

Reading Rawls in India

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In the companion piece, “The Lamps in our House: Reflections on Postcolonial Pedagogy,” I explored general questions regarding the place of philosophers in the Western canon in the Indian classroom. Here I speak specifically of the case of Rawls, and what an engagement with his work might offer the Indian political theorist.

I

The title of this paper can be read in two ways: what does it mean to read *Rawls* in India? What does it mean to read Rawls in *India*? My main concern is with this second question, but I will address it by considering the first. I wish to demonstrate, first, that an engagement with Rawls may help us think through least some pressing philosophical problems raised by the contemporary political scene.

More importantly, I wish to suggest that reading Rawls in India – that is to say, reflecting critically on what he has to say, against the backdrop of our understanding of Indian political realities – need not be very different from reading Rawls in the ‘West’. This is not to deny that we live in a very different social, political, and historical context from the world in which Rawls wrote. But it is precisely what he called the “abstract and unworldly character” of his texts (PL ix) which allows for the engagement to be fruitful. In particular, this engagement need not require some complicated process of ‘redirection’ or ‘decolonisation’ towards ‘Indian

Political Theory' as a discipline with a distinct subject matter and methodology (Parekh 1992; Bhargava 2010; Rathore 2018; 2019).¹

Upon reading Rawls in India we might conclude that his work doesn't apply in the Indian context; that it has internal tensions which he is unable to resolve; or that a consideration of his theories in the Indian context leads us to find new or deeper problems with his arguments even for the context within which he wrote. But in all these scenarios, his carefully worked out theoretical positions are resources to think *with*, and in arranging and articulating our disagreements, we are already doing (one kind of) 'Indian political theory'.

To be sure, the Indian context provides data which must figure in any exercise of reflective equilibrium, in a way that may be unavailable to those reading his work within the context in which he wrote. Thus reading Rawls in India may enrich our engagement with his work and provide fresh points of departure in terms of critique. But the nature of this engagement is not different in kind from that involved in reading his work in the course of doing 'Western political theory'.

But my focus in this paper is not on the question of how reading Rawls in India might deepen our understanding and appreciation of Rawls. All that I wish to establish is that Rawls has something to say to us: that is to say, an engagement with his work in the terms of the tradition of political theorizing of which he is a part can offer us some fresh insights or perspectives into our own predicaments. Indeed, the very act of engaging in theoretical work on first principles as a way of responding to political disagreement would add something to our broader political culture.

To illustrate this claim, I consider two examples, one from each of his major texts: the notion of 'merit' which figures in Indian debates about reservation (or affirmative action/positive discrimination) policy, which Rawls discusses in *A Theory of Justice* (TJ) (Rawls 1999); and debates about Indian liberalism which resonate with Rawls' discussion in *Political Liberalism* (PL) (Rawls 2005).

¹ This is a deliberately modest point: I do not claim that there is *nothing* in Rawls which requires such a process; only that there is plenty in Rawls which does not.

I conclude with some thoughts on what it might mean to develop a specifically *Indian* tradition of political theory, and what might come in the way of doing so. I suggest, perhaps paradoxically, that a focus on the 'Indianness' of Indian political theory might come in the way of developing such a tradition.

II

In an eloquent polemic written thirty years ago titled 'The Poverty of Indian Political Theory' (Parekh 1992), Bhikhu Parekh criticised Indian political theorists for failing to address a range of theoretical issues raised by post-Independence political life. He gave as an example of this failure the topic of reservations or affirmative action (what he called 'positive discrimination'). The nature and justification of such policies, he noted, called forth a range of theoretical considerations, regarding the nature of justice, trade-offs between justice and other social values such as efficiency; whether groups rather than individuals are the bearers of justice-based rights and obligations; and so on. But Indian political theorists had failed to address them.

Writing 15 years later, Parekh noted (Parekh 2006) that while the topic had achieved some theoretical attention, and indeed while reservations had become a "fixed point" in Indian political life, and a "touchstone of social conscience" for social justice (ibid, 442), they needed to be located within a broader egalitarian theory of social justice (ibid., 444). For familiar reasons having to do with the need to secure widespread legitimacy for a policy of reservations, Parekh claimed that such a theory needs at least to be *articulated* and defended. He reiterated that political theorists have by and large failed to do so (ibid. 454):

One would have thought that during the half a century that these concepts [a long list, including reservations] have dominated Indian political thought and practice, its political philosophers would have subjected them to a critical scrutiny. They certainly have, but it is somewhat patchy, tentative, either too abstract or patently partisan, often driven by political crises rather than a quest for theoretical clarity, and, in general, does not add up to a coherent and comprehensive philosophical articulation of Indian political experiences...There is...no attempt to construct an

inspiring vision of a just and humane India. Rajni Kothari put the point well when he observed that, although India is a 'mammoth virgin laboratory for original research', the contribution of political philosophers has been the 'weakest', and that such original work, as has been done, has come mainly from thoughtful public figures.

It is not my purpose to assess Parekh's claims about the extent to which the policy of reservations has been adequately theorised in India, though I should note that several political theorists in India have indeed tried to address the normative questions which Parekh flags (Heredia 2012; Hegde 2015; Bajpai 2010). Indeed, we might wonder – is it even an innocent question to ask about the justification of a policy of reservations, given that it is designed to address manifestly unjust social and economic relations of long standing? At the very least one might think that the question is worth addressing because it has been asked, and that providing a satisfactory answer might be one way of cementing political consensus around it. The assumption I make here, with Parekh, is that at least some questions about the justice of reservations policy can be made in good faith.

Rather, I wish to claim that Rawls' discussion of some of these issues is a perfectly adequate starting point for such reflection, notwithstanding the very different historical, social/cultural and economic context within which he wrote. Of course, the topic of affirmative action has received a great deal of philosophical attention in the West (Fullinwider 2018), but some of this work is indeed so grounded in the specificities of the American context that it may be less useful in thinking about the Indian case. This is one area in which it is precisely the abstraction and generality of Rawls' work which allows for such portability across contexts, and one reason to think that reading *Rawls* in India may be more productive than reading other political philosophers writing about affirmative action in the West.

My main aim, however, is not to defend Rawls, or even to argue that one can defend a policy of reservations in India on Rawlsian grounds.² Rather, it is to make a more abstract point about the nature of such theorising. If Indian political theorists were to engage with his work on these questions, I think that they would be doing political theory *simpliciter* – not (necessarily at least) engaged in some other discipline called ‘Indian political theory’ which requires a separate set of indigenous concepts, difficulties of translation between Western and Indian contexts, and so forth. Reading Rawls in *India* would then be, in one important sense, not so very different from reading Rawls in *America*.

How might this engagement proceed? It is worth noting an important difficulty at the outset. *A Theory of Justice* is primarily concerned with fundamental questions of social justice in connection with the ‘basic structure of society’; there may not be a straight line from answers to these fundamental questions to details of social policy.

