some natural sense *ours*. I would argue instead that the designation of a figure as 'ours', of conscripting them into a tradition of which we are a part, is an active, creative act. One *makes* others part of one's tradition; and if one can do this with Ashoka despite the vast distance in time between his world and ours, there is no reason why we might not do so across geographical distances which might mark the West from the non-West.

V

In his many writings on Ashoka following the early essay I quoted in the last section, Bhargava returns to a notion which he introduces there, the idea of a 'conceptual space' or a 'conceptual resource' (Bhargava 2014, 174–75):

[A]t crucial junctures in Indian history, certain conceptual spaces were opened up that, under certain conditions, and provided we build an appropriate narrative, can be seen to contribute to the growth of modern secularism. I have used the phrase conceptual spaces in the plural. I mean here that some spaces open up simultaneously or over time, which enable multiple historical agents to imagine new concepts, provided they have the motivation to do so. A conceptual space may open up and may remain wholly unutilized for long periods of time, sometimes so long that it may entirely recede out of our background, totally forgotten. Or else, it may get filled up by concepts, though these concepts may be in different stages of articulation, some clearly formed, others only half done, still others barely born. Some

concepts in the space may have a very short life—they get made, are used and destroyed; others have a much longer period of gestation. Most are revived, modified, recast, recycled, reappropriated. Some are even mutated. The important thing is they are available in the conceptual stock as a resource, for use, dissemination, and, under certain conditions, for mobilization.

I leave aside the details of the Ashokan edicts Bhargava discusses, as well as their context and the particular interpretation he gives of their outlook as standing, not for toleration, but for something like “norms of civility” between followers of rival belief systems.¹¹ I also leave aside the questions of anachronism etc which Bhargava noted were possibilities attendant on a project of this kind.

My question is rather: in what sense are they a conceptual resource for *us*? This is not, after all, the case of an ongoing tradition of thinking about secularism or ‘deep diversity’ stemming from the reign of Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. He has not been (so far as I am aware) part of ‘our’ historical consciousness for many centuries until James Prinsep deciphered the rock edicts in the middle of the 19th century. Until then, at least, the edicts were not ‘available’ to us as a conceptual resource at all.

To what extent have they added to our stock of conceptual resources since then? As a philosophical resource, I have my reservations about whether they add anything more to the stock of concepts we already have. Bhargava himself characterizes the Ashokan position as capturing a norm of civility or fraternity across difference, but these norms can be described, as he does, without reference to Ashoka at all.

¹¹ The two edicts are as follows:

ROCK EDICT VII (Translated by Radha Kumud Mookerjee)

His Sacred and Gracious majesty desires that in all places should reside people of diverse sects (pashandas). For they all desire restraint of passions [samyama] and purity of heart [bhava-’sudhi]. But men are of various inclinations and of various passions. They may thus perform the whole or a part (of their duties). But of him whose liberality is, too, not great, restraint of passion, inner purity, gratitude and constancy of devotion should be indispensable and commendable.

ROCK EDICT XII

King Priyadarsi honours men of all faiths, members of religious orders and lay-men alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem. Yet he does not value either gifts or honors as much as growth in the qualities essential [sāra-vadhi] to men of all faiths. This growth could take many forms, but its root is in guarding one’s speech [vachi-guti] to avoid extolling one’s own faith and disparaging the faith of others improperly or, when the occasion is appropriate, immoderately.

The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one’s own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one’s own faith and also does disservice to that of others. For if a man extols his own faith and disparages another because of devotion to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith. Therefore concord (samavāyo or samanvaya) alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and respect the conception of Dharma accepted by others. King Priyadarsi desires men of all faiths to know each other’s doctrines and to acquire sound doctrines. Those who are attached to their particular faiths should be told that King Priyadarsi does not value gifts and honors as much as the growth in the qualities essential to religion in men of all faiths. Many officials are assigned to tasks bearing on this purpose—the officers in charge of spreading Dharma, the superintendents of women in the royal household, the inspectors of cattle and pasture lands, and other officials. The objective of these measures is the promotion of each man’s particular faith and the glorification of Dharma.

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It is always a valuable exercise for the political theorist to contemplate or confront sensibilities and circumstances far removed from the ones in which they find themselves theorizing. But note that the example of Ashoka is not meant to enrich us by means of trying to destabilize or defamiliarize us from our current preconceptions; rather, the enrichment is supposed to happen via a process of *familiarization*.

There remains the possibility that the example of figures like Ashoka is meant to show that the Madan charge – secularism is not *ours* – can be met by saying: *we* also had it (or something near enough like it). On this reading, the example of Ashoka is something like a political resource (available for “dissemination” and “mobilization”) for use, e.g. in the construction of a new national identity of a familiar Nehruvian kind. This is how Bhargava describes the project (ibid., 173-4):

In another work, *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru writes,

Men of religion have seldom, very seldom, been as tolerant as Ashoka. In order to convert people to their own faith they have seldom scrupled to use force and terrorism and fraud. The whole of history is full of religious persecution and religious wars, and in the name of religion and of Gods perhaps more blood has been shed than in any other name. It is good therefore to remember how a great son of India, intensely religious, and the head of a powerful empire, behaved in order to convert people to his ways of thought. It is strange that any one should be so foolish as to think that religion and faith can be thrust down a person's throat at the point of the sword or a bayonet.

