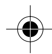

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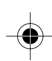

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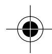

Swami Vivekananda and the Shaping of Indian Modernity*

Makarand R. Paranjape

This paper comprises of three parts. In the first, I offer some theoretical considerations on modernity; in the second, I shift the focus to India in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, to the time of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, and the emergence of Indian modernity; finally, in the third section, I discuss more specifically Vivekananda's contribution to this process, examining in greater detail his thoughts on two crucial themes, namely rationality and modern science.

I

The heterogeneous character of modernity renders it virtually impossible to understand or define fully. What we must content ourselves with is a series of intelligent, if fragmentary, generalizations, most of which will tend to be reductive, if not essentialist.

To me, modernity is an invention. Its invention may not be a deliberate act by an identifiable set of historical agents but more like a process set in motion over centuries. Yet it is very much an invention in the same sense that Eric Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger showed that tradition was an invention; in fact, an intriguing implication of their work is that the *difference* between tradition and modernity is itself an invention.

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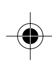
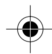


The fundamental invention that constitutes the core of modernity is that modernity frees its subjects from the hold of authority or the weight of the past; to put it more specifically, freedom is at the heart of the modern project. Yet, as Agnes Heller points out, because "modernity is founded on freedom," it, paradoxically, "has no foundation, since it emerged in and through the destruction and deconstruction of all foundations" (1). Hence, this notion that freedom is at the heart of modernity's self-construction is not without its peculiar "double bind": "freedom is entirely unfit to serve as an arché, because it is a foundation which does not found" (Ibid.). Heller calls it a ground that "opens the abyss" (Ibid.), from whose "paradoxical character of a non-founding foundation several other paradoxes follow" (3). Additionally, the deeper inconsistency at the heart of modernity is that its "foundational" value, freedom, is enframed "with the idea of the limit" (Heller 5). Freedom is limited in its inability to surrender itself to authority, even if the latter is informed by an emancipatory orientation; freedom, thus, is not free to give itself up. Sartre phrased this irony in his own inimitable way in *Being and Nothingness*: man is "condemned to be free" (439). Here, condemned may be read as "bound". To be bound or condemned to be free is not to be absolutely free. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer go even farther when they assert that the "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (4).

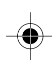
Such a paradox may be discovered in another of modernity's non-foundational foundations, namely rationality. One of the most influential theories of modernity is Max Weber's idea of the progressive rationalization of the world. But Weber's rationalization thesis also conceals the paradox that the disenchantment brought about by the substitution of religion by science also produces a value-fragmentation because science, unlike religion, has neither a transcendental purpose nor a soteriology. When the grand narratives of monotheistic religions are taken over by the logic of universal science what results is not, in Weber's words, their "peaceful dissolution" but rather "an incommensurable value-fragmentation," with a plethora of



pluralist sub-cultures, following their own "immanent logic": "The slow death of God has reached its apogee in the return of gods and demons" who, as Weber predicted, "strive to gain power over our lives and again ... resume their eternal struggle with one another" (qtd. in Kim). What religion claimed to answer and what science does not address, such metaphysical queries now become the preserve of multiple, fragmentary *petit recits* or little narratives. Thus the very disenchantment of the world that rationalization has wrought also ushers in, through violent disjunctures, a polytheistic re-enchantment enacted in a million different localities, real and virtual, the multiple "ethnoscapes" that Arjun Appadurai argued characterized cultural flows in our globalized post-condition (33). According to Appadurai, it is these multiple, fluid, irregular, "deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" that constitute the "the building blocks" of lived and "imagined worlds"—"the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe…" (33).

The rise of modern science in the West, especially its conflict with religion, was facilitated precisely because it served initially as an alternate and orderly system of value-creation. Thus Bacon was convinced that science, not religion was "the road to *true* nature", as Descartes was that it was "the road to the *true* God" (qtd. in Kim). As an early proponent of modern science in India,Vivekananda's interventions in the creation of Indian modernity are so important because, as I shall show later, he too initially welcomed it as the door not only to material power, but also to spiritual knowledge. But as Weber claimed and Sung Ho Kim paraphrases, modern science is nevertheless:

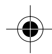
> a deeply nihilistic enterprise in which any scientific achievement worthy of the name *must* 'ask to be surpassed and made obsolete' in a process 'that is in principle *ad infinitum*,' at which point, 'we come to the *problem of the meaning* of science.' (Kim)



Consequently, beyond the Popperian logic of falsifiability are deeper metaphysical and eschatological issues on which science must remain silent and neutral. They are, as noted evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould claimed, "nonoverlapping magisteria" or NOMA, each legitimate in its own domain, but separate from one another:

> The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for starters, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the arch cliches, we get the age of rocks, and religion retains the rock of ages; we study how the heavens go, and they determine how to go to heaven. (594)

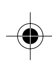
Gould postulated a no man's land between the two magisteria but he also acknowledged that there could be areas of inquiry which did not have a clear mandate from either side. Gould's notion of respectful, even loving concord between the two magisteria was hailed by many in the science-religion debates as a major step forward until critics pointed to internal philosophical contradictions and uncertainties in his arguments, and many leading scientists denounced it as a sop to anti-scientific irrationalism and religious fundamentalism. By the end of his short life, Vivekananda too, coming up against the difficulties in reconciling modern science and Vedanta in one unified framework, had to temper his early enthusiasm for the former as the final solution to the objections raised against the latter. Thus in India too, as in the West, modern science, after having "relentlessly deconstructed other sources of value-creation," must inevitably face the prospect of "its own meaning … dissipated beyond repair" (Kim). That is why, "Weber's rationalization thesis concludes with two strikingly dissimilar prophecies — one is the imminent iron cage of bureaucratic petrification and the other, the Hellenistic pluralism of warring deities" (Ibid.). The



unprecedented freedom that modernity affords results in a paradoxical loss of moral or metaphysical conviction. The "permeation of objective, instrumental rationality" also causes a "purposeless agitation of subjective values" (Kim). For Weber, "sensualists without heart" and "specialists without spirit" were two sides of same coin that was the "disempowerment of the modern self" (Ibid.). The "bureaucratic 'iron cage,'"similarly, wrought by rationalization, was also accompanied by the "'polytheism' of value-fragmentation" (Ibid.). Perhaps, this is what accounts for the widespread dominance of fantasy at all levels of popular literature and culture. Incidentally, a lot of theorists argue that the rise of imaginative/fantastic fictions in the last century or so marks an attempt to "re-enchant" the world.[1]

Taking Weber's arguments forward, Adorno and Horkheimer famously argue that the rationality that is so self-constitutively at the heart of modernity's self-apprehension is not free of irrationality and myth: "All human expression, indeed culture itself is stripped of any responsibility to thought and transformed into the neutralized element of the all-embracing rationality of an economic system long since grown irrational" (72). Sketching the prehistory of anti-Semitism, Adorno and Horkheimer show how its "irrationalism" derives from the nature of the dominant reason and of the world corresponding to its image (xix). The result is catastrophic: "The not merely theoretical but practical tendency toward self-destruction has been inherent in rationality from the first, not only in the present phase when it is emerging nakedly" (xix). Modernity's rationality can be terribly irrational, as in the killing factories of the Holocaust: "The irrationality of the unresisting and eager adaptation to reality becomes, for the individual, more reasonable than reason" (169). Heller sums up rather brilliantly: "If anything grants immortality to moderns, it is the limited, not the unlimited" and "modernity is characterised by the fact that things do not fit into one another" (7).

[1] See, for instance, Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, or Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," or "Instauration Fantasy," (fantasies of large-scale renewal and restoration) in *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Clute and Grant). China Mieville calls fantasy the "default cultural vernacular" (40) of our times.



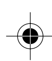
This not fitting in is amply evident in one of the recurring questions concerning the nature of modernity. Is it single or multiple? After the *Daedalus* special issue on "Multiple Modernities" (2000), the latter term has been widely circulated. In fact, in his Tanner Lectures on Human Values on *Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere* delivered at Stanford University in 1992 eight years earlier than the publication of this issue, noted Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor had already outlined two ways of regarding modernity, "cultural" and "acultural" (205). In the interest of marking the "plurality of human cultures" (Ibid.), Taylor, it would appear, favoured the cultural approach, according to which modernity takes multiple forms depending on the conditions and contingencies under which various societies transform themselves. Such differences are ignored by the predominantly "acultural" accounts of the rise of modernity:

> The belief that modernity comes from one single universally applicable operation imposes a falsely uniform pattern on the multiple encounters of non-western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialization.