In Chapter IV, Rawls sketches a “Four Stage Sequence” for the application of his views within specific institutional contexts (TJ, s. 31, 171–176). Each of these corresponds to a “point of view” from which questions at the appropriate level of abstraction are discussed, and each can be distinguished by the amount of information made available to deliberators at that stage. The first of these is the original position, in which the two principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. The second is the stage of a ‘constitutional convention’ in which a just constitution is to be designed, constrained by the principles of justice, and concerned with the task of designing procedures to cope with diverse political views; ‘delegates’ to this convention are assumed to know “the relevant general facts about their society, that is, its natural circumstances and resources, its level of economic advance and political culture, and so on” (ibid, 172).

2 What Rawls actually thought about the policy of affirmative action is itself an interesting question, which I leave aside, except to note that it is a topic of contemporary debate. One problem pointed out by Thomas Nagel (Nagel 2003), is that questions about affirmative action belong to the field of ‘non-ideal’ theory, a topic on which Rawls himself has little to say. In a series of writings on Rawls, Charles Mills has criticized this focus on ideal theory as a form of blindness to the history of racial injustice in the United States (Mills 2009; 2013). Indeed, Rawls’ work plays a very small role in the entry on ‘affirmative action’ in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fullinwider 2018).

Rawls thinks that it is the third “legislative stage” in which questions of social and economic policy are to be discussed; it would be at this stage that questions about the justice of reservations policy would be raised – but a procedural theory of justice may have little to say about the details of some particular policy (ibid. 174; emphasis mine):

Now the question whether legislation is just or unjust, especially in connection with economic and social policies, is commonly subject to reasonable differences of opinion. In these cases judgment frequently depends upon speculative political and economic doctrines and upon social theory generally. *Often the best that we can say of a law or policy is that it is at least not clearly unjust.*

This pessimism (humility?) is a striking feature of his thought. In an interview to Harvard undergraduates in the 1990s, he was asked whether he tended to look at current events with his philosophical framework in mind (Aybar et al. 1991, 45, emphasis mine):

JR: Not really. Well, like anyone else, I react to current events and present problems in a certain way. I'm sure that my view must affect in some manner how I see them, but I don't just ask what justice as fairness would say. That would be limiting. *I don't see a political conception of justice as something that will tell me what to think. It's a great mistake to think of it as a device that will give you answers, that will deliver the answers to all sorts of questions when you want them.* That is one reason I am reluctant to answer questions about specific political topics. It suggests the wrong idea: that we could {have) some theoretical way of doing that, which is usually not so at all. I think of justice as fairness as trying to answer certain specific though basic questions. Its scope is limited. In any case, a reasonable view is important but it doesn't begin to be enough by itself. Judgment, informed opinion, due consideration, and much, much else are required. Usually if a question interests me, I may form an opinion on its merits. That's probably the best thing to do -- and then see whether the opinion is reasonable, and what other people think. Except for special cases, I wouldn't ask whether the opinion fits with *A Theory of Justice*. Besides, it would be a mistake to apply one's principles all the time. You need to examine things apart from them, else you risk becoming an

ideologue. People who have opinions on everything derived from their so-called principles are not to be trusted.

So, if Rawls is to be believed, one will not get from *A Theory of Justice* an account of *all* that Parekh would want, not even an abstract defence of the policy of reservations, beyond perhaps the conclusion that such a policy is “not clearly unjust.” But, I would argue, this would not be a trivial accomplishment.

A default anti-reservation stance might concede the importance of fair equality of opportunity, and recognise that in a just society disabilities imposed by caste oppression must be evened out. Nevertheless, a proponent of such a view might think that natural aptitude, hard work, etc. should be rewarded, and that it is unjust that ascriptive identities like caste be a criterion for relative *disadvantage* for members of non-reserved castes, particularly if they themselves are disadvantaged in other ways (e.g. economically), or have no direct responsibility for caste injustice.

One might recognize that ‘merit’ of the sort specified is itself a product of a great deal of (undeserved) privilege, but nevertheless believe that it should be rewarded, perhaps on the basis of “common-sense” precepts such as “to each according to his effort,” or “to each according to his contribution” (TJ 268). A system which violated these precepts, one might think, at least calls for justification.

There are various elements of *A Theory of Justice* which address just such an argument. For one thing, while Rawls accepts the principle of fair equality of opportunity as an element of his theory of justice, he does not think it can cover the entire field (TJ, 64):

For one thing, even if it [the principle of fair equality of opportunity combined with that of the principle of efficiency] works to perfection in eliminating the influence of social contingencies, it still permits the distribution of wealth and income to be determined by the natural distribution of abilities and talents. Within the limits allowed by the background arrangements, distributive shares are decided by the outcome of the natural lottery; and this outcome is arbitrary from a moral perspective. There is no more reason to permit the distribution

of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune. Furthermore, the principle of fair opportunity can be only imperfectly carried out, at least as long as some form of the family exists. The extent to which natural capacities develop and reach fruition is affected by all kinds of social conditions and class attitudes. Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances. It is impossible in practice to secure equal chances of achievement and culture for those similarly endowed, and therefore we may want to adopt a principle which recognizes this fact and also mitigates the arbitrary effects of the natural lottery itself. That the liberal conception fails to do this encourages one to look for another interpretation of the two principles of justice.³

A more important element of the theory is often described as the claim that there is no “pre-institutional” theory of desert (TJ, 88-89):

One may object that those better situated deserve the greater advantages they could acquire for themselves under other schemes of cooperation whether or not these advantages are gained in ways that benefit others. Now it is true that given a just system of cooperation as a frame-work of public rules, and the expectations set up by it, those who, with the prospect of improving their condition, have done what the system announces it will reward are entitled to have their expectations met. In this sense the more fortunate have title to their better situation; their claims are legitimate expectations established by social institutions and the community is obligated to fulfill them. But this sense of desert is that of entitlement. It presupposes the existence of an ongoing cooperative scheme and is irrelevant to the question whether this scheme itself is to

3 This alternative principle, is, of course, the Difference Principle. In its final formulation in TJ, it reads as follows (TJ, 266):

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

He adds a further ‘priority rule’ which includes the condition that ‘an inequality of opportunity must enhance the opportunities of those with the lesser opportunity.’

be designed in accordance with the difference principle or some other criterion (§48).

Rawls does not himself use the terminology “pre-institutional,” though it is often used as a shorthand for his central view, at least on one interpretation. As Thomas Scanlon puts it, one way to make sense of the intuition that economic rewards may be just or unjust based on the extent to which they are the product of voluntary economic contributions is to rely on such a “pre-institutional” notion of desert, and claim that whether or not economic institutions are just depends upon the extent to which they distribute benefits or burdens according to whether they are deserved in this sense (Scanlon 1988).

