

ENLIGHTENMENT - INDIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE EUROPEAN IDEA

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**“When you hear about the Self,
meditate upon the Self,
and finally realize the Self,
you come to understand everything in life.”**

- *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5*

To go into the query of Enlightenment in India, it is interesting to get acquainted with the most recent concept of *Enlightenment* as described by the pioneer of Art of Living His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar - Here are some excerpts from his speeches delivered from time to time: *His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar* is a spiritual master of extraordinary simplicity, wisdom and unconditional love. In his lecture Enlightenment on 21st May 1996 Sri Sri Ravi Shankar said *Enlightenment is beyond seasons -like an evergreen coconut tree that yields its fruit through out the year.* As a boy resplendent with radiance, he was recognized by the enlightened saints of the time as crowned with the divine. His way of imparting knowledge to masses in simple ways is unique. One experiences the depth of words that flow from his mouth to unfold the mysteries the mind cannot understand. Enlightenment is like a joke! It's like a fish searching for the ocean. Once upon a time, there was a congregation of fishes which got together to discuss who had seen the ocean. None of them could actually say they had seen the ocean. Then, one fish said, "I think my great-grandfather had seen the ocean!" A second fish said, "Yes, yes. I also heard about this." A third fish said, "Yes, certainly, his great-grandfather had seen the ocean." So they built a huge temple and made a statue of the great-grand father of that particular fish. They said, "He had seen the ocean. He had been connected with the ocean."

An effort to understand Indian views on Enlightenment, it would be interesting to see how Meera Nanda examines in an essay available in Internet entitled *>How modern are we? Cultural Contradictions of India's Modernity < the intellectual sources of the cultural contradictions of India's modernity. Rather than bring religion under the limits of scientific reason, India has witnessed a steady co-option of science into the spirit-based cosmology and epistemology of "the Vedas.* The history, the logic and social consequences of this counter-Enlightenment are examined.

Meera Nanda says in an essay available in Internet entitled *>How modern are we? Cultural Contradictions of India's Modernity <* that the transformation of reason brought about by the scientific revolution that so impressed Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers holds the key to the fulfillment of the programme of disenchantment and secularization everywhere. Once we understand the transformation of reason that the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment set in motion, we will be in a better position to understand why modernity in India has this feel of incompleteness, superficiality and even schizophrenia. Modern India has embraced the end products of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment in the west - namely, Modern technology and a liberal-secular framework of laws encoded in the Constitution. But it has done so without challenging the cultural authority of the supernatural and mystical world view derived from the idealistic Strands of Hinduism. If anything, from its very beginning in the Bengal renaissance, India's project of modernity has evolved within a uniquely Indian inclusive style of counter- Enlightenment. Since independence, India has created an impressive workforce of scientists and engineers, many of them doing fairly advanced science which meets the standards of excellence in the best laboratories in the rest of the world. There are, of course, many complex social and economic reasons why child marriages still persist in India in significant numbers. The literary and cultural movement *Aufklärung* in German began around 1650 and ended around 1800. It differed from the enlightenment movements in other parts of Europe. There was neither any friction in Germany between the nobility and middle class; nor was it characterized by religious conflict. The movement still caused cultural and national unity, as well as greater freedom of the press and an enhanced judicial system. The German Enlightenment helped to develop German philosophy primarily differing from French philosophy in that Germans rejected empiricism and embraced mysticism. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Immanuel Kant are the main personalities of the German Enlightenment. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was a mathematician, who invented calculus along with Newton. He brought up the idea that the universe was a manifestation of a perfect *God*. According to Leibniz

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the whole universe consisted of spiritual atoms, or monads, which influenced the way people, saw the world. His ideas, which focused on metaphysics, helped develop the mysticism associated with the German Enlightenment. Leibniz's work formed the basis for the philosophies later developed by Kant. Immanuel Kant explained in his book *Critique of Pure Reason* that every human being perceives the world on the basis of the inborn raw or transcendental experiences. For Kant the mind gave laws to nature and not the laws of nature governed the mind. Contrary to the French Enlightenment he emphasized skepticism and rejected empirical evidence as touted in during the German Enlightenment. One of the most important of these was the call to do away with the prejudices towards religious minorities was the most important feature. Eighteenth-century European attitude towards non-Christians is reflected in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise* during the *German Enlightenment*.