And:

> exclusive reliance on an acultural theory unfits us for what is perhaps the most important task of social sciences in our day: understanding the full gamut of alternative modernities which are in the making in different parts of the world. It locks us into an ethnocentric prison, condemned to project our own forms onto everyone else, and blissfully unaware of what we are doing.
>
> (215)

But, as Taylor reminds us, the crucial question here is one of identity: without some core features, how can we speak even of multiple modernities? For his purposes, Taylor identifies this



"central feature" (221) of modern societies as the "public sphere," a "common space" in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these. (220).

It is precisely in the formation of such a public sphere in India, as I hope to show later, that Vivekananda played a crucial role.

Before I end this section, I wish to revert briefly to the idea of the invention of modernity. Though modernity required "a historically unique constellation of cultural values and social institutions" (Kim) to arise, it was also cobbled together, at an abstract and ideological level, by a revival, retooling, and redeployment of selective elements from the past. Once some of these had served their purpose they could be discarded. For example, occult, alchemical, and hermetical traditions were enormously useful during the early rise of modern science not only as a source of hidden knowledge and ideas, which needed to be tested empirically, but also as a counter to the dogmas of the established church and religious authority. Later, once their purpose was served, these very traditions could be discarded, after being denounced as irrational and superstitious. When religious authority was the key obstacle to the growth of both science and capitalism, classical paganism and neo-classical humanism could serve as an aid to the one as the protestant revolution leading to the protestant ethic could abet the other. Arguably, then, Europe could not have modernized without the renaissance and the Enlightenment. In the former, the discovery of classical secular traditions played a vital role as in the latter, the discovery of Oriental knowledge, arguably, did. What we call Western modernity, in other words, did not emerge *sui generis* but was quickened and fertilized by influences and inputs from elsewhere.

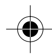
Some of the key elements or themes of modernity, which I

have culled and modified for my own purposes,[2] may be summed up as follows:

1) Modernity as a conscious rejection of the past: This aspect of modernity, in tune with its etymological meaning, emphasizes its break with tradition. As Europe gradually moved away from its religious orientation with the Renaissance, it began quite consciously to identify itself with modernity. The Middle Ages, left behind, were seen as static, empty, and devalued. The true ancestors of "modern," post-renaissance Europeans were thus considered to be like the ancient Greeks and Romans. As Heidegger observed, "The essence of modernity can be seen in humanity's freeing itself from the bonds of the Middle Ages". It implie the "emancipation of man in which he frees himself from obligation to Christian revelational truth and Church doctrine to a legislating for himself that takes its stand upon itself" (148). But the compulsive modernizing drive did not end with the Renaissance. The French revolution also set into motion a new time, based on the rejection of the "*ancien régime*". With modernism, art itself came to be measured by continuous and ceaseless innovation, thus establishing an ever inventive *avant garde* but eventually leading to fatigue and triviality. In the process Europe set itself up as the inevitable future of other parts of the world, thus "provincializing" them to its onward march of progress.

2) The rise of science: After the renaissance, the rejection of authority, and the use of both empiricism and rationalism resulted in the birth of modern science based on experimentation and the observation of nature. This science also gave rise to technology which helped modify nature and produce real changes in the material world. These changes, especially those in navigation, ship-building, metallurgy, and weaponry led to the rapid expansion of Europe after the fifteenth century; a prelude to nearly

[2] There is actually an inter-university doctoral program on "Europe and the Invention of Modernity" where some of these themes become topics of study and research. See http://www.europeandoctoralprogramme.com/curricula/europa-modern.php



five centuries of conquest, plunder, genocide, colonialism, and world domination. This outbound exploration and expansion also helped define Europe's uniqueness and superiority vis-à-vis other cultures and peoples, thereby also institutionalizing racism, bio-politics, cultural imposition, and the Europeanization of the world through settlement, hybridity, slavery, indenture, mass migration, and other forms of the exchange of populations.

3) The modern state: In Europe itself, the withering of old empires gave rise to new political formations such as nations, which in turn influenced the rise of the liberal state. This state, essentially, was premised not on notions such as the divine rights of kings, nor on conquests, but on some idea or other of social contract. The Age of Revolutions in the Atlantic territories made the gradual ascent of democracy inevitable. The universalization of democracy, however, met with resistance from various forms of totalitarian regimes that also arose in modern times. These included military dictatorships on the right and Communist dictatorships on the left. In either case, the centrality of the state system to modernity was not challenged until very recently, with developments such as the European union.

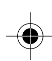
4) The relentless march of capital: After the Industrial Revolution, which was responsible for the creation of modern science and technology on the one hand, and the drawing of surplus resources from colonialism and their investment in the metropolis on the other, capitalism gradually became the dominant economic system during modernity. For little over half a century, however, it encountered a formidable adversary in socialism, but that threat was neutralized not only by the determination of Western powers to oppose the latter but also by the resilience of capitalism itself. Ultimately, the more wealthy and productive nations could outflank and outmanoeuvre their economically challenged socialist counterparts.

Similarly, when it comes to India, Indian modernity, too, is impacted by all these aspects. In addition, one of its peculiarities is that it is Janus-faced. As Madhuri Santhanam Sondhi observes in her essay on Gandhi and Mallik, "Gazing into the future with

Janus, therefore, and scanning the flow of past events for constant indices, one may have one's vision enlarged by various pasts and various futures" (84). More specifically, Indian modernity is Janus-faced both chronologically and spatially because it is constituted by elements drawn from classical Indian traditions and from the contemporary West; it looks both backwards and forwards at the same time and also both towards the East and the West. To complete the metaphor, we might add that it looks both inward and outward at the same time. Those who are unable to grasp and reconcile this dual nature of Indian modernity at once veer to one or the other extreme of either succumbing totally to the lure of the West or rejecting the West in the hope of asserting some untainted Indian identity. Indian modernity, then, is a peculiarly schizoid formation which resists two monisms, Indic or Western, respectively, to arrive at its own unresolved and ambivalent disjuncture.

Without a rediscovery of its "glorious" past, which was one of the by-products of colonialism, Indians would not have had the self-confidence to stake their claim to modernity. But because they were colonized, Indians also never quite overcame their sense of inferiority to the West, a trait that still persists to this day, especially in the domain of intellectual efforts and knowledge-production. Consequently, the finest product of Indian modernity, as I have argued extensively elsewhere, was the nation-state.[3] Though truncated and partitioned, this entity had the best chance of preserving the civilizational heritage of India, of staving off foreign invaders, and of allowing the Indian people to express their natural energies and talents in a somewhat just social order. If the Indian nation is the embodiment of India's tryst with modernity, it also bears all of India's contradictions when it comes to our uneasy relationship with it. Indians are not anti-modern, nor are they pro-modern; they are uneasily, unusually, and alternatively modern—or as, I have argued in *Altered Destinations,* radically *non*-modern. In other words, our

[3] See *Altered Destinations: Self, Society, and Nation in India* and *Making India; Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English Authority.*



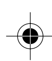
modernity is a species of alter- or non-modernity; that is why, even as we keep speaking of Indian modernity, we must bear in mind its radical alterity.

II

We have already observed that like European modernity, Indian modernity was also riddled with contradictions and paradoxes. Hinduism, not yet quite an "ism" nor fully reformed to survive in the new age, itself was under siege. Faced with the criticism of Christian missionaries on the one hand and the dismissive contempt of post-Macaulay secular "English education" on the other, it was hard-put to justify its existence. Some, such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, arguably the first modern poet of India, even compared it to a rotten tree trunk, fit only to be cut down. Middle-class Hindus were faced with two conversions to measure up: a religious conversion as several leading Bengalis of the period, including Madhusudan, resorted to, or a more widespread and irreversible secular conversion to modernity that most others committed themselves to. Yet, neither was without its attendant risks or discontents. Converted Indians somehow felt inferior, as if they were hollow or mimic men. What was the way out? A reformed, congregational, monotheistic version of Hinduism as the Brahmos practiced? Atheism? Or, of course, conversion or deracination?