In the mythology of secular nationalism, Asoka is the tolerant king par excellence. It was only a matter of time before a step was taken within the nationalist narrative to move from tolerance to secularism. It was claimed that Ancient India, particularly in Asoka's time (304–232 b.c.e.) and because of his initiative, formulated a conception of the proto-secular state in India. Asoka's tolerance toward all religions was the forerunner of the policy of religious neutrality associated with secularism. The clear implication of this was that this new attempt would not have been possible without something akin to a secular state in the Indian tradition.

In this piece, Bhargava offers what he takes to be a more cautious reformulation of the secular nationalist historical claim. One way to see that project is in terms of providing reference points to ‘ordinary’ Indians who might otherwise be disturbed at the prospect of a constitutional order premised on the notion of the secular, itself seen as a “Western” or “colonial” concept. To them one can say – what we want to do is quite familiar after all, we have done it here in the past as well.

But two things ought to be remarked here. First, the background is explicitly that of constructing an idea of a continuous Indian nation (hence “a great son of India”): Ashoka is assumed to be already part of this nation. Second, again the work of cultural ‘adaptation’ has already been done by characterizing Ashoka's concerns in a way that brings them to bear upon our own circumstances. Were we to be faithful to the particularities of Ashoka's own situation over two thousand years ago, and try to insert his ideas into the present without mediation by a Nehru or a Bhargava, it is quite likely that the ‘cultural inadaptability thesis’ would apply to Ashoka as well.

This to me is the crux of the matter. LP Hartley famously said “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” I think we should take this adage seriously when it comes to the question of indigeneity. If the problem with the “alien” concept (e.g. secularism or tolerance) has to do with

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inapplicability/inadaptability/incommensurability in our current context, then we do not – necessarily – solve the problem by substituting historical for geographical distance.

Conversely: to the extent that a figure like Ashoka seems available to us as a conceptual resource to appeal to in thinking about how to develop a secular tradition in India, that is against the background of a great deal of cultural and political work which has already happened and is invisible to us at the time of our encounter with him. There is no reason in principle why this could not be done with other figures also, including the writers of the Western secular canon.

One might perform this work and find that a figure like Locke has little to say to us after all. But that would not be because he is un-Indian, but because what he has to say has little purchase on our own circumstances and concerns, given the particularities of our history, the nature of contemporary religions in India, and so forth. The question of origins here is a red herring – I am sure many writings produced in the Indian land mass at the same time would also fail the test of cultural adaptability, though one would have to make a case-by-case assessment.

My overall aim is to suggest that the question of indigeneity when introduced into political debate as a means of questioning or rejecting certain concepts/theories/practices as inappropriate because alien should not be met, as it sometimes is by scholars such as Bhargava, Thapar, and Sen, by pointing to analogues of these within parts of what are seen uncontestedly to be part of the Indian past. There are two reasons for this. First, the concept of ‘indigeneity’ and the idea of an Indian past are philosophically complex notions; by seeking to respond to their opponents on their own terms, a range of theoretical complications is simply being swept under the carpet.

Second, the debates within which these interventions happen are in the end normative debates. Should we have freedom of speech? Should we treat people equally without regard to their religious beliefs or their sexual preferences? Should the state intervene in religious matters in order to protect the very vulnerable or marginalized? Whether or not we should do so seems to me clearly a question which is independent of the question of whether we *have* done so, or have even thought of doing so.

One way to see this is to think of the way a nativist-conservative might respond to this evidence of Indian traditions of dissent, argument, and so forth. They might say: yes, you have shown us that there were multiple discursive and dissenting traditions in the Indian past. But this does not settle the question of which tradition we *should* try to extend into our Indian present. It’s all very well to celebrate the *charvakas*, say (a favourite example of ancient Indian dissidence for modern Indian liberals); but they were mistaken in their hedonism and materialism. So too with depictions of sexuality in temple art and texts such as the *Kamasutra*. So what if there have been such traditions in the Indian past; there have also been more conservative sexual traditions, and it is these to which we should give our allegiance.

A dialogue of this kind has the merit of shifting the focus where it should be, on first-order normative arguments regarding how we should live. But once we enter the space of such arguments, what role is left for ancient history in the first place? I confess I find it hard to see.

I am drawn, in this connection, to a famous essay by Nissim Ezekiel on VS Naipaul, “Naipaul’s India and Mine” (Ezekiel 1976). Ezekiel writes:

In the India which I have presumed to call mine, I acknowledge without hesitation the existence of all the darkness Mr. Naipaul discovered. I am not a Hindu and my background

makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian...

India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India.

...

Not being Hindu, I cannot identify myself with India's past as a comprehensive heritage or reject it as if it were mine to reject. I can identify myself only with modern India, a place with more things in it than are dreamt of in Mr. Naipaul's philosophy. I am neither proud nor ashamed of being an Indian. I am neither proud nor ashamed of being Westernized. History is behind me. I live on the frontiers of the future that is slowly receding before me.

Can we recover anything of this high modernist sensibility in 'new India'? To do so would require recognizing that history, in the end, is no substitute for substantive theorizing in moral and political philosophy, of the kind Rajeev Bhargava has pioneered in the Indian context.

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