Lessing used the literary device of hidden identity in *Nathan the Wise* to challenge social barriers, but instead of questioning barriers based on class, as was more common at the time, taking up issues based on religion. By showing genuine respect for other creeds, Lessing went a step further than the majority of Enlightenment writers, who merely advocated religious tolerance. Lessing's uniqueness of his approach to religious diversity is to be seen in *Nathan the Wise*.

New systems of logical analysis helped facilitate the future for the religion in the eighteenth century through a new faith in reason "science". Philosophers like Christian Wolff (1679-1754) changed systems of formal logic into metaphysics. Wolff's most important writings was *Vernünftige Gedanken von dem Gebrauche der Theile* (1724), a work on physiology which reflects his comprehensive view of philosophy as embracing all fields of knowledge. The most powerful critique of the Enlightenment derives from its emphasis on the domination over nature. The ecological movement has opened the eyes of the world. Technology cannot be identified with the supremacy of Ecology. Ecology offers new possibilities for linking the efforts of reason with the creation of a safer, better, and more beautiful world. No major representative of the Enlightenment was an advocate of slavery and, in fact, modern racist philosophy begins with the reaction against its principles. Many Enlightenment figures were, of course, personally anti-Semitic and sexist and "Eurocentric." "Voltaire and most of his mends were even supporters of "enlightened despotism." But to claim that their milieu and concerns were really no different than others is simply to remain stuck in Hegel's night where all cows are black. The honest

and genuine striving for truth becomes more important than its possession and nowhere does this receive more eloquent articulation than in the famous words of Lessing: "if God held the truth in his right hand and in his clenched left fist the quest for it, along with all my future errors, and then told me to choose, I should point to the left and humbly say: >Father give! The pure truth belongs to You alone.<"

Is enlightenment really possible for the average person? The answer is "Yes, a big YES." Enlightenment is very possible for the ordinary individual. Actually, it is easier than for someone who thinks that they are special. You see, when someone thinks they are special, their ego becomes involved. "I am a great teacher or I am a great writer," that is only ego. The ego wants to be special and this may cause someone to get stuck for a long time. Whenever someone is ordinary, simple, Innocent and natural that is enlightenment. Enlightenment is your very nature. It is in you already, as seed form. When you drop all the tensions and hang-ups and become natural, then it is right in your hand. We simply need to let go of the old patterns that are in the mind, just drop them. Then you see that something in you flowers and dawns. It is so beautiful. What is the true meaning of life? Enlightenment is a rare combination of innocence and intelligence, with words to express and, at the same time, being very silent in that state, the mind is fully in the present moment. Whatever is necessary is revealed to you in such a natural and spontaneous way. You just sit and the song flows through you. Everything Vedic is "scientific" and every "science" known to human kind only affirms the wisdom of the Vedas. Indeed, claims of the "innate" scientific temper of the Vedas occupy a place of pride in the Hindutva assertions of Hindu superiority over Islam and Christianity, which are declared to be merely faith-based "creeds." Science, "vedically" interpreted, is feeding into Hindu chauvinism.

That "the Vedas" are conflated with science as we know it today will hardly come as news to anyone who knows anything about India. This is routine business going on since the very introduction of modern science and technology in India, dating back to the 18th century. Most Indians pause to think about this streak of scientism in Modern Hinduism, just about as much as fish pause to reflect upon the water they live in - which is not much at all. It has become a part of the commonsense of Modern, science-educated, English-speaking Indians to treat the teachings of popular gurus, yogis and swamis as vaguely "scientific," and therefore Modern. Indian scientists, for the most part, have not challenged the religious uses of science: they tend to keep their laboratory lives and their personal

lives in separate water-tight compartments. Our public intellectuals and social critics, meanwhile, have been more exercised about the real and imagined scientism of the Modern Indian state, than about the scientism that pervades Modern Hinduism. As Stephen Bronner writes in his spirited new book, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, nearly all aspects of modern life, especially “the ideals of personal autonomy, tolerance, secularism and reason, developed against the backdrop of Enlightenment’s protest against the exercise of arbitrary power, the force of custom and ingrained prejudice [that] justified social misery”. On this reading, it was the Enlightenment that made real the ideals of modernity that were only latent in the Renaissance, the Reformation and the scientific revolution. Enlightenment, then, is considered by many intellectual historians as the true beginning of modernity.