Such a narrative sets the stage for the messianic appearance of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1888) upon the scene. As Professor Amiya P. Sen puts it, to his followers and believers,

> Ramakrishna signalled the humbling of the West and all that was Western: 'This great intellect never learnt even to write his own name but the most brilliant graduates of our university found in him an intellectual giant', observed Vivekananda (CWV 3: 268). A friend of Vivekananda, Nagendranath Gupta (1861-1940), argued that it was not at all fortuitous that the saint should prefer to have as his disciples 'English educated

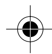


> men of good families' and not passing sadhus or saints with whom he otherwise freely associated. (Sen 168)

One might even argue that Ramakrishna offered an alternative to the *bhadraloks* who were suffocating under the disenchantment imposed by colonial reason and modernity. To these, Ramakrishna became an escape, a refuge. This, at any rate, is how Samir Dayal sees him:

> In the late 1870s and the early 1880s, colonial Bengal was on the cusp of great social change.Western education and its rationalist values and print culture had permeated everylevel of colonial middle-class life. … But not everyone welcomed change … and for some groups the period was the sad twilight of a familiar old order. If there was a rising middle-class elite, there was also a disappointed middle-class minority, caught somewhere between the Indian elite groups and the true subalterns. It was from within this disappointed middle class that Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-88), a (religious) ecstatic and would-be social reformer, emerged to offer an unlikely but compelling alternative for subaltern self-assertion, and a modest form of resistance.(75)

Ramakrishna, in other words, inaugurated a unique performative which though "couched … quite self-consciously in a symbolic frame sanctioned within the community" nevertheless offered an alternative to the dominant "discourse of modernity, with all its appurtenances of progress, education, science, emancipation, and epistemology" (Ibid.). But, according to Dayal, that very modernity to which Ramakrishna offered a countervailing pull, was "fast also becoming the rallying cry of the rising cadre who were prominent in the Freedom Movement … and who would ultimately replace the British by inheriting the reins of the hegemonic public discourse, as Indian society made the transition to Independence" (Ibid.). Therefore, Ramakrishna's "teachings and resistant performative" to Dayal, "comprise" not so much "a fully developed blueprint for a alternative modernity … but … a



minor, oppositional discursive space, between the discourse of tradition and the universalizing discourse of modernity" (Dayal 75).

It seems to me that Dayal's formulations are more persuasive than the characterization of Ramakrishna by some of his critics as "a captive of a middle-class discourse in colonial Calcutta" (Sen 166). Tracing this line of thought from Walter G Neevel, Jr., Sen critiques how it develops in Partha Chatterjee and Sumit Sarkar. For Chatterjee, Mahendranath Gupta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* reveals more about its author and the urban middle class that he represents than it does its subject, Sri Ramakrishna (166). Ramakrishna, in other words, is an invention; like any fictional character in the newly emergent and increasingly popular genre of the novel, he is a creation of his author's imaginative depiction and deliberate narrative strategies. Similarly, Sumit Sarkar observes:

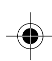
> If Ramakrishna attracted bhadralok through his 'Otherness' this was to a considerable extent an Other constructed by the bhadralok themselves. There is no direct written testimony left by the saint: we know about him only from bhadralok disciples and admirers, and the texts they composed simultaneously illuminate-and transform. (1544)

And:

> Ramakrishna, then, was an appropriated, partially bhadralok-constructed, Other with whom an urban group plagued with a sense of alienation from roots could relate without undue discomfort. (Ibid.)

For Sarkar, Ramakrishna could be appropriated so easily precisely because he posed no significant threat to the established order:

> Despite the apparent vehemence of his rejection of book-learning and activism, acceptance of

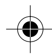


> Ramakrishna, we shall see, did not usually involve any sharp or total break with normal forms of bhadralok life and activity. These could still be carried on, but in a new way, enriched by a spirituality and inner life suited to the times, which helped to mitigate a deepening sense of anomie. (Ibid.)

In fact, his appeal lay in affording the bhadraloks a way of reaching back to their own rural and rustic past: "for through Ramakrishna the city bhadralok[s] could imagine themselves to be reaching back to lost traditional moorings, in the countryside, in simple faith conveyed through rustic language" (Ibid.). Ultimately, Sarkar is somewhat dismissive, if not condescending, about the phenomenon called Ramakrishna, who he claims stood for a non-threatening devotionalism:

> Quietistic, inward-turning bhakti, tolerant and non-proselytising, had thus been trans-formed, with conflicts but no major rupture, into a crystallised and assertive Hindu identity with activist programmes. But insurmountable contradictions—fundamentally, perhaps, the limits set to bhadralok idealism by hierarchies of caste, gender and class within a colonial situation—blocked the realisation of such a programme…. (1562).

Sarkar, like Chatterjee, does not consider religious or mystical phenomena as valid in themselves; they must and can only be reduced and understood in material, social or historical terms. In such analysis, no autonomy is granted to the subjective, inner realities, even to the experience of Samadhi or superconsciousness that Ramakrishna repeatedly and visibly demonstrated. Nor is any credence to be adduced to the recorded affect of his trances on his companions, disciples, or followers. Spiritual matters, then, must be understood in terms of their material causes or effects.



In response to such claims, Sen says:

> It appears absurdly reductionist to suggest that this class, bereft of much hope in a grossly unequal world, was primarily attracted to Ramakrishna's recurring references to the 'illusory' nature of this world and worldly relations. (167)

Similarly, Peter Heehs in *Indian Religions: A Historical Reader of Spiritual Expression and Experience* says:

> Writing as social historians of nineteenth-century Bengal, Sarkar and Chatterjee are not obliged to study the experiential sources of Ramakrishna's teachers, by granting no autonomy to his inner life, they miss out on what might have been the most important factor in his appeal to his countrymen. (27)

On the contrary, Debiprasad Bhattacharya in "The Relevance of Sri Ramakrishna for Modern Man" goes to the other extreme in maintaining that Ramakrishna's teachings went against all that the dominant culture valued. In asserting that "nothing is of the slightest consequence except for the Divine, and man's relation with the Divine," Sri Ramakrishna "can have no conceivable relevance for the modern age" (237). In preaching "pure spirituality" (238) Sri Ramakrishna is a "profoundly disturbing phenomenon" (240) because he goes against he zeitgeist of his age. He is "supremely relevant" only because he is "radically different" (240). Though we cannot be like him, even imitating or following him a bit is wonderful because "even a little dharma saves one from great catastrophe" (245-246). What makes Ramakrishna exemplary and therefore counter-modern is that there is not the "slightest discrepancy between speech and act, theory and practice" (243) in his life. Between easy appropriation and radical unassimilability is the more complex paradox of Ramakrishna, deliberately reaching out to the modern sector, as if knowing full well that that is the real target of his mission,

even as he continuously displays a healthy disregard for its materialism, secularism, and worldliness.

Whether Ramakrishna was radically different or easily assumable, the relationship between him and the Calcutta bhadraloks was complex, dynamic, and almost dialectical. If it was a relationship of attraction and repulsion between an incipient modernity and creatively reinventing tradition, then the official accounts in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition certainly reinforce such a stereotype.

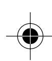
The key to the understanding of this conundrum is the relationship between Ramakrishna and his foremost disciple, Vivekananda. Much has been written on this relationship, but I shall focus only on one central aspect, which is to regard it as a paradigmatic encounter of modernity with tradition.[4] Here is Ramakrishna himself, as quoted by Gupta, on his initial meeting with Vivekananda:

> When I met Narendra for the first time, I noticed that he did not have body consciousness. I just touched his chest with my hand and he lost all external consciousness. When he returned to his normal state, he exclaimed, 'I say, what did you do to me? I have my father and mother!' This happened in Jadu Mallick's house. (Gupta, "Sri Ramakrishna")

Here, Gupta, the narrator, reports Ramakrishna's own report of Vivekananda. But in his Introduction, Gupta frames the encounter in terms of a classic face-off between mundane if modern rationality and superiorly endowed spiritual power:

> As he read in college the rationalistic Western philosophers of the nineteenth century, his boyhood

[4] A whole range of scholars including Ashis Nandy (1973), Sumit Sarkar (1992), Narsingha Sil (1993), Carl Olson (1998), and Jyotirmaya Sharma (2011) have dealt with this relationship. Raghurama Raju, in his conference paper, "Universal Self, Equality and Hierarchy in Swami Vivekananda" has attempted to critique these formulations.



