



PRSS-5

Vedic Modernism in Modern India: The urgent necessity of its resurgence

Dr. Krishna Barua

Associate Professor

Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati

Dept. Of Humanities & Social Sciences

North Guwahati, Guwahati-781 039, Assam, India.

*Akam Sat; Viprâ baahudhâ vadanti**(That which is, is one. Wise men speak of it in many ways)."*

Max Weber had characterized the emergence of Modernity in the West as a process of rationalization and disenchantment. However in the last decade, in India particularly, this conception of modernity as a process of disenchantment has been replaced by a disenchantment with the glittering edifice of modernity itself. The three famous predicates by which Baudelaire diagnosed the condition of the modern world The ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent (Baudelaire) have lost none of their potency even today, long after the period called Modernism has come to an end. Generically, the word "modern" was used to refer to the *just now*, the contemporaneous, the avant-garde and the experimental.

Modernism was just another term for Enlightenment rationalism, shaped by optimism with respect to the possibilities of reason in controlling human life. It was that period of Western history whose motto according to Immanuel Kant was, "Dare to know." It was the 18th-century belief that only the enlightened mind could find truth; both enlightenment and truth were discovered through the application of reason to knowledge, a process that also created new knowledge. The individual acquired knowledge and at the same time the means to discover truth in it through proper education and instruction.

The aim of the paper will be mostly in the form of interrogation of contextuality, specificity and the mutuality of Western Modernism through the Indian approach.. And to raise the question that if this civilization has survived through 6 to 7,000 years, is it only now to be dismissed as unsuited to Modernism. "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at least a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure" (Man np). In a country which had the most living culture in the world, aren't we devouring principles cooked in the West and pickled in India under an unsettling paradigm shift? Unfortunately two centuries of colonization of the Indian mind probably made us learn to look at ourselves through Western eyes.

The aim of the paper will therefore be an attempt to locate the Modernism of traditional thought power and systems and the urgent necessity of its resurgence for self enquiry. "The main cause of India's weakness," Sri Aurobindo had observed in 1920, "is not subjection, nor poverty, nor a lack of spirituality or Dharma, but a diminution of thought-power, inability or unwillingness to think." (Aurobindo). If we go back to the very concept behind Western Modernity, we find that it was essentially divisive and exclusive, full of

'isms' doled out into neat philosophical watertight compartments, labelled and pitted against the other. This was unfamiliar territory for many in India where the qualities of pluralism, universality, integrality was nurtured over thousands of years and where there have been always a recognition and respect for the infinite multiplicity of approaches to the Truth. Under the Western canons, those very approaches became many divisions rivalling each other. Indian culture is a subject as vast and complex as Indian life itself. The eighteenth, nineteenth centuries saw the clash of two civilizations, the new European, dynamic, eager for aggrandizement of space, appearing far better fitted than the Indian, exhausted and lost through repeated onslaughts and internal wars. Even the post independent political India could not achieve definite independence of thought. The cult of Western Modernity was essentially divisive and exclusive. There was the rapid conquest of the Indian mind and life as India merely followed European thought, science, and political institutions culture and traditions to make a cult of modernity. Swami Vivekananda was the first to give the call to "de-hypnotise yourselves !" (Vivekananda 105). Michael Danino rues that "India's failure to boldly formulate and implement a truly Indian education after Independence ranks as her most tragic, most ruinous error" (Danino np).

Ethnocentrism has always been a particularly powerful tendency in Western culture. Which automatically led to the belief that all "Non-Western" culture, were marginal. This was what Edward Said had referred to represent reality through a "textual attitude, of trying to explain one's experience in a foreign culture by referring to a travel book. By knowing the Orient, the West came to own it. The Orient became the studied, the seen, the observed, the object; The Orient was passive; the West was active. The importance of such a construction is that it creates a single subject matter where none existed, a compilation of previously unspoken notions of the Other. (Said) These led to inaccuracies of a wide variety of assumptions as it questions various paradigms of thought which are accepted on individual, academic, and political levels. Or what about the great French writer André Malraux's observation, "I see in Europe a carefully ordered barbarism" (Thullier 55). In recent years, a number of critics like the multiculturalists have attempted to decenter the dominant discourse of Western culture in order to open the West up to the discourses of non-Western cultures. Instead, reality is a social construct—a creation in people's minds, colored by their social background. It is a sort of cultural relativism which limits the sphere of truth to a particular society or culture. In order to show an objective and scientific way to do cultural research, it is now conceivable that an anthropological historical study gets more realistic ideas about man as a cultural being, cross-culturally, and globally. This is again hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation as the subject of an extensive historical study with a view to practicing and teaching understanding.