While the philosophers of the Enlightenment exhorted their fellow citizens to live by the light of reason, they were simultaneously redefining reason by setting limits on what can legitimately be known, given the kind of sensory apparatus and reasoning powers human beings are endowed with. The philosophers and architects of the age of reason, from Locke and Hume in England; to Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu in France; Kant, Lessing and later Marx in Germany; and Jefferson, Paine and Franklin in the US, were impressed by the success of the scientific revolution, especially the disciplined empiricism of Newton. His famous laws of force and universal gravitation emerged out of patient and careful observation of comets, planets, objects in motion and transmission of light. Newton, in other words, derived his first principles from the empirical investigation of phenomena. This, to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, was in refreshing contrast to the method of theologians and metaphysicians who started with infallible, divine revelations and proceeded to deduce the knowledge of physical phenomena from them. They recognized full well that Newton’s observations themselves required metaphysical grounding - that is, a belief in the existence of order created by god. But what they found remarkable was that Newton used this metaphysical belief as a springboard for empirical examination, rather than as an a priori truth to explain material phenomena. Newton’s method became the paradigm of reason for the Age of Enlightenment. The philosophers denied - most strenuously - that it was possible to make any factual claims about the world based upon “pure reason” by which they meant Gnostic intuition, mysticism, “direct realization” or revelation, that is, any means of knowing which cannot be validated by sensory experience. Only those objects in the “noumenal world” (to use Kant’s vocabulary) that cor-

respond to human categories of space, time and causality can possibly become objects of our experience, and human knowledge can only extend to these objects. We have no possible way of knowing the objects of the “noumenal world” (to use Kant’s vocabulary again), the things-in-themselves that lie outside our mental categories of space, time and causality. This meant that supra-sensible entities like god, absolute consciousness, soul, vital spirit, etc, which lack extension in space and time forever lie outside human abilities to know them. The question before all reactionary modernists is how to use the technological products of Modern science, while rejecting its world view and its norms of reason. The solution has been to remove scientific reason from the world view of the Enlightenment, a world view of reason, intellect, internationalism, materialism and redefine it in the jargon of authenticity, community, and heritage. The claims of science and modernity are not rejected out of hand, but “only” translated into an ethno-scientific vocabulary.

Universalism of science is not denied in favour of anything goes kind of relativism, but Modern science is deemed to be only one of the many other equally universalisable ways knowing. The importance of subjecting beliefs to experience and evidence is not denied, but what constitutes evidence and experience is made relative to the metaphysical categories of the rest of the culture. The saffronisation of history, including the history of science that we experienced under the reign of the Sangh Parivar was a political expression of this long-standing conflation of the Vedas with Modern science. Like other reactionary modernists before them, neo-Hindu philosophers seem to accept the challenge of the Enlightenment. They accept that with the success of the scientific revolution, as Radhakrishnan put it in his Hindu View of Life, “the centre of gravity in religion has shifted from authority to reason”. But - and here is the rub - they define the non-sensory, intuitive or mystical experience, the so-called “pure reason”, to be actually referring to real, causal entities and/or energies which can be directly “seen”, or “heard” by altering your consciousness through yoga: mystical insight is interpreted as an empirical experience of natural order. They argued that what the yogis experienced “in here” in their minds actually corresponded with realities “out there,” and by experimenting with their inner selves, Vedic adepts can come to know and control external reality. Indeed, neo-Hindu and Hindutva writings are replete with references to the Vedas as describing empirical facts and law of nature that were actually “seen” and “heard” by the mythic authors of the Vedas through the process of yogic meditation alone.