> faith in God and religion was unsettled. He would not accept religion on mere faith; he wanted demonstration of God. But very soon his passionate nature discovered that mere Universal Reason was cold and bloodless. His emotional nature, dissatisfied with a mere abstraction, required a concrete support to help him in the hours of temptation. He wanted an external power, a guru, who by embodying perfection in the flesh would still the commotion of his soul. Attracted by the magnetic personality of Keshab, he joined the Brahmo Samaj and became a singer in its choir. But in the Samaj he did not find the guru who could say that he had seen God. (Gupta, "Narendra")

Gupta is already skewing his narrative away from "cold and bloodless" reason and "mere abstraction" towards something greater and bigger. The crisis of colonial reason, the somewhat paler and watered-down version of the Universal Reason of the Enlightenment, is already evident here in its full-blown form, with Sri Ramakrishna shown as the classic mind-bender that a fully awakened guru was supposed to be.

> Again, in his second visit, Gupta records how suddenly, at the touch of the Master, Narendra felt overwhelmed and saw the walls of the room and everything around him whirling and vanishing. "What are you doing to me?" he cried in terror. "I have my father and mother at home." He saw his own ego and the whole universe almost swallowed in a nameless void. (Gupta, "Narendra")

Interestingly, Narendra, who has a strong will, considers natural causes for his altered state of mind, including hypnotism, but not satisfied, returns home "more confused than ever, resolved to be henceforth on his guard before this strange man" (Ibid.).

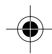
The stage is now set for Narendra's conversion by which the supremacy of the mystical, even occult, supra-rationality of

Ramakrishna is established over conventional reason. During the third visit, Narendra entirely loses consciousness:

> While he was still in that state, Sri Ramakrishna questioned him concerning his spiritual antecedents and whereabouts, his mission in this world, and the duration of his mortal life. The answers confirmed what the Master himself had known and inferred. Among other things, he came to know that Narendra was a sage who had already attained perfection, and that the day he learnt his real nature he would give up his body in yoga, by an act of will. (Gupta, "Narendra")

By now we have left the terrain of modern reason entirely, entering the mysteries of spiritual realities quite beyond our mundane, historical verities.

Ramakrishna's slipping out of historical time into mythic time is seamless. But even if there is no division or break for him, for the modern bhadralok, such a flip is only possible through a process of validation through eye-witness accounts and verifiable experience. The pre-modern, non-historical, mytho-poetic world into which Ramakrishna draws Vivekananda is thus ratified empirically, by modern, contemporary, and rational means. It is in this emphasis on actual experience that scholars like Jeffry D. Long locate the modernity of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda neo-Vedanta. Long argues that the official doctrine of the Ramakrishna Mission is not Vedanta, but neo- or Ramakrishna Vedanta, which is different from Sankara's and other traditional ideas of Vedanta. The difference is that in Ramakrishna Vedanta, *anubhava* or direct experience is given the highest validity, higher even than the Vedas. According to Long, this is in keeping with modernity which places the highest value on "direct experience—and reasoning based on that experience—over the authority of a text, institution, teacher, or oral tradition" (18). Long, I believe, is wrong in thinking that traditional Vedanta set no store by direct experience. It always did, but in its scholastic traditions, this primacy was often overshadowed by intricate debates over doctrinal nicities and

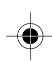


speculative hair-splitting. Yet, at least throughout the classical period, spiritual experience was not considered unavailable or unamenable to rationalistic expression or articulation. It is largely in the medieval period that an ecstatic celebration of spiritual union was taken out of the pale of dry reason and mental gymnastics. This period also coincided with the decline of classical scholarship and its supporting institutions, largely as a consequence of the destruction of Hindu kingdoms and their system of patronage to Sanskritic knowledge. Bhakti was a way of bypassing the inferiority of the unlettered by allowing for the attainment of a direct, higher spiritual realization through fervent longing and loving surrender rather than painstaking scholarship. Ramakrishna, unlettered savant as he was made out to be, was himself a representative of this tradition, perhaps it's final flower. On the other hand, modern Vedanta, as championed by Vivekananda, after a long gap, once again made spiritual practice and experience amenable to rational analysis and expression. After centuries of the dominance of bhakti, characterized by emotional surrender and pseudo-feminine anti-intellectualism, modern Hinduism tried to reintroduce a robust rationality into the spiritual quest without denying the latter altogether as had happened in the West. No wonder Swami Nikhilananda, Vivekananda's biographer, is quick to point out that:

> The Master never once asked Naren to abandon reason. He met the challenge of Naren's intellect with his superior understanding, acquired through firsthand knowledge of the essence of things. When Naren's reasoning failed to solve the ultimate mystery, the teacher gave him the necessary insight. (Nikhilananda, "At the Feet")

In Nikhilananda's version of Narendra's second visit to Ramakrishna, the power of the latter's "magic" over the former's rationality is even more pronounced:

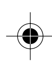
> After a minute or two Sri Ramakrishna drew near him in an ecstatic mood, muttered some words, fixed his



> eyes on him, and placed his right foot on Naren's body. At this touch Naren saw, with eyes open, the walls, the room, the temple garden — nay, the whole world — vanishing, and even himself disappearing into a void. He felt sure that he was facing death. He cried in consternation: 'What are you doing to me? I have my parents, brothers, and sisters at home.' (Nikhilananda, "At the Feet")

Nikhilananda very consciously develops this conflict between rationality and spiritual realization, modernity and enlightened tradition:

> Sri Ramakrishna was ignorant of the modern way of thinking. But Narendra was the symbol of the modern spirit. Inquisitive, alert, and intellectually honest, he possessed an open mind and demanded rational proof before accepting any conclusion as valid. As a loyal member of the Brahmo Samaj he was critical of image-worship and the rituals of the Hindu religion. He did not feel the need of a guru, a human intermediary between God and man. He was even sceptical about the existence of such a person, who was said to be free from human limitations and to whom an aspirant was expected to surrender himself completely and offer worship as to God. Ramakrishna's visions of gods and goddesses he openly ridiculed, and called them hallucinations. … One day he was making fun of Sri Ramakrishna's non-dualism before a friend and said, 'What can be more absurd than to say that this jug is God, this cup is God, and that we too are God?' Both roared with laughter.
>
> Just then the Master appeared. Coming to learn the cause of their fun, he gently touched Naren and plunged into deep samadhi. The touch produced a magic effect, and Narendra entered a new realm of consciousness. He saw the whole universe permeated by the Divine



> Spirit and returned home in a daze. While eating his meal, he felt the presence of Brahman in everything — in the food, and in himself too. While walking in the street, he saw the carriages, the horses, the crowd, and himself as if made of the same substance. After a few days the intensity of the vision lessened to some extent, but still he could see the world only as a dream. While strolling in a public park of Calcutta, he struck his head against the iron railing, several times, to see if they were real or a mere illusion of the mind. Thus he got a glimpse of non-dualism, the fullest realization of which was to come only later, at the Cossipore garden. (Nikhilananda, "Training")

Not accidentally, this account of the taming of Vivekananda occurs in a chapter called "Training of the Disciple." Vivekananda's training is not complete till he recognizes a source of knowledge superior to sense perception and rational deduction. These two sources of knowledge recognized by modern science are shown to be subordinate to a mystical or non-dual, unmediated apprehension of reality, which can only happen in supra-normal if not supernatural states of consciousness.[5] While this "conversion" is quite remarkable, it is not entirely without basis in tradition. *Apta vachana* or *Sabda pramana*, translatable as the reliable authority of a spiritual master, was also considered a valid epistemological category in traditional Indian logic, along with direct sense perception and inference. What distinguishes modern thought from tradition is clearly its rejection of authority as a reliable source of knowledge. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, once again, rather than breaking with tradition on this score, actually insists on continuity by recognizing spiritual authority as a valid source of knowledge.