On the alternative, “institutional” account of desert as described by Scanlon (and commonly attributed to Rawls), there is no independent notion of desert which can be used as a constraint on the justification of just economic institutions. Rather, the notion of economic desert is seen as ‘internal’ to institutions, and dependent upon a prior notion of justice. If institutions are just, that is not because they distribute goods according to desert; on the contrary, whether or not people deserve certain economic benefits depends upon whether they are assigned by just institutions.⁴

My aim, once again, is not to defend Rawls. After all, even within the Western philosophical tradition there have been important criticisms of Rawls’ arguments, most famously by figures such as Robert Nozick (Nozick 2017); Rawls has himself been criticized by figures such as Charles Mills for not paying adequate attention to questions of historical injustice.

I wish to make two more limited points. First, anyone wishing to defend the policy of reservations in India, and wishing in particular to address popular anti-

4 I should note that the question of desert arises in other contexts than the economic, e.g. in the context of the justification of penal institutions. There are interesting questions about whether Rawls’ position can be consistently applied across economic and penal contexts (Scheffler 2000).

reservation arguments in India based on the notion of 'merit', would find in Rawls' work, and its subsequent discussion, a rich seam within which to work.⁵

More importantly, such engagement does not require sophisticated cross-cultural or inter-tradition dialogue. The philosophical intuitions which might drive someone to be sceptical of reservations in India (assuming that such scepticism can ever be motivated by theoretical considerations alone, as opposed to mere self-interest), are not so different in kind from those driving similar scepticism with respect to affirmative action policies in the US. A philosophically sensitive anti-reservation activist in India would have no difficulty, I think, in identifying what they call 'merit' with what the Rawlsian tradition would call 'pre-institutional desert'; and on this issue they might naturally find a home in Rawls' libertarian opponents such as Robert Nozick.⁶ It is in this sense that Rawls is speaking to us.

III

There are two important methodological points which one must emphasize in thinking about the kind of engagement I have in mind. First, it is not simply an exercise of 'reading off' from a theory developed in a 'Western' context particular implications for the Indian political scene. For, as one has seen, the connection between the very abstract claims Rawls makes in *A Theory of Justice* and particular institutional realizations is in any case underspecified; one needs to draw out the connections even *within* Rawls' own context.

Second, to the extent that one is engaging with Rawls' account of economic justice in order to think say about the notion of 'merit', one need not characterize what one is doing as *Indian* political theory, marked off as a distinctive kind of activity with its own special subject matter. I would say rather that one is simply engaged

5 At least for some kinds of reservation – leaving aside, for instance, reservations in the electoral process. Rawls does have something to say on this issue, but it does not raise questions about desert.

6 In this sense I would argue that the notion of merit is an 'experience-near' notion, to use terminology coined by Aakash Singh Rathore (Rathore 2019). It is hard to see upper-caste mobilization against caste emancipation as anything but 'home-grown'. If this mobilization is articulated in terms of 'merit', does that not suggest that this notion is also indigenous? Or at least, similar enough to the 'Western' notion of desert as not to make a theoretical difference?

in the task of political philosophy in the Rawlsian tradition, of a kind completely familiar to its followers; though of course considerations of the specific Indian context may lead to a rethinking or extension of the tradition itself.

Now I think it is useful to mark out this Rawlsian tradition as 'Western' rather than describe it as political philosophy *simpliciter*. The latter formulation has the disadvantage of seeming to regard itself as 'the only game in town'; the charge of false universalism is well-taken in this respect. However, I think we should be cautious of certain ways in which the framing of 'Western' vs 'Indian' political theory may be misleading. I have in mind, for instance, the following passage from Parekh (557–58, emphasis in the original):

[T]he Indian political theorist must also be a keen student of Western political theory. Political theory in the West has had a continuous history and is better developed than anywhere else. Although the Indian political theorist sometimes pretends otherwise, his traditional theoretical resources are exiguous and of limited relevance to the kinds of questions he needs to ask and answer today. He cannot learn the craft of political theory and acquire the necessary skills and sensibilities without mastering the tools of Western political thought. But having done so he must return to his own society, master its forms of thought, and readjust the tools to suit its distinct character. The West can help him understand *what it is to do political theory*; his own society can help him decide *what kind of political theory to do*. To master one tradition is difficult enough; to acquire an adequate command of two is beyond the reach of most. The Indian political theorist needs to go West in order to get back to the East. This is a long way back home, but it is the only way. Not surprisingly some never leave home either physically or theoretically; some others stay West both physically and theoretically; a few do return home but only physically and continue to think West.

Rajeev Bhargava articulates a similar thought in another paper inspired by Parekh's work, "Is there an Indian Political Theory?" (Bhargava 2010). His topic is the notion of multi-culturalism as developed by Canadian political philosophers, among others:

If multiculturalist practices were formulated and long discussed in India, why were they not theorized? Why did we derive theories from the Canadian experience? Though theories emerge from practice, neither the presence of a particular set of practices nor ad hoc reflections on them generates theory. We need to rely on traditions of theorization and sustain practices of learning from them. And while these traditions and institutional apparatus to learn about them exist in the West, such traditions are non-existent or broken in India. Unless these are retrieved or invented in India, no original *theories* can be generated.

This is a difficult, rather pessimistic conclusion. What must be done in the interlude? Most theories originating in the West are bound to initially have a strong flavour of their origin. However... concepts and theories can be decontextualized, relocated, and then invested with different meaning and intonation. This complex practice of decontextualization and recontextualization must be pursued. To understand *how* to decontextualize, we need to rely on available theoretical traditions. To know *what* precisely to recontextualize, we must have a strong practical grasp of our own social practices.

...

So, we will have an Indian political theory in some weak sense, that is, largely western theories with a distinctively Indian flavour. When we are engaged in political practices, reflect on issues that grow from them, and creatively use traditions of theorizing no matter where they are born, then something like an Indian political theory is bound to emerge. The difference between this political theory and political theory in other parts of the world, particularly in Europe and in the USA, may be tiny. But since the devil is in the detail, these little variations are bound to make a big difference to the character of Indian political theory.⁷

My discomfort with these formulations is the suggestion that the activity of 'Indian political philosophy' is distinct from, and initially subordinate to, that of 'Western'

7 I should note that in describing this possibility Bhargava is not endorsing it whole-heartedly; indeed, he introduces with a certain ambivalence, marked for instance by the claim that the conclusion is "difficult" and "pessimistic."

philosophy, and one which involves primarily questions of *application* or *de/re-contextualization*. I would wish to open space for the thought that political philosophers working in or on India, and their counterparts in the West, are at least some of the time engaged in the *same* enterprise. The Parekh–Bhargava model suggests that the Western-trained philosopher wishing to do ‘Indian political theory’ is like a chef trained in London, say, who upon moving to India must now ‘adapt’ her recipes to suit the Indian palate and Indian conditions. This seems to me a mis-characterization of the philosophical enterprise.

To take another example, suppose an Indian automotive engineer is trained in Germany, say, and returns to India to design cars for the Indian market. Indian roads, weather conditions, driving norms and so forth are certainly distinct from those in Germany, and presumably a good engineer must take these differences into account when designing Indian cars. But in doing so I would think that the engineer is still simply doing *automotive engineering*, rather than a distinctive and (initially subordinate) activity known as ‘Indian’ automotive engineering.