In other words, while neo-Hindu philosophers accepted the Kantian emphasis on using “one’s own reason” and not the authority of priests and holy books, they rejected the limit the empiricists had put on the powers of reason. The empiricist tradition that flowered during the Enlightenment had steadfastly denied that one can make any substantive claims about reality based upon “pure” or non-sensory reason alone. Neo-Hindu philosophers insisted that within the holistic world view of Vedanta, in which consciousness permeates all matter, non-sensory, meditative knowledge of one’s inner self can give you insights about the ultimate reality of the material world. While the Enlightenment drew a line between sensory and non-sensory perception, neo-Hindus rejected this line and insisted that mystical experience constituted a valid empirical experience.

How was this interpretation of mysticism as providing valid empirical knowledge defended? Here we find striking similarities with the post Modern theories of all knowledge - including Modern science - as being paradigm-bound, a construct of specific metaphysical assumptions, which serve the interests of power over nature and society. Neo-Hindu thinkers have asserted that the Kantian restriction on sensory knowledge as the only legitimate source of knowledge is a construct of the dualist world view of Abrahamic or “Semitic monotheistic” religions in which god/divine consciousness is separated from brute matter. Because the Hindu tradition does not separate matter from spirit but considers all matter - living and non-living - as the embodiment of “vital energy” (‘prana’) or consciousness (‘brahman’), it is considered perfectly legitimate within the Hindu tradition to treat mystical “realization” of the spirit in our own selves to correspond to the spirit, or essence, of the rest of the universe. And, Vedic science apologists go on to insist that because a “reduction is f” materialist- empiricism is an aberration of the Abrahamic faiths, anyone who accepts its validity suffers from “mental colonization” and trying to semitise Hindu dharma. This defence of mystical empiricism, unfortunately, got a big boost from the idealistic interpretations of quantum mechanics popularized by Fritjof Capra, Mahesh Yogi, Deepak Chopra and Amit Goswami in recent years.

So, how Modern are we, really? If modernity means a differentiation and separation between science and religion, between sensory experience and the mystical experience of metaphysical “realities”, we in India have a long way to go. Rather than challenge the authority of private mystical experiences of our “holy” men and women with the evidence and logic that is available to ordinary men and women in everyday walks of life, we have dignified mystagogy with

the name of “holistic science.” We have been playing word games, rationalising and pretending we-know-it-all while, in fact, we do not.

What is so terribly wrong with the scientism of neo-Hindu gurus, intellectuals and believers? By presenting ancient wisdom in scientific terms, are they not encouraging Indians to study science and develop a scientific temper? By refusing to separate consciousness from matter, are they not avoiding the sterile materialism of the west? Besides, why crusade against superstitions anyway? Isn’t it true that irrationality can coexist with good science as, say, in America, the world’s undisputed leader in science? Others advise that as long as you have secular institutions and laws in place, popular superstitions are not worth worrying about. Still others insist that rather than fight “mere” ideas in people’s heads, we should fight for a socially just society: secularization, they say, will naturally follow the lead of political and economic reforms.

It is sometimes argued that rationalization and secularization of world views will follow, pretty much on their own, in the wake of technological and economic modernization, and therefore, no special engagement with the content of people’s beliefs is needed. Indeed, even well-meaning secularists are weary of criticizing religious beliefs as elitist and disrespectful of ordinary people. But there is no evidence that “modernization of infrastructure and economic relations alone, or by itself, can bring about a secularization of beliefs. Beliefs, especially those beliefs that answer our existential questions regarding death and birth, misfortune and good fortune, right and wrong, have a life of their own. Beliefs don’t simply lie down and die when the social context changes: instead, they mutate, and adapt to the new social context. The planetary configuration of Akshay Tritiya, to take an example cited above, did not cease to be auspicious for Modern Indians, many of whom have grown rich on jobs in the high technology and scientific research and development. Rather, it is mutating from a day that was considered auspicious for child marriages into a day that is auspicious for conspicuous consumption of gold jewellery. But the underlying idea that stars can confer auspiciousness on human actions remains intact. India today is witnessing a resurgence of many old superstitions and rituals - couched in pseudo-scientific language to appeal to Modern sensibilities. Economic and technological modernization, then, is no guarantee of a secular culture. The creation of a secular culture requires active engagement with the religious common sense of the people.