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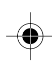
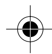
[5] Halbfass considers this tendency in neo-Hinduism and neo-Vedanta as an attempt to show that orthodox Vedanta as exemplified by Sankara is "fully compatible with Western rational and scientific thought" (131). The whole chapter, "Human Reason and Vedic Revelation in Advaita Vedanta" (131-204) is fruitful in this context.



What is happening in such "official" accounts of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda relationship is not just the reinforcement of the Guru-Sisya *parampara* or the master-disciple paradigm. It is nothing less than a careful rearrangement of the value-chain of epistemological hierarchy with Enlightenment rationality not rejected, but reordered as second to gnosis or spiritual insight. It is this reordering or rearrangement of reason that is at the heart of the Indian inflection or tweaking of modernity. Such a *re*-placement of reason, I believe, has never seriously been challenged even by the proponents of modernity in India; instead, they simply dismiss it or refuse to engage with it. On the other hand, it has been continuously reinforced by almost every major spiritualist including Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, J. Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta Maharaj, the Dalai Lama, and so on, not to speak of poets like Rabindranath Tagore, scientists like Jagadishchandra Bose, and political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. Reason below illumination or realization is, thus, the hallmark or canonical formula of Indian modernity, which makes it quite different from its European parent. I do not wish here to set up a dichotomy between Western and Indian modernities. On the contrary, I am deeply concerned with their differences, especially with the spaces, however, tenuous, that Indian modernity affords. From this point of view, Indian modernity too is an invention of a special version of tradition, just as European modernity, as I showed earlier, too was. Elements from the classical past were combined with others features derived from the modern West to shape Indian modernity. In so doing, we were distanced not only from our medieval, but also from our immediately prior Muslim pasts. Interestingly, perhaps, it is upon such a formulation that the hopes and fantasies of India being the *jagatguru* or the teacher of the world rest. After all, if modernity needs to be rescued from itself, only something other than reason, even a higher, non-divisive, and non-violent version of reason, might do the trick.

To return, however, to the *Kathamrita,* that key, even foundational text on Ramakrishna, we notice how it also suggests



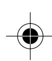
how such accounts of the conversion of Narendra may be exaggerated. We may go so far as to suggest that it is the demands of the master-disciple narrative, symptomatic of the relationship between Ramakrishna and the *bhadra samaj*, tradition and modernity, that fed into such constructions. Perhaps, even to begin with, Narendra was not such a sceptic or hard-core rationalist after all. In a telling passage in the *Kathamrita*, Narendra says:

> I have no need to take to reasoning. Mother! Grant that I may be mad in Your love. (To M.) Look, I have read Hamilton. He wrote: A learned ignorance is the end of Philosophy and the beginning of Religion.
>
> Sri Ramakrishna (to M.) — What does it mean, brother?
>
> Narendra — When one completes the study of Philosophy, one becomes a 'learned fool'. Then he begins to talk on religion. Religion starts then. (Gupta, "With Bhaktas")

Here, it would appear that Narendra is already speaking his Master's language; like preaching to the converted, Ramakrishna merely reinforced what was not totally erased from the Indian psyche. Indian modernity had not quite given up its ancient spiritual leanings. Beneath the varnish, the old orientation continued, merely waiting for a quickening agent.

As if to prove that no matter how modern, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission actually subscribes to an ideology that runs counter to the basic thrust of Western modernity, we only need to read their mission statement, as published on their website. Of the official tents of their faith, point number six bears special examination:

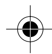
> Avatarhood of Sri Ramakrishna:
>
> According to the Hindu religious tradition, God



> incarnates himself as the Avatar in every Age in order to give a new message to humanity suited to the needs of each Age. In the Ramakrishna Movement, Sri Ramakrishna is adored as the Avatar of the Modern Age. What this means is that his life and teachings have opened a new way of salvation for humanity. The uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna's Avatarhood is that it embodies the spiritual consciousness of earlier Avatars and prophets, including those who are outside the Hindu fold, and is in harmony with all religious traditions. In all the institutions of the Ramakrishna Order, worshipful reverence is shown to all Avatars and the founders of all religions. ("Ideology")

"Avatar of the Modern Age" would seem like a contradiction in terms; modernity, after all, is predicated upon the epistemic destruction of every form of authority. The only room for such a figure is sociological, as in Weber's idea of charismatic authority. But here too it is the function and the effect of such figures that is examined, not their experience or the content of their self-expression. On the contrary, such leadership is seen as liable to being cultic and dangerous.

Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal argue that anti-colonial modernity was not only: 1) an assertion of a unique and romantic Indian past; 2) a critique of Western modernity; but 3) consisted of imaginative borrowings and exchanges with the latter in order to escape the oppressive present. The debates were between tradition and modernity within India, on the one hand, and between European and indigenous modernity on the other (90-92). I believe that Ramakrishna and Vivekananda worked together to help forge such an alter- if not anti-colonial modernity. In this context Raju makes an astute observation about the difference between them. Pushing Nandy's characterization of Vivekananda as a "more divided man" (than Ramakrishna) "dealing with more divided men," he considers him much more "troubled" than Ramakrishna, precisely because Vivekananda, having gone to the



West and understood its material superiority, understood not only the magnitude of the challenge for India but also the extent to which modern Indians had become "divided men" as a consequence. According to Raju, this "trouble" is the key to understanding Vivekananda's "inconsistencies, confusions, ambiguities" ("Universal Self, Equality and Hierarchy in Swami Vivekananda" 10).[6] The assertion of Indian spiritual or religious "superiority" was one way to shore up the self-esteem of a defeated people, something that Ramakrishna in his pre-modern or "folk" self-sufficiency and confidence did not need. One might, from a somewhat firmer faith-location, even venture that Ramakrishna's self-confidence, easy, natural, and "innocent," did not rest on the fragile and easily undermined ignorance of colonialism or modernity but on the firmer footing of self-realization and Samadhi. His avataric intervention, choosing of suitable vehicles such as Vivekananda, and resolve to "save" India, derived not from naiveté or lack of acquaintance with the engines of colonialism, technology, and modernity, knowing their destructive power only too well. As the great Bankim himself told him when asked why he (Bankim) was "bent" (the literal meaning of his name), it was because of the kicks of our colonial masters. Ramakrishna's diatribes against "chakri" or slavery of colonial masters may thus be interpreted not just as an attempt at un- or other-worldliness but as an early exhortation to swaraj or self-rule, both in the material and spiritual senses of the word. Vivekananda modified this formula of disengagement with the world to a somewhat more equal exchange with the dominant West, where India, instead of being only a beggar or recipient, also had something to bring to the table.

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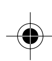
[6] Also see Raju's *Debates in Indian Philosophy: Classical, Colonial, and Contemporary* for insightful comments on the "Swami" vs. the "Mahatma" paradigms and *Modernity in Indian Social Theory* for an innovative reading of Vivekananda's attacks on some of the "Others" of Hinduism as examples, after Raymond Williams, of "subjunctive" rather than "indicative" criticism.



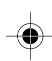
III

I now come to the third and final part of my paper in which I look at Vivekananda's engagement with rationality and modern science.[7]

In his lecture on *Reason and Religion* (delivered in London on 18 November, 1896), Vivekananda states,

> The worship of the goddess of Reason during the French Revolution was not the first manifestation of that phenomenon in the history of humanity, it was a re-enactment of what had happened in ancient times, but in modern times it has assumed greater proportions. The physical sciences are better equipped now than formerly, and religions have become less and less equipped. The foundations have been all undermined, and the modern man, whatever he may say in public, knows in the privacy of his heart that he can no more 'believe'. Believing certain things because an organized body of priests tells him to believe, believing because it is written in certain books, believing because his people like him to believe, the modern man knows to be impossible for him. There are, of course, a number of people who seem to acquiesce in the so-called popular faith, but we also know for certain that they do not think. Their idea of belief may be better translated as 'not-thinking-carelessness'. This fight cannot last much longer without breaking to pieces all the buildings of religion.
>
> The question is: Is there a way out? To put it in a more concrete form: Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason, through which every other

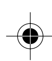
[7] Several portions of this section are from a paper, "Swami Vivekananda and Modern Science," by Sukalyan Sengupta and me (part of our larger work, *The Cyclonic Swami*). Some of these paragraphs are actually his writing and I am grateful to him for allowing me to include them in my paper.