For an alternative analogy one might look at Rawls’ own approach to the history of moral and political philosophy, and in particular his self-understanding as carrying on a stable tradition of democratic thought, as discussed by some of the major figures of the Western philosophical canon, e.g. the philosophers in the social contract tradition. But what sense does it make to say that Rawls is thinking about the *same* questions as, say, Kant or Rousseau, given the vast distance in context between Prussia and Geneva of the 18th-century and late-20th century USA?

There is an interesting duality to Rawls’ engagement with the past, recently the subject of thoughtful paper by Theresa Bejan (Bejan 2021). On the one hand we have in his lectures on moral philosophy a set of reflections on studying the history of philosophy which emphasizes the productive engagement with the past as arising from *differences* with it. It is worth quoting him at length, from his lectures on the history of moral philosophy (Rawls 2000, s. 7, “On Studying Historical Texts”, 17–18):

1. If (a) we viewed philosophy as specified by a more or less fixed family of problems or questions (which might be added to over time); and if

(b) we agreed about the criteria for deciding when these problems are satisfactorily resolved; and if (c) we saw ourselves as making steady progress over time in resolving these problems, then we would have rather little philosophical interest in the history of philosophy.

However, the idea that philosophy is specified by a fixed family of problems with agreed criteria for deciding when they are resolved, and that there is a clear sense in which progress has been made and an established doctrine arrived at, is itself in dispute. For one thing, even if there were a more or less fixed family of philosophical problems and answers—marked out roughly by its leading topics—these problems and answers would take on a different cast depending on the general scheme of thought within which a writer approaches them. This scheme of thought imposes its own requirements on acceptable solutions to the allegedly standard problems, so there will not be agreed criteria of philosophical progress so long as there are diverse schemes of philosophical thought, as is now the case. Thus, one of the benefits of studying historical texts—and of trying to get a sense of the writer’s view as a whole—is that we come to see how philosophical questions can take on a different cast from, and are indeed shaped by, the scheme of thought from within which they are asked. And this is illuminating, not only in itself, as it discloses to us different forms of philosophical thought, but also because it prompts us to consider by contrast our own scheme of thought, perhaps still implicit and not articulated, from within which we now ask our questions. And this self-clarification helps us to decide which questions we really want to resolve, which ones we can reasonably expect to settle, and much else.

On the other hand, we have the view clearly implicit in both PL and TJ that he understands the nature of his enterprise as continuous with an ongoing ‘tradition of democratic thought.’ Here he seems not to be worried about the differences in starting points, contexts, or methods which might separate him from the historical figures by whom he seems to have been so deeply influenced.

I think there is an analogy how one might approach the problem of historical distance (say between Kant and Rawls) *within* a tradition, and how one might

approach the problem of contextual distance between, say, Rawls and us. Notice how badly the chef analogy works in the case of Rawls' engagement with figures such as Kant and Rousseau – Rawls is not concerned with 'decontextualizing' and 'recontextualizing' these figures, or trying to 'adapt' them to his own context. But clearly he is well aware of the contextual differences imposed by historical distance. If he can regard himself as continuing a tradition of thought which includes figures such as Kant and Rousseau, that must be because, even at a very abstract level, he thinks of himself as being interested in a similar set of issues – as indeed he does, given his explicit identification with the 'social contract' tradition.

It seems to me that *both* of these attitudes which Rawls seems to have had towards the history of philosophy – that it is a resource to be valued both for its continuities (similarities), as well as its discontinuities (differences) with the present – are fruitful in thinking about how to read Rawls in India. If one is mindful of the discontinuities, an engagement with Rawls might prompt serious re-examination of one's 'own' scheme of thought. I suspect that this possibility is closed off to, or at least under-emphasized by, many modern Indian academic political philosophers for two reasons. On the one hand, they have a default liberal sensibility which would not be substantively shaken by an encounter with Rawls (though I will argue in the next section that this is a mistake, at least insofar as this liberalism is in turn anchored in a Nehruvian nationalism). On the other hand, given the shadow of the colonial past, they are loath to ground normative positions within the Western canon.

I wonder, though, about how an encounter with Rawls might prompt re-thinking from figures who are either working from within alternative traditions, or are trying to develop one – a Gandhi, say, or a Savarkar (or even a Nandy or a Madan). How would a conservative philosophical thinker who believes in the caste hierarchy, or in the doctrine of *karma*, react to the idea of the veil of ignorance (Saran 2021)? If they continued to hold on to their substantive first-order beliefs, how might they choose to justify their beliefs? This kind of 'East-West' encounter has some historical resonance within India (the Bengal Renaissance comes to mind), and it would be interesting to explore it further with a figure like Rawls in the contemporary moment.

Of course both liberal and (for want of a better word) conservative thinkers might reject Rawls out of hand because he is a Western philosopher operating from within an entirely different context. But a serious argument for a ‘discontinuity’ thesis would be productive if it were made more specific. Just how should the difference in context make a difference, say, to the idea that people’s life-chances should not be the outcome of brute luck (to adopt a controversial reading of one of Rawls’ doctrines)? How should this difference in context make a difference to the argument for equal liberties, which is premised on the thought that the fundamental principles of justice should be chosen under a veil of ignorance? These questions invite serious philosophical reflection which is, I would argue, of a piece already with the kind of reflection Rawls is engaged in.

My own leanings are however in the opposite direction: I think that Indian political theorists have tended to over-emphasize the *differences* between Western liberal theorizing and the Indian context. Indian political thinking, then, is taken to have as its proper subject matter specifically *Indian* political conditions: Indian secularism; *Indian* constitutionalism, *Indian* democracy. I think it may be useful to think more about the similarities: Indian *secularism*; Indian *constitutionalism*; Indian *democracy*. I cannot argue this point here, but I think that this would be one route to ‘de-parochializing’ Western philosophy.⁸

IV

What allows for the possibility that the Indian and the Western political theorist are working, at least for some of the time, on the same questions in the same way? I have already suggested one answer one might draw from Rawls, which is that this is made possible by the level of abstraction at which the theories are formulated. I will illustrate this point by reference to another example from Parekh’s paper, this time in relation to what he calls India’s “unofficially official political philosophy,” i.e. a form of Nehruvian modernism. Elsewhere Parekh has developed a searching criticism of elements of this philosophy (Parekh 1991).