It is also true, as some scientist friends have suggested, that good science can exist and even thrive in otherwise superstitious societies. It is true that Mod-

ern science has become relatively autonomous of the larger culture. It has developed a naturalistic metaphysics and an empiricist methodology of its own which is often at odds with how the workings of nature are interpreted in the rest of the culture. It is possible for scientists trained in the culture of their own arcane specialization to do great science, without ever having to engage with the religious interpretations of nature that prevail outside the walls of the lab. The two cultures simply don't seem to talk the same language, even though they, in fact, often offer competing explanations for the same phenomena (e.g., Darwin's evolution by natural selection, and "spiritual evolution" as propagated by "integral yoga" of Sri Aurobindo and his followers, or the "Vedic creationism" through the agency of karma and rebirth, as propounded by the followers of Krishna Consciousness).

But, while science can thrive in otherwise irrational societies, there is a huge price to pay for the gap. It is not a coincidence, in my opinion, that a majority of Americans who believe in divine creation over Darwinian evolution should have believed the Bush administration's completely bogus case linking Iraq with terrorism: in both cases, there is a faith-based, rather than evidence-driven, reasoning at work. In both societies, there is a need for scientists to stand up for critical reasoning and sound evidence both inside and outside the laboratory. The need to speak up for, defend and advocate scientific temper is far greater in India where superstitions and pseudo-sciences have a far deeper hold on the popular psyche and where they often make a difference between life and death, between dignity and indignity of caste and other hierarchies. To conclude, Indian modernity will remain incomplete and schizophrenic until the time it is animated by the spirit of critical reasoning. Kant's motto: *sapere aude!* "Have courage to use your own reason!" remains as vital for India today as it was in his own time. Special pleas to spiritualize nature and science in the name of Vedic holism may make us feel superior over other faiths and cultures, but it will not help us shed our own prejudices and superstitions.

Very interestingly we get confronted with several studies on Indian Enlightenment, which deal more with spirituality.

Many people, through various routes, have experienced what have become known as altered states of consciousness. By "altered" what is meant is that the way experience is both taken in and framed is different from one's ordinary day-to-day experience. The two main routes of alteration (perhaps each as old as humanity) are through substances (chemicals in plants or synthetics) and practices that loosen up the way

the mind structures experience. Altered states can also occur through near-death experiences, great stress, or spontaneously without any known cause.

One of the most life-changing of these altered states is what is called the mystical experience, the essence of which is the actual experiencing of an underlying unity within all existence. We call this the Oneness experience. While this experience is occurring, it feels beyond words and concepts, beyond time, beyond all polarities (including life and death), and beyond even the feeling of there being an experimenter who is having the experience. The infusion of more easily accessed mysticism into Western culture began in the sixties. For still unknown reasons, powerful psychedelic drugs bypass the ordinary ways the human brain integrates, making available experiences that previously could only be read about in esoteric books. Many leaders in the then-budding human potential movement and young aspirants in the arts, humanities, and sciences had their worldviews chemically jolted. Eastern spiritual structures offered routes of explaining and integrating these experiences in a way Western ones simply could not. Some experimenters loudly and publicly extolled their newfound insights, while many others more quietly incorporated them into their viewpoints. Eastern spiritual teachers either came on their own or were brought to the West to plow this fertile ground. The actual mystical experience along with the interpretations of Eastern cosmologies became dual influences on psychology, music, art, and fashion. This even shifted the perspectives of many who were not directly involved in the psychedelic culture. Mysticism was in the air.

· Being at one with the universe to the extent of having no ego or boundaries around the self. A hierarchy of value wherein the more selfless one is, the better, with the highest state being total selflessness.