> science justifies itself? Are the same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of Religion? In my opinion this must be so, and I am also of opinion that the sooner it is done the better. If a religion is destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless, unworthy superstition; and the sooner it goes the better. I am thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. All that is dross will be taken off, no doubt, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation. Not only will it be made scientific — as scientific, at least, as any of the conclusions of physics or chemistry — but will have greater strength, because physics or chemistry has no internal mandate to vouch for its truth, which religion has. (*CW* 1:366-383)

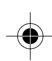
From a man of religion, a monk in fact representing a certain order and belonging to an ancient tradition, this is a statement of extraordinary boldness and self-confidence. Not only does Vivekananda refuse to justify or preserve a religion which is no longer "true," whose beliefs are easily disproved by discoveries in sciences, and which maintains its hold on its flock only through dogma, superstition, or fear — he also asserts that the modern reliance on reason is not unprecedented, nor is science itself entirely new or modern. He asserts that in times past too the civilizational enterprise was based on rational pursuits of verifiable truths. Indeed, the evidence of such a quest is to be found in Indian spiritual traditions themselves. By this method, he seeks to forge an alliance between ancient Indian spirituality and modern, largely Western science, considering them as natural allies rather than antagonists. What this does is to make science and spirituality allied quests instead of adversaries; the terms of their encounter are not framed in the classic Western templates of reason vs. faith or science vs. superstition.

In both domains, argues Vivekananda, the source of knowledge is similar. Thus, even the internal mandate posited by



Vivekananda is based on the criterion for fullness of a knowledge system that may be acceptable to the scientific method. According to Vivekananda:

> Experience is the only source of knowledge. In the world, religion is the only science where there is no surety, because it is not taught as a science of experience. This should not be. There is always, however, a small group of men who teach religion from experience. They are called mystics, and these mystics in every religion speak the same tongue and teach the same truth. This is the real science of religion. As mathematics in every part of the world does not differ, so the mystics do not differ. They are all similarly constituted and similarly situated. Their experience is the same; and this becomes law.
>
> In the church, religionists first learn a religion, then begin to practice it; they do not take experience as the basis of their belief. But the mystic starts out in search of truth, experiences it first, and then formulates his creed. The church takes the experience of others; the mystic has his own experience. The church goes from the outside in; the mystic goes from the inside out.
>
> Religion deals with the truths of the metaphysical world just as chemistry and the other natural sciences deal with the truths of the physical world. The book one must read to learn chemistry is the book of nature. The book from which to learn religion is your own mind and heart. The sage is often ignorant of physical science, because he reads the wrong book — the book within; and the scientist is too often ignorant of religion, because he too reads the wrong book — the book without.
>
> All science has its particular methods; so has the science of religion. It has more methods also, because



> it has more material to work upon. The human mind is not homogeneous like the external world. According to the different nature, there must be different methods. As some special sense predominates in a person — one person will see most, another will hear most — so there is a predominant mental sense; and through this gate must each reach his own mind. Yet through all minds runs a unity, and there is a science which may be applied to all. This science of religion is based on the analysis of the human soul. It has no creed. (*CW* 6: 81-82.)

We might see here an attempt by Vivekananda to "scienticize" religion, thus going contrary to the NOMA hypothesis explained earlier. The extent to which religion can be considered another type of science is not clear, not can we be certain that this is the best or most productive way to understand religion. Indeed, we may see Vivekananda's attempt to explain religion in terms of science as both a strategic defense of religion in a world dominated by science and an attempt to focus on the more rational aspects of faith. But if we were to go back to Vivekananda's master, Ramakrishna, then we shall see that neither the materialism of modern science nor the supremacy of rationality are accorded the highest importance; faith, spiritual experience, and grace are viewed as equally, if not more, important, depending on the temperament of the aspirant and the context of the spiritual practice. Even if we do not take Vivekananda's terminological transposition of religion as a type of science at face value, we will have to acknowledge that what Vivekananda does accomplish is to anticipate by nearly a hundred years the efforts of other religious figures such as the Dalai Lama to open up spiritual phenomena to scientific examination, thereby enriching both domains.

Having explored the question of the relationship between science and spirituality in a broader perspective, let us now examine Vivekananda's views on some specific scientific topics. I am particularly interested in some of his cosmological observations because they were actually in dialogue with

scientific thought of his time. As Vivekananda states, the Sanskrit word for creation [srishti], properly translated,

> should be projection and not creation. For the word creation in the English language has unhappily got that fearful, that most crude idea of something coming out of nothing, creation out of non-entity, non-existence becoming existence, which, of course, I would not insult you by asking you to believe. Our word, therefore, is projection. (*CW* 3: 116-135)

But this immediately raises numerous age-old questions, best summarized in the beautiful hymn of the Nâsadîya Sûkta for the Rig Veda (X.129): "Whence is this? When there was neither aught nor naught, and darkness was hidden in darkness, who projected the universe? How? Who knows the secret?"[8] Vivekananda answered these questions in detail in a lecture. His central arguments were as follows:

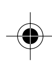
1) Everything in nature begins with certain fine forms and becomes grosser and grosser, and develops, going on that way for a certain time and then again goes back to that fine form, and subsides. The same is the case with the universe: it has come out of a nebulous state and must go back to it. Thus, it is a cyclic process of involution and evolution: every evolution is preceded and succeeded by an involution.

2) For any phenomenon, going back to the cause is termed destruction.Therefore, the effect is the same as the cause, not different.

3) This manifested universe cannot be projected from nothing. (*CW* 2: 203-211)

The next logical question, also put rhetorically by Vivekananda, is: "The involution of what? What was involved?" Vivekananda answers in one word: God. He relates God to the sum-total of the intelligence displayed in the universe and states

[8] Ralph T. H. Griffith. The Hymns of the Rgveda. (Motilal Banarsidass: Delhi: 1973 New Revised Edition, Reprint 1995).



that it must therefore be the involved universal intelligence unfolding itself. In his words, "It is absolutely certain that in the beginning there is that Infinite cosmic intelligence. This cosmic intelligence gets involved, and it manifests, evolves itself, until it becomes the perfect man, the 'Christ-man,' the 'Buddha-man.' Then it goes back to its own source" (Ibid.). We should be careful not to confuse Vivekananda's definition of "universal intelligence" with the present controversy regarding "intelligent designer": the former is ontological whereas the latter is an active agent that is regulating biological evolution. Instead, Vivekananda here clearly anticipates Sri Aurobindo, whose theory employs this very vocabulary of involution and evolution.

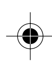
However, the question still remains: what are the building blocks of this universe? Today, this question is the holy grail of physicists who are searching for a single "Theory of Everything" that would reconcile gravity with electromagnetic, strong, and weak nuclear forces, and the theories of the very small (quantum mechanics) with the theories of the very large (general relativity) which, while very successful in the their own domains, refuse to be reconciled. Vivekananda's interpretation is as follows:

> According to the philosophers of India, the whole universe is composed of two materials, one of which they call Âkâsha. It is the omnipresent all penetrating existence. Everything that has form, everything that is the result of the compounds, is evolved out of this Âkâsha. It is the Âkâsha that becomes the air, that becomes the liquids, that becomes the solids; it is the Âkâsha that becomes the sun, the earth, the moon, the stars, the comets; it is the Âkâsha that becomes the body, the animal body, the planets, every form that we see, everything that can be sensed, everything that exists. It itself cannot be perceived; it is so subtle that it is beyond all ordinary perception; it can only be seen when it has become gross, has taken form. At the beginning of creation there is only this Âkâsha; at the end of the cycle the solids, the liquids, and the gases all melt into the Âkâsha again, and the next creation similarly proceeds out of this Âkâsha.

> By what power is this manufactured into this universe? By the power of Prâna. Just as Âkâsha is the infinite omnipresent material of this universe, so is this Prâna the infinite omnipresent manifesting power of this universe. At the beginning and at the end of a cycle everything becomes Âkâsha, and all the forces that are in the universe resolve back into the Prâna; in the next cycle, out of this Prâna, is evolved everything that we call energy, everything that we call force. It is the Prâna that is manifesting as motion; it is the Prâna that is manifesting as gravitation, as magnetism. It is the Prâna that is manifesting as the actions of the body, as the nerve currents, as thought force. From thought, down to the lowest physical force, everything is but the manifestation of Prâna. The sum total of all force in the universe, mental or physical when resolved back to its original state, is called Prâna. (*CW* 1:147-148)

In such passages, one can find remarkable similarities between Vivekananda's thoughts and those of modern philosopher-cosmologists such as John Wheeler and Martin Rees, especially the concept of "the big crunch" and the idea of a "multiverse". One cannot over-emphasize that Vivekananda expressed these thoughts in 1895, ten years before the much-celebrated set of papers of Albert Einstein was published, heralding a new age in Physics.