8 I think of Cécile Laborde’s work (Laborde 2021) as a model for how this enterprise might proceed.

On his view, Nehru regarded “modernization” as India’s “national philosophy,” which he saw as involving seven ‘national goals’: national unity, parliamentary democracy, industrialisation, socialism, development of the scientific temper, secularism and non-alignment. Parekh’s problem with Nehru’s philosophy was essentially that it was undertheorized and somewhat shallow, at times insufficiently attuned to the particularities of the Indian scene, and rested too much on Nehru’s enormous personal prestige. In his 1992 article he described the consequences of this modernist elite consensus for the public political culture (Parekh 1992):

Since independence, then, India has had an unofficially official political philosophy. It has become so deeply embedded in national self-consciousness that even those feeling uneasy about some aspects of it rarely express their doubts, or do so in muted and hesitant tones. Since they often share the modernist analysis of the causes of Indian decline, they feel deeply worried lest they should unwittingly send the country back to its now notorious historical slumber or strengthen its regressive tendencies. The national political philosophy has also so profoundly structured the political discourse that its critics lack an adequate vocabulary in which to articulate their doubts and criticisms, let alone develop coherent alternatives. If someone is against secularism, he must be for Hindu raj; if against socialism, he must be for unbridled capitalism; if against the scientific temper, he must be for religious obscurantism; and so on.

It is hardly surprising that the range of political issues on which critical discussion is welcome in India is small, and on each the spectrum of respectable positions is considerably narrow. There is a good deal of official and unofficial pressure not to ask certain questions and not to say certain things, and hence there is much concomitant intellectual and moral self-repression. As a result there is little conceptual and psychological space for a critical political philosophy to grow. When neither the national political philosophy nor its dominant interpretation may be questioned, political philosophy has little role. It might be argued that it could at least be engaged in offering a well-considered philosophical defence of the national political philosophy. But this is to misunderstand the nature and

role of political philosophy. When there is no criticism there is no need for justification either. Furthermore justification is necessary when what is to be justified is believed to be problematic and in need of defence. Since India's national political philosophy is largely accepted as 'obviously true', it is assumed to need no defence. Justification is also an extremely risky enterprise. It puts the national philosophy on the public agenda and opens it up to a critical debate, and there is no saying what the outcome of the debate would be or what emotions it might stir up. The safest and most effective way to 'justify' anything is not to seek to justify it at all.

One of the great changes in Indian public life since Parekh wrote these words is the complete eclipse from our public political culture of Nehru's political philosophy, combined at the same time with the eclipse, by and large, of Nehru's own reputation as a statesman and politician.⁹ While the Hindu right has been at the vanguard of this movement, other political currents in Indian life – e.g. Ambedkarite movements – have contributed to it as well.

I cannot make the case here, but I would argue that part of the problem has been precisely what Parekh articulated, that Indian political theorists failed to articulate a "well-considered philosophical defence" of this modernist philosophy, because the public political culture did not allow for a range of reasonable debate on these issues. If its public acceptance and legitimacy rested in part on its association with the towering figure of Nehru, combined with the historical legitimacy of the nationalist movement of which he was a leader, then it is unsurprising that the sustained attack on his personal legitimacy in political life, and the simultaneous elevation of other figures in national political consciousness (Bhagat Singh,

9 For some recent attempts at rehabilitating Nehru see the introductions to recent collections of writings on and by Nehru by Nayantara Sahgal (Sahgal 2015) and Purushottam Agrawal (Nehru 2019) respectively; see also Pratap Bhanu Mehta's fine essay from 2014 (Mehta 2014)

Bose, Savarkar, Patel, Ambedkar, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, etc.), should have marginalized the philosophy itself.¹⁰

It is widely acknowledged today that Indian liberalism is under threat today by the ruling political dispensation and its ideological allies. What is worth noting as another aspect of our public political culture today is the continued dependence by Indian liberals on the Nehruvian vision, even if his name is rarely invoked. Here one might see the repeated references to the “idea of India” as an essential element of the nationalist consciousness which we now need to recover; the appeal to the “scientific temper” as an antidote to the obscurantism of the Hindu right; and the claim that the RSS cannot lay claim to the nationalist heritage because it did not participate in the anti-colonial movement, it was complicit in the assassination of Gandhi, etc.

I would speculate that the default position of Indian liberals today is to locate Indian liberalism broadly within the fold of Indian nationalism, and second, to define this nationalism not only in anti-colonial terms but also in opposition to the “communalism” of the Hindu right, on the one hand, and “Muslim separatism” on the other. It is the nationalist heritage and the legitimacy it enjoys which can then (it is hoped) be mobilized against the forces of the Hindu right. In these respects contemporary Indian liberalism displays a great deal of continuity with Nehruvian modernism.¹¹

There are several problems with this approach. For one thing, it makes it difficult to appropriate or appreciate the thought of interesting figures now associated with the Hindu right, such as Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Lala Lajpat Rai, as a source of support for liberal values: their Hindu right-wing politics automatically

10 It is a striking fact that this new pantheon contains such a range of ideological diversity, much of it (Bhagat Singh, Ambedkar, Patel and Bose) radically at odds with that of the ruling ideology of Hindutva. The fact that the Hindu right has ‘appropriated’ these figures despite these these historical differences has been much lamented (Salam 2016; Meghwanshi 2017; Puniyani 2019).

I would argue that the fundamental problem is not with the historical accuracy or fittingness of the various members of the national pantheon, but with the need to have a pantheon to begin with. The problem is that it displaces genuine debates in political philosophy by historical debates. I have commented on this problem in (Burra 2015; 2021), the latter a draft of a paper at a Symposium on the work of Rajeev Bhargava, which treats some of these issues.

11 With some important differences, of course, including an awareness of caste and a scepticism about the developmental state, both of which are absent in Nehru.

excludes them from consideration as possible *sources* of liberalism.¹² For another, it ignores the various ways in which the nationalist movement, particularly in its post-Independence avatar, contained illiberal elements, especially with respect to values of individual liberty.¹³

But a more fundamental problem, I would argue, was that diagnosed by Rawls in *Political Liberalism*: that Indian liberalism in the Nehruvian mould has been a ‘comprehensive’ doctrine, part of a ‘package deal’ which includes substantive ideas of the kinds of life worth living (e.g. one governed by ‘the scientific temper’), the character of national life (e.g. a secular democracy infused with the spirit of ‘unity in diversity’), and so forth. What space is there within such a liberalism for, e.g., those who believe in the idea of a Hindu *rashtra*, or who believe in the idea of a caste hierarchy?

Rawls is driven by the thought that comprehensive liberalism is unstable, for the long-run tendency of a polity with free institutions will be to generate alternative, and incompatible, comprehensive doctrines. His great concern is with the resultant fragility of constitutional democracy. The aim of *Political Liberalism* is to secure an alternative foundation for constitutional democracy in such situations of deep diversity: as he puts the question, “How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?” (PL, xxxvii).

The solution Rawls proposes is a specifically ‘political’ liberalism which can gain the support, through an ‘overlapping consensus’, of a wide range of what he calls ‘reasonable comprehensive views’. The aim is to develop a ‘political conception’ of a just democratic regime which could also be supported in a wholehearted way by those, e.g., who affirm religious doctrines based on religious authority (PL xxxviii):

12 For Mookerjee see (Burra 2019; 2016); for Lajpat Rai see (Bhargav 2021; 2020). I am grateful to Bhargav for sharing unpublished work with me.

