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WHAT IS 'INDIAN' ABOUT INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT?[1]

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I. Introduction

My aim in this talk is to describe and resist two intellectual instincts or tendencies when thinking about how to do political philosophy in India today. The first involves a resistance to 'Western political thought', as alien, unfamiliar, or simply inappropriate for thinking about Indian political realities. Central to this resistance is the idea that Western political thought is in some important sense *foreign* to the Indian experience, and that this foreign-ness poses an intellectual problem or barrier which must be overcome before it can be fruitfully engaged with when thinking about the Indian present.

The estrangement from Western political thought as foreign comes with a concomitant instinct regarding how we should do political theory in India, namely by engaging with *Indian* thinkers and traditions, both ancient and modern. Let me label these two instincts – one involving estrangement from the

[1] This is an expanded version of a lecture delivered virtually to the North Bengal University in May 2022, part of the Study Circle organized jointly by the NBU and the Indian Council of Philosophical Research. I am grateful to Professor Anureema Bhattacharyya for this invitation. I have tried to preserve the informality of the lecture format in the text.

foreign, the other involving intimacy with the *indigenous* – as broadly 'swarajist' in character.[2] This is a deliberately weak formulation, since, of course, swarajist concerns have been driven not just by the foreignness of Western political thought, but by its specific location as part of the history of *colonialism.*

I use the term 'tendency' or 'instinct' because these core thoughts can be expressed in a variety of ways, at different levels of intensity and sophistication, by thinkers of very different ideological persuasions. Thus, at one end of the spectrum one could completely reject the Western tradition altogether, claiming perhaps that the desire to engage with the tradition reveals a "colonized mindset". However, weaker forms of the swarajist instinct exist even in philosophers who would not wish to reject the Western tradition *in toto*.

In one form this amounts to believing that Western political thought can have at best an *indirect* relevance: for it to speak to the Indian situation requires radical 'translation' or 'contextualization'. Consider, as an example, the following lines from a well-known article by Bhiku Parekh (Parekh 1992):

[The Indian political theorist] 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*.

[2] This label pays homage to important works in this genre, from K. C. Bhattacharya's classic essay "Swaraj in Ideas" (Bhattacharya [1931] 1977) and the writings of Gandhi, to modern articulations in the works of figures like Ashis Nandy and Aakash Singh Rathore (Rathore 2019)

Key to the swarajist instinct is a distinction made between the enterprises of 'Western' and 'Indian' political thought, and a search for what makes Indian political thought distinctively *Indian*. The relevant notion of the 'Indian' can be described in many ways as well, ranging from the crudely nativist to the sophisticatedly ecumenical. Here is one contemporary description, by the editors of a reader on Indian political thought:

[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.

My primary aim is to resist this division between 'Western' and 'Indian' thought, particularly when the 'Indian' in Indian political thought is taken to be a matter of *origins*, motivating a search for the indigenous. My own answer to the question posed by the title of my talk – "What is 'Indian' about Indian Political Thought" does not rest upon such a division.

Indeed, I believe that there are forms of engagement with Western political thought in an Indian context which are not different in kind from engagement with that thought in a Western context. These engagements are not well described as doing *either* 'Western' or 'Indian' political thought.[3]

In this talk, I develop two contentions. First, I believe that the notions of the 'foreign' and the 'indigenous' are philosophically complex, and that what it means for an intellectual tradition to be 'ours' is a very difficult question.

[3] I cannot defend this thought here. I have explored it more fully in a paper concerned with the relevance of the work of John Rawls (Burra 2022).

Second, I believe that one kind of barrier which might be posed by the 'foreignness' of Western political thought in thinking about Indian political realities today *also* applies to at least some traditions of indigenous thought, especially those involving the distant past. To recall the famous lines by the novelist L. P. Hartley, "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there" (Hartley [1953] 2002). I think that we should take this dictum seriously.

Taken together, these contentions point to a provocative conclusion: *if* there is a philosophically interesting sense in which the thought of a figure like Ashoka is part of the 'Indian philosophical tradition,' there is *also* a philosophically interesting sense in which a figure like John Stuart Mill or John Rawls might be part of an Indian philosophical tradition.