Many attempts have been made to reinterpret Vedantic statements in light of Einsteinian concepts of relativity, space-time curvature, mass energy equivalence, quantum mechanics, and so on. Quantum mechanics is not an Einsteinian concept. Quantum theory was not propounded by Einstein, though his work on the nature of light was instrumental in heralding the quantum revolution. As a matter of fact, he was against the paradoxical, apparently contra-rational suggestions of quantum mechanics–famously asking if God plays dice with the universe–and only accepted the views of Niels Bohr and the new physics reluctantly, towards the end of his life, because they yielded precise, reproducible results.



But let us explore Vivekananda's interaction with one scientist of the pre-Einstein era: Nikola Tesla. Nikola Tesla was one of the preeminent scientist-engineers of the 1890s.[9] In January and February1896, he most likely attended Vivekananda's lectures in Hardman Hall or Madison Square Garden, New York, as Vivekananda later mentioned in an address at Kumbakonam:

> I have myself been told by some of the best scientific minds of the day how wonderfully rational the conclusions of Vedanta are. I know one of them personally, who scarcely has time to eat his meal or go out of his laboratory, but who yet would stand by the hour to attend my lectures on the Vedanta; for, as he expresses it, they are so scientific, they so exactly harmonize with the aspirations of the age and with the conclusions to which modern science is coming at the present time. (*CW* 3:185)

Tesla was practically living in his Houston Street Laboratory in New York at that time, and fits Vivekananda's description of the scientist mentioned above. Tesla and Vivekananda probably met earlier in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition (the site of the Parliament of Religions) in Chicago, but no record exists of any conversation between them.They did meet at the Corbins' house (a mansion in Fifth Avenue, New York City) for dinner on 5 February, 1896 and almost certainly Vivekananda explained Sânkhyâ cosmology to Tesla and asked him questions, for we know of the letter from Tesla to Vivekananda dated 8 February, 1896:

> My dear Sir,
>
> As it would be difficult to answer your questions by letter and as I wish to have the pleasure of meeting you again I would suggest a visit to my laboratory at 45 East Houston Street any day next week you find convenient.
>
> Faithfully yours,
>
> N. Tesla

[9] See, for instance, M. T. Commerford's *The Inventions, Researches, and Writings of Nikola Tesla* (1894), reprinted in 1996.

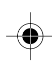
They agreed to meet for Vivekananda wrote in a letter to E. T. Sturdy dated 13 February, 1896:

> Mr. Tesla thinks he can demonstrate mathematically that force and matter are reducible to potential energy. I am going to see him next week, to get this new mathematical demonstration. In that case, the Vedantic cosmology will be placed on the surest of foundations. I am working a good deal now upon the cosmology and eschatology of Vedanta. I clearly see their perfect unison with modern science…Now on the Advaitic side, it is held that the soul neither comes nor goes, and that all these spheres or layers of the universe are only so many varying products of Âkâsha and Prâna. (*CW* 5:101-102)

Unfortunately, there is no record of this meeting and Vivekananda scholars opine that the meeting never took place. Vivekananda's disappointment at the failure of this marriage between Vedantic cosmology and modern science (modern in the 1890s) is clear in his lecture in Lahore, "There is the unity of force, Prâna; there is the unity of matter, called Âkâsha. Is there any unity to be found among them again? Can they be melted into one? Our modern science is mute here; it has not yet found its way out" (*CW* 3:400).

Post Albert Einstein's landmark papers in 1905 (three years after the death of Vivekananda), it is clear that if we interpret Âkâsha as the "Big Bang" singularity and Prâna as the products of this explosion (including matter, energy, space and time) and combine this with the equivalence of mass and energy, we clearly see a domain that overlaps science and spirituality. But it is interesting to note that even as late as the 1930s, Nikola Tesla did not agree that mass and energy are equivalent. When he was finally convinced of the famous Einstein equation $E = mc^2$, he wrote a letter that remained unpublished in his lifetime, published first by his biographer John J. O'Neill:

> Long ago he [man] recognized that all perceptible matter comes from a primary substance, or a tenuity



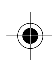
> beyond conception, filling all space, the Akasa or luminiferous ether, which is acted upon by the life-giving Prana or creative force, calling into existence, in never ending cycles, all things and phenomena. The primary substance, thrown into infinitesimal whirls of prodigious velocity, becomes gross matter; the force subsiding, the motion ceases and matter disappears, reverting to the primary substance. (251)

It is amazing that forty years after his meeting with Vivekananda, Tesla remembered the Sanskrit terms Âkâsha and Prâna.

As mentioned earlier, modern Physics is busy grappling with the issues of expansion of the universe, the cosmological constant, the fundamental particles that arose right after the big bang explosion, the "Unified Field Theory", etc. But the question alluded to indirectly by Vivekananda, namely, "what gives rise to Âkâsha and Prâna", is even today considered "metaphysics" rather than "physics". We can only hope that in the future this question will be embraced by mainstream science.

Going back to our discussion on rationality, Vivekananda made numerous references to the word "consciousness" in his lectures but the challenge that we face today of arriving at a definition of consciousness that everyone agrees with was applicable to his era as well. Vivekananda used three categories: sub-consciousness, consciousness, and super-consciousness; we will include all the three in our discussion. Vivekananda said:

> You must remember that the first manifestation of this Prakriti in the cosmos is what the Sânkhya calls Mahat. We may call it intelligence—the great principle, its literal meaning. The first change in Prakriti is this intelligence; I would not translate it by self-consciousness, because that would be wrong. Consciousness is only a part of this intelligence. Mahat is universal. It covers all the grounds of sub-

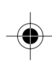


> consciousness, consciousness and super-consciousness; so any one state of consciousness, as applied to this Mahat, would not be sufficient. …The substance Mahat changes into the grosser matter called egoism.
> (*CW* 2: 443-444)

But, contrary to Vivekananda's views, a majority of the researchers in this field seem to be of the view that "consciousness is in the brain." The main drawback of this approach is that it relies almost completely on the means to analyze a "conscious experience" rather than make any attempt to answer the question, "Who is having this conscious experience?"[10] Moreover, if the primary focus is on understanding neural responses, then a definition such as, "Consciousness refers to those states of sentience and awareness that typically begin when we begin from a dreamless sleep and continue until we go to sleep again, or fall into a coma or die or otherwise become 'unconscious'" (Searle 21) is logical. But Vivekananda, following Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions, clearly stated that there are two other domains—one that is needed to understand dream and sleep or *svapna* and *nidra* (termed sub-conscious) and the level above individual egoism or Samadhi (termed super-conscious) that have to be included in any discussion of consciousness. Moreover, Vivekananda was very clear that the experience in the dream state is at a lower plane of existence (because it primarily arises from Avidyâ, ignorance) than the experience during samâdhi. He also maintained that "if a man goes into samâdhi, if he goes into it a fool, he comes out a sage" (*Raja Yoga* 75).[11] It is almost impossible for science today to corroborate or disprove this

[10] See Menon, S. "Towards a Sankarite Approach to Consciousness Studies: A Discussion in the Context of Recent Interdisciplinary Scientific Perspectives", *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, XVIII.1, (2001): 95-112.

[11] It is here that Vivekananda differs significantly from Freud who did not believe in the "super conscious" or the Samadhi state. Indeed, he considered the "oceanic" state of ego-transcendence to be pathological rather than specially endowed or liberative state. Freud distrusted trances that melted



hypothesis. Moreover, though scientists are mapping the brain of subjects during meditation to understand changes in activity in various parts of the brain, the question, "what is the entity that remains unchanged before, during, and after meditation and tells the experiencer of these experiences" is unanswerable by present scientific methods. Many researchers have posited analysis of Vedantic insights to make advances in this field. We will avoid this discussion but would conclude by stating that Vivekananda viewed cosmology and consciousness as a continuum, unlike modern science's attempts to compartmentalize these two subjects in very different realms.