13 Prohibition is but one such example. For others, see the examples collected in Rohit De’s book on the early Indian constitution (De 2018). It should be said that his treatment of these cases is considerably more sanguine than I think is warranted.

Referring to citizens holding such a religious doctrine as citizens of faith, we ask: How is it possible for citizens of faith to be wholehearted members of a democratic society when they endorse an institutional structure satisfying a liberal political conception of justice with its own intrinsic political ideals and values, and when they are not simply going along with it in view of the balance of political and social forces?

It is not possible to summarize such a complex book, but an essential element is the notion 'reciprocity' (PL xliii):

Citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of social cooperation (defined by principles and ideals) and they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that others also accept those terms. For these terms to be fair terms, citizens offering them must reasonably think that those citizens to whom such terms are offered might also reasonably accept them...And they must be able to do this as free and equal, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position.

Much of the book consists of elaborating this notion of reciprocity, and exploring the institutional implications of a world in which it is taken seriously.

The crucial thing to note is Rawls' emphasis on the possibilities of achieving consensus in a world "marked by a diversity of opposing and irreconcilable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines" (PL 2-3). It may not be possible to achieve such a consensus – some comprehensive doctrines may be unreasonable, in the sense that those who hold them are unwilling to enter into social cooperation under fair terms. What PL seeks to offer, then, is "the defense of *reasonable faith* in the possibility of a just constitutional regime" (PL 172; my emphasis).

No doubt the concerns of PL are spelled out at a very abstract level, and perhaps there are ways in which his underlying model of diversity in comprehensive views

does not sit well with the situation of Indian diversity. But it is hard not to read PL as a deeply familiar book for anyone interested in the contemporary Indian scene.¹⁴

Reading it may not give us any answers to our problems, but I think at the very least he gives us a new way of looking at them. Primary among these, I believe, is the fact that we have not made a serious attempt to generate a consensus around core liberal principles, including basic rights and liberties, of a kind which may be acceptable to fellow citizens who hold very different ideas about the past and future of the nation.¹⁵

V

I have claimed that reading Rawls in India is a useful, generative exercise for anybody interested in thinking about Indian political life today. I illustrated this claim with the aid of two examples, though others might do equally well. I wish to conclude with some reflections on the very nature of 'Indian political thought' as discussed by Parekh and some of his interlocutors. I believe that, in some formulations at least, it is an unnecessarily parochial category, and comes in the way of developing a tradition of political philosophy of just the sort whose absence Parekh laments.

Here is Parekh's definition (Parekh 1991, 535):

First, by Indian political theory I mean works on political theory written by Indian writers irrespective of whether they live in India or outside it, and exclude the works of non-Indian writers on India.

In an edited volume on 'Indian Political Thought,' Aakash Singh Rathore and Silika Mohapatra note that this notion seems unnecessarily ethnocentric (Singh and Mohapatra 2010, 5). One might understand Parekh's category as useful given that

14 For a recent attempt to employ the framework of PL in the Indian context see an interesting draft by Kranti Saran (Saran 2021). Thanks to Saran for sharing this work with me.

15 There is a tradition associated with the work of Granville Austin which holds that the work of the Indian Constituent Assembly was precisely an enterprise of this kind (Austin 1966). For doubts on the Austinian account, which I share, see the work of Arvind Elangovan (Elangovan 2014; 2019).

he is interested, in part, in offering a sociological diagnosis of the poverty of Indian political theory. Though such a diagnosis is definitely of great interest, it is hard to see how citizenship, place of origin, or ethnicity are useful lenses through which to think about political theory.

The alternative characterization offered by Rathore and Mohapatra is as follows (ibid):

[W]hat seems to especially characterize the Indianness of Indian political thought is the way in which it is infused by Indian tradition(s) – whether to accommodate, assimilate, sublimate, or even negate. Wrestling with the tradition(s), evoking the tradition(s), evading the tradition(s), these are all characteristics useful in delimiting the notion of ‘Indian’ within the context of Indian political thought.¹⁶

Thus, more than formal considerations of citizenship, residency, or even hollow ethnic considerations, most substantively, contemporary Indian political thought carves out a determinate space for itself by means of ascribing value to – evaluating – the relevant literature of the tradition(s) that preceded it. To turn this coin over, we might mention that Western political philosophy can be held in contradistinction to Indian political philosophy by the general exclusion of any reflection on material from the Indian tradition(s), whether in the form of a work like the Arthashastra, or the life and work of moderns such as Gandhi or Ambedkar and so on. In sum, the bearing, or the burden, of tradition seems to be a necessary element (albeit not a sufficient one) in concretizing the meaning of the term ‘Indian’ within the phrase ‘Indian political thought’.

Note that this characterization pushes the question of what is ‘Indian’ one step back. If Indian political thought is characterized by reference to an engagement

16 Rathore has since written further on this notion (Rathore 2019). I cannot here engage with this complex and interesting work, but I should note that in his more recent writings Indian political thought is still characterized primarily with respect to Indian political *thinkers*, albeit over a much broader span: thus, the Buddha, Basaveshwara, Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Guru Nanak, Jyotirao Phule, and more recently figures such as Periyar, Iyothee Thass, and B.R. Ambedkar (ibid 153).

with Indian *traditions* of political thinking, we might ask: what is it that makes a tradition of political thinking *Indian*? The answer is not self-evident, and I have written elsewhere of the problems associated with taking as unproblematic the idea that figures such as Ashoka, say, are in some straightforward way members of the Indian tradition (Burra 2021).¹⁷

It seems to me however that this characterization of Indian political thought suffers from a more serious problem. To be sure, there are many routes into political philosophy, and I have no quarrel with the Rathore/Mohapatra approach being one of them. But it seems to me to be unduly restrictive.

If we are moved to do political philosophy in India for the reasons Parekh adduces – to think through normative, explanatory, and conceptual questions which arise in the context of contemporary political life -- there seems to be no reason to restrict our resources to the Indian past. After all, we might have problems which our ancestors did not; and their solutions to the problems *they* faced might distort rather than illuminate ours.

Indeed, I would speculate that this is precisely the case: for instance, I think the nationalist pre-occupation with freedom associated with national self-determination and the end of colonial rule has meant that we have very few resources within our tradition for thinking about questions of *individual* liberty.

Finally, even if there are aspects of the Indian tradition which *do* have some bearing on the contemporary – even if only, in Rathore and Mohapatra’s words, “to accommodate, assimilate, sublimate, or even negate”; or even if, as Rathore argues, there is a rich tradition of Indian thinking about equality; or as Bhargava argues, that there is a similarly rich tradition of thinking about toleration and living together – why should that generate an *imperative* for the contemporary thinker concerned with contemporary Indian issues to engage with this tradition as a requirement of doing ‘Indian political thought’?

17 The idea that a figure like Ashoka can be seen as a ‘proto-secularist’ figure has been explored in some detail by Rajeev Bhargava (Bhargava 2010; 2013).