In India, especially after Independence, traditional forms of authority and meaning were coming under attack, even as cultural and aesthetics and artistic forms crumbled in the face of unforeseen challenges. If we consider the yardsticks to measure the shift in perspective, it is literally a quagmire



leading to a fascism of western standards and tropes (What Renee Guenon, the French philosopher called the "Classic Prejudice") and a shrinking of years of moral maturity in a frozen inability or unwillingness to think. We can look at issues of decadence and cultural decline in philosophy, in literature and poetry, the relationship between community and modern society in sociology, the rise of a mindless and urban and mass society. It is imperative here to recall Sri Aurobindo's words "Ancient India's culture, attacked by European modernism, overpowered in the material field, betrayed by the indifference of her children, may perish for ever along with the soul of the nation that holds it in its keeping." (Sri Aurobindo 139)

Most of us may recall that time in 1999 when the sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar had described as "unfortunate" the furor created in the country over Saraswati Vandana. Talking to the Hindustan Times, Pandit Ravi Shankar had pointed out that Saraswati remained the ruling deity in Indian music and cultural tradition. He had called for preserving the Indian classical traditions, especially in view of the rapid cultural invasion from the West mainly through the television channels (Shankar np). The invocation is replete with all the tenets of Modernism, freedom, knowledge and insight: "May you fully remove my lethargy, sluggishness, and ignorance." Yet the protests against its chanting revealed that no Indian element was tolerable in education, while they are perfectly satisfied with an education that, at the start of the century, Sri Aurobindo called "soulless and mercenary" (The National Value of Art 65). Most of our inspiration come only from ancient Indian thought. we are generally too sluggish to protest because we need sharp intellectual weapons which we had no time nor inclination to develop. Swami Vivekananda reiterated that "Too much of inactivity, too much of weakness, too much of hypnotism has been and is upon our race" (Swami Vivekananda 105). When Indians living in Harappan cities invented the decimal system, they were modern; when, about the same time, they measured the periods of rotation of the planets, they were modern; when later they cast the Iron Pillar which still stands in South Delhi and challenges today's metallurgists with its non-rusting properties, they were modern; when they pioneered discoveries in mathematics, astronomy, surgery, construction and agricultural techniques, they were modern (Kak Chapter VI)

Some of the most fascinating stories in the Vedic texts are about the creation myths. Through these texts an appreciation can be gained of how pre-scientific notions may influence our thinking if we attempt to decode the meaning of the myths. At times, there emerges remarkable evidence for the surprisingly acute observation and straight thinking. Like the speed of light is clearly given, to an amazing degree of precision, in Sayana's commentary on the Rig-Veda? And can it be a coincidence if a day of Brahma, equal to 4,320,000,000 years, happens to be the age of the earth? (Kak 31-36) Many such examples could be supplied in other fields, from mathematics and astronomy to quantum physics to linguistics. The Vedic split of time-consciousness as "timeless reality" or "the unifying force" places a high value on universality, and the persistent conception of a transcendent reality is more

important than the phenomenal world it underlies and sustains. "I am the time, the destroyer of the worlds" (Bhagavad Gita 11:32)

The attempt to grasp the concept of time quantitatively, and the universe, world, and social order as eternal was not a part of historiography. In the West, whether Christian or atheist, the fundamental obvious fact was death, whatever meaning it gives to it whereas India's fundamental obvious fact was the infinity of life in the infinity of time.

India's early scientist/philosophers understood dialectics in nature - they understood change, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Even when they did investigate the relation of two phenomena from cause to effect, they generally did not take the view that a single effect is caused by a single active movement, but preferred to consider that effects were produced by the combination of various causes. In India, virtually every rational school of philosophy had something to say on the nature of elementary particles, and various schools of thought promoted the idea that matter was composed of atoms that were indivisible and indestructible. This shows that the much vaunted "scientific temper" was nothing new to India.

Even amongst those Indian philosophers who accepted the separation of mind and body and argued for the existence of the soul, there was considerable dedication to the scientific method and the development of the principles of deductive and inductive logic.

It is not by chance that the numeral zero, which allows the communication of large numbers, is a Hindu invention. The use of the decimal system and the concept of zero was essential in facilitating large astronomical calculation and allowed such 7th C mathematicians as Brahmagupta to estimate the earth's circumference at about 23,000 miles - (not too far off from the current calculation. The historian Will Durant, writing in the 1950s, anticipated this phenomenon when he wrote:

"It is true that, even across the Himalayan barrier, India has sent us such questionable gifts as grammar and logic, philosophy and fables, hypnotism and chess, and, above all, our numerals and our decimal system. But these are not the essence of her spirit; they are trifles compared to what we may learn from her in the future." (Durant 633)

Is it not an irony that we in India have allowed others, unfamiliar with or contemptuous of the truths discovered by millennia of yoga and sadhana, to think for us, speak for us, and ultimately to dictate to us. in the Mahabharata, for example, Markandeya tells Yudhisthira that in the Kali Yuga, "Men generally become addicted to falsehood in speech," and "intellectual darkness will envelop the whole earth." (Varna Parva 187-189) Yet in every sphere of life, be it political, social, cultural or ethical, we have done surprisingly little to dispel this darkness from our own minds.

Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore had stated clearly that he had no distrust of any culture, however modern or foreign. On the contrary he believed that the shock of such forces was necessary for the vitality of India's intellectual nature. But what he objected to was "the artificial arrangement by which this foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind and thus kills, or hampers, the great opportunity for the creation of a new thought power



by a new combination of truths. It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthened, not to resist the Western culture, but truly to accept and assimilate it, and use it for our food and not as our burden. . . But before we are in a position to stand a comparison with the other cultures of the world, or truly to co-operate with them, we must base our own structure on a synthesis of all the different cultures we have. When, taking our stand at such a centre, we turn towards the West, our gaze shall no longer be timid and dazed ; our heads shall remain erect, safe from insult. For then we shall be able to take our own views of Truth, from the standpoint of our own vantage ground, thus opening out a new vista of thought before the grateful world." (The Center of Indian Culture 31-34)

What are these issues then ? Will the whirlwinds of change in India's cultural and political ethos be an extension and resistance to imperialism ? It is only if we allow the western canons to think for us that India is in danger of becoming just an imitation of European Modernism. Still if we make a sincere attempt to revitalize the country to think independently, effectively, with great insight, not superficially we will in many ways be free from prejudices and prejudgments and open up diverse interpretations of the rich heritage of universal knowledge to the world. Narrative and Social Space as Edward Said had entailed was a rejection of biological generalizations, cultural constructions, and racial and religious prejudices. It is an erasure of the line between 'the West' and 'the Other', but rather to a focused and complex type of history that allows space for the dynamic variety of human experience. (Orientalism)

Behind all these interlaced processes we are yet still not exactly sure how to situate Modernism In Modern India. We are complacent with all that we have accomplished and busy with the world of notions which we have constructed around. therefore, can we question whether modernism existed as its own cultural period or whether it might better be understood as a continuation of what came before. To what extent can we tie culture and art to the political and social history that accompanies them? How can we best understand the relation between radical changes in the place of women, in the role of sexuality, of community, tradition, and democracy on one hand, and the developments in literature, film, and other art forms on the other? But we must not disguise from ourselves that in this critical phase of global deculturization and dehumanization, of confronting outer liberation and change, we should aim not at a radical disruption of Modernism as such but reinvigorating the synthesis of an intellectual climate with all its possibilities and difficulties of adaptations.

Isn't it wonderful to see that the age of materialistic science is expanding in favor of a new science of consciousness, where India exhibits such a strong relationship between relativism and cosmic horizon which spans beyond time, space and matter. "Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises" (Tagore 23) As when in the *Bhagavadgita*, Arjuna asks Krsna, "Who are you?" Krsna replies, "I am the field and am also the knower of the field."

Works cited:

Bhagavad Gita .Chapter 11: The Yoga of the Universal Form: 32

Baudelaire, Charles "The Painter of Modern Life," originally published as "Le peinture de la vie moderne" in the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro* I, 1863

Durant, Will. "Our Oriental Heritage" Vol 1, Story of our Civilisation. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954: 633

Danino, Michael. "Effects of Colonization on Indian Thought" Michael Danino Homepage. : 10th Oct, 1999

Kak, Subhas . "Savanas Astronomy" in Indian Journal of Science, Vol 33, 1998: 31-36

The Astronomical code of the Rg Veda. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2000: Chapter VI

Man , Paul de . "Literary History and Literary Modernity," lecture, *Blindness and Insight*, 1971

Sri Aurobindo. India's Rebirth. Mysore: Mira Aditi, 2000 (3rd ed): 139

. "The National value of art" in "Karmoyogin ," India's Rebirth. Mysore: Mira Aditi, 2000 (3rd ed): 65

Said, Edward . Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient . Penguin, 1995.

Swami Vivekananda. Lectures from Colombo to Almora. Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1992 : 105

Shankar, Pt. Ravi. "Saraswati Vandana Protest" The Hindustan Times, Calcutta, February 14, 1999

Tagore, Rabindranath. Crisis in Civilization. Calcutta: Viswa Bharati, 1988: 22-23

The Center of Indian Culture . Calcutta: Viswa Bharati, 1988: 31-34