This brings us to the crux of the issue. The new, unified epistemology that would reintegrate not just science and spirituality, but science with humanities—indeed, all fields of human pursuit for truth, both in the subjective and objective realms—has not yet been born. Instead, the very language available to us only reinforces such dualities and binaries. Perhaps, a new integralism is required which will bring all these different, sometimes opposing, quests into one unified field. Until that happens, Vivekananda along with other spiritual figures, will still be on the fringes of what we consider the mainstream scientific disciplines.

Before closing, it would appropriate to briefly point out that an assessment of Vivekananda's contribution to the growth of modern science cannot be confined to a study of his writings. The latter may be somewhat bounded by time and context, but

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ego-identities. This, once again is the difference, between Freud's undermining of Enlightenment rationality by the discovery of the unconscious and the modern Indian curative for both the ills of unconscious drives and excesses of conscious rationality in the notion of superconsciousness or transcendental wisdom. By believing that a higher state of consciousness than the normal human was not only desirable but achievable—through yoga, meditation, Sadhana and so on—India offered a new telos to a world disenchanted by modernity and the telos-devoid regime of science that Weber and Heidegger wrote about.

his personality, dynamic and boundless as it was, was perhaps even more influential. On the way to the Parliament of Religions in July1893, Vivekananda met Jamsetji Tata on board the steamship *Empress of India* from Yokohama to Vancouver. In his *Complete Works* there is no mention of this meeting nor of any communication between Vivekananda and Jamsetji. Our only source is the letter Jamsetji wrote to Vivekananda on 23 November 1898 more than five years later, a copy of which is in the IISc archives. Of course, we need to remember that when they met, Jamsetji was already a prominent industrialist and businessmen, while Vivekananda was a virtually unknown monk. Jamsetji was on his way to the US to acquire the technical know-how to make steel in India, something that the British steelmakers did not want to part with.

Exactly what transpired between the two great Indians, one a leading tycoon, the other a spiritual visionary, is not known. Whether or not it was Vivekananda who suggested to Jamsetji that an Institute of Science should be set up is also not clear; certainly Jamsetji's letter does not say so. Indeed, as B. V. Subbarayappa's painstaking history of Indian Institute of Science shows, the idea was mooted as early as 1892, the year before Jamsetji and Vivekananda met.[12] But after the Parliament of Religions and his triumphant return to India, Vivekananda became a national figure. No doubt, Jamsetji did not forget their meeting, but went on to ask for Vivekananda's help in promoting science in India by harnessing the energies of asceticism and tradition for this cause: "I know not who would make a more fitting general of such a campaign than Vivekananda. Do you think you would care to apply yourself to the mission of galvanizing into life our traditions in this respect?" (qtd. in Lala 114)[13] Tata asks Vivekananda to write a "fiery pamphlet rousing our people in this

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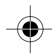
[12] See Subbarayappa, B. V. *In Pursuit of Excellence: A History of the Indian Institute of Science*. New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill, 1992.

[13] Interestingly, India's former President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam quotes this letter in full in his appreciation of Vivekananda's contribution to the growth of the scientific spirit in India (see A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, "Address at the Youth Convention and Inauguration of the Vivekananda Institute of Value



matter"; he even agrees to "cheerfully defray all the expenses of publication" (Ibid.). Of course, Vivekananda did not write such a pamphlet, but the publication that he had started, *Prabuddha Bharata*, issued an editorial the following year, in April 1899, lauding and endorsing Jamsetji's project:

> We are not aware if any project at once so opportune and so far-reaching in its beneficent effects was ever mooted in India, as that of the Post-graduate Research University of Mr. Tata. The scheme grasps the vital point of weakness in our national well-being with a clearness of vision and tightness of grip, the masterliness of which is only equalled by the munificence of the gift with which it is ushered to the public. ...Mr. Tata's scheme paves the path of placing into the hands of Indians this knowledge of Nature—the preserver and the destroyer...—that by having the knowledge, they might have power over her and be successful in the struggle for existence. ...We repeat: No idea more potent for good to the whole nation has seen the light of day in Modern India. Let the whole nation therefore, forgetful of class or sect interests, join in making it a success. (qtd. in Lala 117)

At Vivekananda's behest, Nivedita and, later, Josephine Macleod met Jamsetji. It is clear therefore that Vivekananda not only supported the foundation of such an institute in India but, in general, welcomed the spread of modern scientific education and research in our country. From our earlier account it is evident that his support of modern science was not only for its manifold

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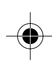
Education and Culture at Porbandar, Gujarat on January 12, 2006", *Indian Institute of Science Archives*, 29 October 2012, Web, 16 January 2013, <http://apc.iisc.ernet.in/iisc_tata_vivek_kalam.htm>). See also, Anil Budur Lulla, "IISc Looks to Belur for Seeds of Birth", *The Telegraph*, 3 September 2007, Web, 16 January, 2013, <http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070903/asp/nation/story_8268384.asp> for IISc's own efforts during its centenary year, 2008, to try to establish the Belur and Calcutta connection with its history.

material benefits to a backward and underdeveloped India, but also for its capacity to understand and appreciate truth, which to him was also the goal of spirituality. Despite the initiative and largesse of Jamsetji Tata, his dream project, the Indian Institute of Science, had a very difficult start because it faced stiff opposition from the colonial authorities. The Institute finally began to function only in 1911, seven years after Jamsetji's and nine years after Vivekananda's death. Today if India is one of the few nations in which the Constitution itself enjoins upon each citizen to cultivate and promote the scientific spirit, it is not only because Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, was a votary of modern science. Much before him there were many others, including spiritual leaders and men of religion such as Vivekananda, who also welcomed the spread of modern science in India.

Swami Vivekananda's mortal remains are enshrined in a simple but elegant two-storey temple at the Belur Math, on the banks of the Hooghly. The Math itself is a modern structure, built in the last days of the British Empire. It is an eclectic mix of Rajputana and Eastern architectural styles, with neo-Classical and colonial flourishes thrown in. Across the river, we can see the more traditional temple complex of the Dakshineshwar Kalibari, which Rani Rasmoni built in the second half of the nineteenth century and where Sri Ramakrishna came as the temple priest.[14] Sri Ramakrishna's *lilaprasanga,* as his disciple-biographer, Swami Saradananda characterizes his life, was played out mostly

[14] A similar passage occurs in Sarkar, though he does not see the contrast between Dakshineshwar and Belur so overtly as a face-off between tradition and modernity:

> Dakshineshwar temple, where Ramakrishna had lived for thirty years, and Belur Math, founded by his most illustrious disciple, face each other today on opposite banks of the Bhagirathi, presenting in many ways a vivid study in contrasts even oppositions. The temple, like any major Hindu sacred site, is thronged with crowds which cut across class divides, noisy, colourful, not oversensitive to dirt. … Belur Math is much more of an upper-middle-class devotional-cum-tourist spot: almost aggressively hygienic, it is full of guards and notices warning visitors off from bathing in the river or spoiling the lawns. (1558).



inside the compound of that temple. The more modern Belur Math was inspired by Swami Vivekananda, his foremost disciple, who also founded the order named after him, the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission was a wholly new, even modern phenomenon, but one which was inspired by the deepest springs and stirrings of tradition, and which had its roots in the soil of spiritual India. Swami Vivekananda's samadhi has many visitors, who bow before his image and visit his room upstairs. The shrine is immaculately clean and there is daily worship conducted there by the designated priests of the Ramakrishna Order. In contrast, across the river, there are endless streams of much more ordinary pilgrims, quite unregulated if not chaotic, who worship not just Kali, the principal deity, but the many Shivalingas, Radha-Krishna, and Sri Ramakrishna, pausing at his little room, full of portraits of his disciples and other saints. Somehow, these two institutions facing each other across the Hooghly represent, to my mind, the paradox of Indian modernity that I have been exploring throughout this paper: what appears tradition has been reinvented in modern times and what is patently modern actually has its roots deep in the seed bed of tradition.

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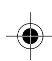

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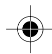

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