Of course, framing arguments in terms of these figures in the Indian tradition may have the virtue of making them more accessible to a contemporary Indian audience, though I must admit my scepticism here (how does Basaveshwara speak to a contemporary Indian Marxist atheist, or to a Baptist Garo from Meghalaya? Is the inability to be moved by such a figure make them less Indian, in any interesting way? I would hope not). But this is a practical, not a philosophical justification for engaging with these figures.

And of course, it may be very helpful to engage with these traditions for just the reasons I have argued that it may be helpful to engage with Rawls – that they illuminate our present both by way of continuity and discontinuity, and are a resource to think with or against. However, it seems to me that notions such as equality and ‘living together in difference’ can be explicated, defended, and argued with without reference to this past at all. Assimilation, accommodation, sublimation and so forth of Indian traditions may then indeed be helpful in thinking through the present, but this cannot be taken for granted: certainly the fact that these traditions are *Indian* is no guarantee that they can philosophically illuminate the present.

What I have tried to show is that a figure like Rawls can in fact shed light on some of our current predicaments. Indeed, I would argue that Rawls’ characterization of the circumstances which call forth political philosophy have a deep resonance in our present moment, and I would suggest that the particular vision of political philosophy on offer is at least worth exploring (PL, 44-46):

In political philosophy the work of abstraction is set in motion by deep political conflicts. Only ideologues and visionaries fail to experience deep conflicts of political values and conflicts between these and nonpolitical values. Profound and long-lasting controversies set the stage for the idea of reasonable justification as a practical and not as an epistemological or metaphysical problem. We turn to political philosophy when our shared political understandings, as Walzer might say, break down, and equally when we are torn within ourselves.

[Abstraction] is a way of continuing public discussion when shared understandings of lesser generality have broken down. We should be prepared to find that the deeper the conflict, the higher the level of abstraction to which we must ascend to get a clear and uncluttered view of its roots. Since the conflicts in the democratic tradition about the nature of toleration and the basis of cooperation for a footing of equality have been persistent, we may suppose they are deep.

Indian political theorists have been understandably wary of the abstract and general, for familiar reasons having to do with the hegemony of the Western 'universal' and its role in the justification of colonial rule. After the end of that rule, it has been used more than once to doubt the stability or the coherence of the Indian democratic experiment. Hence the emphasis, already noted, on the distinctiveness of *Indian* secularism, *Indian* democracy, *Indian* federalism, *Indian* constitutionalism, and so forth.

But in emphasizing the distinctiveness of our situation, I think we run the risk of forgetting our commonalities with the 'democratic tradition' as well. After all, it is natural to think that at least some of the reasons to celebrate Indian democracy flow from considerations which apply to democracies in *general*. And it is natural to think that at least some of the problems faced by Indian democracy – for instance, to understand the proper place of majoritarian concerns in a constitutional democracy – are shared by other democracies as well.

To the extent that theoretical reflection can help understand or ameliorate some of these problems, I see no theoretical barrier to invoking and engaging with theoretical resources developed in other contexts. This is especially true for a thinker like Rawls, whose philosophical concerns are pitched at such a high level of abstraction. To be sure, this is not the only way to do 'Indian political theory', but it is worth a try.

In any case, the value of such engagement cannot itself be settled in the abstract, one way or another. If it is to be established at all, it must be established on a case-by-case basis. In this paper, I have attempted to open one or two doors between

the worlds of 'Indian political philosophy' and 'Western political philosophy', and suggest that walking in and out of them might be a worthwhile enterprise.

Indeed, one might go one step further. If one is reading Rawls in *India*, keeping in mind Indian problems and Indian concerns, is one not doing 'Indian' political philosophy? And if reading *Rawls* in India means that one is doing 'Western' political philosophy at the same time, perhaps we should refigure our sense of these terms, if not retire them altogether.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Many thanks to the students and auditors of two PhD seminars on Rawls taught in successive years at IIT Delhi, particularly Sumeet Agarwal. Thanks also for a stimulating discussion of some related issues at a Symposium in honour of Rajeev Bhargava organized by Arvind Elangovan at CASI, University of Pennsylvania, in October 2021; to Anuj Bhuwania for many discussions about indigeneity in legal and political thought; to Aakash Singh Rathore for helpful correspondence and to Danny Weltman and Kranti Saran for discussion of related issues. Comments by a peer reviewer and by the Editors of this journal were also very helpful in the final formulation of this paper.

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APPENDIX

The Lamps in our House: Reflections on Postcolonial Pedagogy*

I

I teach philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology–Delhi. My teaching reflects my training, which is in the Western philosophical tradition: I teach PhD seminars on Plato and Rawls, while Bentham and Mill often figure in my undergraduate courses.

What does it mean to teach these canonical figures of the Western philosophical tradition to students in India? I have often asked myself this question. Similar questions are now being asked by philosophers situated in the West: Anglophone philosophy, at least in the analytic tradition, seems to have arrived at a late moment of post-colonial reckoning.

One result has been a project to "decolonize" philosophy. The project has several elements. Some of the leading lights of the Western canon have views which seem indefensible to us today: [Aristotle](#), [Hume](#), and [Kant](#), for instance. Statues of figures whose views are objectionable in similar ways have, after all, been toppled across the world. Should we not at least take these philosophers off their pedestals?

Alongside moves to reassess the Western philosophical canon, there have been several moves to [diversify](#) the philosophical curriculum, for instance by including underrepresented or marginalised figures within the West, such as [women](#) and [racial minorities](#), or by expanding the philosophical gaze to include [non-Western traditions](#), such as the [Indian](#) or the [Chinese](#).

Finally, philosophers such as [Charles Mills](#), [Alison Jaggar](#), and [Shelley Tremain](#) have suggested that certain philosophical problems which might be more urgent from non-dominant perspectives – such as the enslaved, the colonized, the disabled – may be rendered invisible because of particular methodologies and problematics which the Western philosophical tradition has taken for granted.

The Indian context generates its own pressures. A focus on the Western philosophical tradition, it is sometimes thought, risks obscuring or marginalising what is of value in the Indian philosophical tradition. Colonial attitudes and practices might give us good grounds for this worry; recall [Macaulay's](#) famous lines, in his "[Minute on Education](#)" (1835),

that “a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

It has also been argued that an uncritical invocation of Western philosophical categories (such as “secularism”) distorts our understanding and experience of the Indian context. To see Indian experience through the lens of these categories is to operate from a space of “colonial consciousness” which takes us away from ourselves, as [S. N. Balagangadhara](#) has argued. At its limit, as K. C. Bhattacharya put it in his famous essay “[Swaraj in Ideas](#)” (1928), it may involve a “slavery of the spirit.”

Finally, the dominance of the Hindu right in contemporary India has made it easy to mobilize the rhetoric of anti-colonialism against the figure of the Muslim (as invader) and the liberal (as alien, non-Indian) – both thus suspect members of the (essentially Hindu) Indian nation.