The way an "enlightened" person is supposed to manifest enlightenment is through being selfless and beyond any need for ego gratification. So the image of the enlightened one is of being totally giving, unconditionally compassionate and loving, and with no taint of greed, envy, lust, or competitiveness. Those who wish to be considered enlightened must present themselves as being "above it all" - beyond all the foibles of ego: beyond preference, beyond negativity, beyond fear and desire, etc. Such individuals paint a seductive picture of a state they can help others get to that is not only eternal but that can solve all the mundane problems of life.

Creating a special category called the "enlightened state" is itself a manifestation of an accumulation mentality, it becoming the ultimate goal to achieve through accumulating merit and partially enlighten-

ing experiences. One day or lifetime, one finally crosses the barrier and arrives. Then one is a perfect manifestation of the godhead - a perfect master with nowhere else to go. You work toward the goal of enlightenment and once you get it, you have it. The way the ideal is constructed makes it static and unchanging. The experience of unity feels timeless, but the concept of enlightenment turns a timeless moment into an "all the time" fixed identity that continues over time. Ironically, the identity of being enlightened attempts to crystallize in time what is experienced as timeless. Monotheism with one God on top is obviously authoritarian. The authoritarianism embedded within the Eastern ideology of Oneness is less obvious. Believing that God is everywhere and in everything makes a centralized hierarchy more difficult. The concept of enlightenment, however, does bring decentralized hierarchies, each with a master on top. This is what one sees in Eastern religion and in its Western transplants. Whereas monotheism makes the revealed Word of God sacred, Eastern religions make presumed enlightened beings sacred.

The very nature of any structure that makes one person different and superior to others not only breeds authoritarianism, but is authoritarian in its essence. Just as there is no way for humans to question a remote God, there is really no way for a non-enlightened being to question the words or actions of a presumed enlightened one. This is why gurus can get away with anything - they are judged by different standards that make whatever they do perfect by definition. The idea that someone is no longer susceptible to the corruptions of power ensures corruption will occur, promulgating self-delusion in all involved. So the concept of enlightenment precisely because it is so exalted, almost inevitably lends itself to abuse and corruption. People do have enlightening experiences and insights, but are they always a repetition of old insights that others had thousands of years ago? Is awareness a path others have trod that leads to a predictable end? The concept of enlightenment needs to be a-historical, unchanging, and infallible to support authoritarian religious hierarchies. This is the East's way of endowing someone with the last word and ultimate authority on cosmic truth.

Buddha initially excluded women from his monasteries. When pressed, he made their entry condi-

tional upon perpetual subservience to the lowliest (newest) male monks. Was this an example of unchanging wisdom? Or were some of his ideas not so enlightened, but rather a function of his place in history? His agenda to end suffering has had millennia to test it and has failed. Are people just not good enough or smart enough? Is there something wrong with people or is something wrong with the agenda? His methodology for ending suffering was tied to the concept of enlightenment, which involves renouncing both the self and self-centeredness. So as an essentially renunciate religion, Buddhism is also essentially authoritarian, with Buddha being the absolute authority on what to renounce and how to go about it. Some Modern Buddhists would bristle at calling Buddhism renunciate. They would say that through disidentifying or detaching from the illusion that there is a self, self-centeredness effortlessly leaves. We view this as their illusion. Some people may at times see more deeply into the nature of things than others. However, the idea of enlightenment as a state of finality that one reaches once and for all is a viewpoint of wisdom and spirituality that is supposedly true for all people and all times. This static view of enlightenment derives from the a-historic Oneness ideology wherein one transcends the illusion of separateness. Only separate entities can change in relation to each other. Ironically, Buddhists who assert there is nothing but change in the material world hold that spiritual realizations do not change. Denying change in the spiritual realm is basically a fundamentalist stance used to protect the sacred and tradition. But perceiving deeply is a process that is necessarily historically embedded, for each epoch has its particular illusions that must be pierced. Significantly, a less common meaning of an enlightening experience is penetrating the veils of illusion. We see the disillusionment necessary for this age as going beyond the polarizations of either/or moral frameworks, which are the source of most distortions and illusions. Any ideology that presents static ideals of perfection and attainment necessarily creates its own illusions. This anti-evolutionary view of awareness and wisdom not only blocks further inquiry, but it limits the possibility of constructing new frameworks that can free people to be truly more aware.

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