This broader political context casts a pedagogical shadow as well. Take the case of [Patricia Southoff](#), an American scholar who taught a course on the “History and Politics of Yoga” at Nalanda University some years ago. An invitation to extend her contract was rescinded at short notice, and the course itself cancelled soon after. While no official grounds were given, [statements](#) made by influential political figures at the time make it clear that the issue was that a foreigner was being “allowed” to teach a course about yoga in India.

II

Where does this leave the teacher of Plato or Mill or Rawls in the Indian classroom? For years I began on an apologetic note, feeling the need to make the case – if not to my students, at least to myself – for why we are engaging with these Western thinkers. Until recently, my strategy has been to place my pedagogy in the context of a long history of Indian intellectual engagement with the West.

There are many examples to choose from, but I have been moved by three in particular. The first is Gandhi’s engagement with Plato, which [Phiroze Vasunia](#) has [documented](#): Gandhi reworked the Apology into Gujarati in 1908; it was later banned by the British. Mill’s *On Liberty* was [translated](#) into Hindi in 1912 by the famous Hindi novelist Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi and also banned soon after. In his memoirs, [Ruchi Ram Sahni](#) (a distant ancestor) describes the excitement of college students in late 19th c. Lahore reading and debating the works of Bentham and Mill.

I encouraged my students to see themselves as descendants of this tradition. And to myself I said: if their engagement with the West was unproblematic, then, surely, so is ours.

Contemporary Indian liberals sometimes adopt a similar strategy in response to the charge that liberalism is suspect because non-Indian. A line by Gandhi is much quoted in this context:

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed.
I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible.

If it was ok for figures such as Gandhi (whose “Indian-ness” is not in doubt) to engage with the West – the thought goes – surely it is ok for us.

III

I am no longer enamoured of this approach. For one thing, can I really claim the legacy of Gandhi while engaging with the West? Gandhi read the Apology in prison in South Africa in 1908 while he was still formulating the idea of satyagraha (his reworked title is “The Story of a Soldier of Truth”). It was published in Indian Opinion, a journal addressed to the Indian diaspora in South Africa and the Empire, often concerned with political issues of the day.

My students and I engage with Plato in a very different context. I first read the Apology as an undergraduate in America in the 1990s, and my students do not seem particularly fired up by political ideals. So much has changed in the hundred-plus years since Gandhi first read the Apology – politically, socially, culturally -- that it is not clear in what sense my students and I are really part of this tradition.

Suppose we were in fact part of this tradition, what would that show? If my students and I must justify our engagement with the Western canon today by appealing to the practices of earlier generations of Indians, surely the question has simply been pushed back one step? Shouldn't we then have to ask – what justified Gandhi in engaging with Plato?

IV

There is a further, and deeper, problem with this appeal. Recall Gandhi's line about wanting to have the cultures of all lands blow about one's house. It has a pleasingly capaciousness ring, which is no doubt part of its appeal: how mean-spirited (one might say to oneself) of nativists to prefer to wall their houses than keep their windows open! But now consider Gandhi's next lines:

But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.

One might read this initially as simply a call for equality, as though the problem with the engagement with the West is only when it arises from a position of weakness. But Gandhi's metaphor is less capacious than it seems – for even if I am an honoured or welcome guest in another's house, I am after all still a guest.

It is this thought which I find increasingly troubling. Why must I and my students have to participate always, so to speak, at one removed from this thing called ‘the Western philosophical tradition’? Is present-day New Delhi so much further removed from Plato's Athens than, say, present-day New York?

To suggest that the contemporary New Yorker has more of a claim on Plato than the contemporary New Delhi-ite is to partake of what Anthony Appiah called the “[golden nugget](#)” theory of Western civilization – that it is like some treasured possession which belongs, in the first instance, to people who live or were born in the geographical West; and to which ‘outsiders’ have only a secondary claim. And of course, the point goes the other

way as well: why should I have a kind of default claim upon Patanjali which, say, Patricia Sauthoff does not?

After all, one belongs to a tradition by engaging with it, extending it, talking back to it, and so forth. But surely I can do this with my students in New Delhi just as much as my counterpart can with her students in New York? Of course we might – and should – extend the tradition in different ways, given our different political and pedagogical contexts.

And if we – my students and I – are not necessarily outsiders to the Western philosophical tradition, why should participating in it necessarily result in us becoming de-racinated or colonized? At least this would have to be demonstrated rather than simply assumed.

V

My problem with the Gandhian line is thus with its potential to harden the boundaries between insiders and outsiders to a tradition. Talk of decolonizing philosophy makes me nervous to the extent that it reinforces this tendency. But inhabiting a tradition, contra Gandhi, need not be like inhabiting a house: one needn't leave one in order to enter the other.

Another approach is suggested by Gandhi's interlocutor, the poet Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi's lines occur in the course of a public correspondence between the two men in the 1920s. The context was Tagore's discomfort with Gandhi's calls to boycott British goods and British education, part of a broader project to emancipate India from British rule.

In fact, it is Tagore who introduces the metaphor of the house:

Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit at any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house.

I find the metaphor of the lamp congenial. How might it change how one talks and thinks about decolonizing philosophy?

To diversify the canon would be to shed light on a philosophical world of which we occupy a small corner. In the process we might also shed new light on where we stand as well. Geography is not essential to the project: an honest acquaintance with the history of philosophy within a particular tradition might serve the same purpose.

But where we stand also determines where we should look for illumination. Too much light can blind one: if one takes for granted the superiority of a particular philosophical tradition (which might be Western, or Indian, or Chinese, say), the route to wisdom may involve challenging the pieties of the canon in question. This would be so both for the cultural nationalist who identifies with the allegedly superior tradition, or for someone who identifies with a tradition which they regard as inferior in comparison. But dimming the lights, I would hope, is only part of a larger pedagogical strategy. Why not aim to loosen these identifications and light more lamps, so that we can explore more of the house and see it as ours? (We may not like all of what we see!)

Which lamps we choose may also depend upon what we are looking for, or at. In thinking about the nature and value of free speech in India today, I think it is fruitful to reflect upon Mill's defence of freedom of speech in *On Liberty* (1859). One might conclude that his arguments don't work, or that they rest upon assumptions which don't hold in contemporary India. But they are still a resource to think with, and we can engage with them without worrying about where they come from. In particular, Mill's defence of colonialism shouldn't be a hurdle which one must cross before one gets to his arguments.

Accepting that Mill's arguments on free speech have some purchase on the Indian scene does not require us to adopt the Western philosophical tradition wholesale in thinking about ourselves: it may well be that the concept of secularism, say, distorts rather than illuminates the Indian experience. The usefulness of a concept, thinker, or tradition depends upon how one uses them, and what one uses them to think about.

So the question to ask when deciding to teach Plato, Mill, and Rawls is the question of what they can help us see better, and how. This is a local and contingent matter, depending, among other things, upon one's pedagogical practice and one's political context. Or so I now (unapologetically) believe.

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