These are strong claims which require careful formulation and even more careful argumentation, neither of which I can undertake here. I will adopt the dictum that it is wise to have strong opinions, lightly held, and offer only a sketch of some reasons why one should hold them. My method is indirect: what I will do is describe two contemporary approaches to the swarajist instincts outlined above. These criticisms will illustrate the two contentions I have just described.

Let me label the first of these approaches the method of 'historical bootstrapping'. The claim here is that contemporary engagement with Western political ideas is unproblematic because it is part of a long history of such engagement in India. One might point, e.g., to Raja Rammohun Roy's connection with Jeremy Bentham, or to Gandhi's reading of the New Testament, as evidence of this engagement.

Challenged to defend contemporary engagement with Western thought on the grounds that this thought is foreign, the

proponent of historical bootstrapping replies – even if the *thought* is foreign, there is an *indigenous* tradition of engaging with such thought.

The second approach might be called the method of 'excavation.' In thinking about concepts such as equality, democracy, and secularism, the suggestion goes, we need not go to Western political thought at all – instead, we must revive and engage with *indigenous* traditions of thinking about these concepts. A contemporary thinker about secularism, say, might see themselves as articulating specifically *Indian* traditions of thinking about (something like) secularism, for instance in the thought and practice of figures such as Ashoka or Akbar.

Applying the method of excavation allows us to claim that concepts such 'secularism' are not alien after all, even though *Indian* secularism might have roots and justifications which are at odds with traditions of thinking about secularism which emerged in the (Christian) West. Opponents of secularism who criticize it on the grounds of foreignness can then be seen to be mistaken about the content of their own indigenous traditions.

Both of these responses to the swarajist instinct are appealing because they seem to respond to the underlying anxieties on their own terms. Someone who rejects a concept or a thinker as foreign is accused, in the end, of making a *historical* error about the content of their *own* tradition: properly understood, the engagement should be seen as indigenous rather than foreign.

While this may be dialectically satisfying, I think these attempts are misguided because they do not question the fundamental frame *within* which the swarajist instinct has its home, namely by taking the notions of foreignness and indigeneity as philosophically unproblematic.

There is a further problem with these approaches, which is that one cannot reach philosophical conclusions by an appeal to history alone, for historical facts cannot by themselves ground normative conclusions. Appeals to the existence of indigenous traditions must be combined with philosophical argumentation about the importance of the ideals involved (secularism, equality etc.). Once these arguments are made available to us today, the appeal to history adds no independent normative weight in support of the ideals in question.

Take as an example the current debate over the legalization of same-sex marriage, or 'marriage equality'. There are many things a proponent of marriage equality may say in support of their position, e.g., by appeal to the importance of non-discrimination, etc. To further say: moreover, Indians in the *past* have held views about marriage and sexuality which would lead them to support marriage equality now is, in Bernard Williams' phrase, "one thought too many."

To summarize the overall structure of my argument: my ultimate aim is to question intellectual tendencies which draw a distinction between 'Western' and 'Indian' political thought, and which regard the former as problematic in a way that the latter is not. These tendencies are problematic because they rest upon questionable assumptions about intellectual belonging, and ignore symmetries in contextual distance between the foreign and the past.

I will not directly defend these claims, but illustrate them in the course of a critical discussion of two ways in which contemporary political philosophers have tried to respond to the

problem of foreignness, namely, the methods of historical bootstrapping and excavation. It is to these that I will now turn.[4]

II. Historical Bootstrapping

Consider Rajeev Bhargava's treatment of issues of foreign-ness and indigeneity with respect to the Indian constitution, in his Introduction to an edited volume on *The Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution* (Bhargava 2008). Bhargava begins by laying out the swarajist criticism with great clarity:

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

Bhargava's response to this criticism is an example of what I call historical bootstrapping (Bhargava 2008, 30–31). Following Granville Austin, his claim is that while the Constitution is *non*-Indian, it is not *un*-Indian (Bhargava 2008,

[4] Some of these claims are developed in more polemical fashion in an unpublished commentary on the work of Rajeev Bhargava (Burra 2021b).

30). For one thing, Indians such as Raja Rammohun Roy had already begun to make claims to be Western over a century before the Constitution was adopted; it was a move which could be adopted as a form of protest by those who felt shackled by their own tradition (ibid, 37). Bhargava points, for instance, to the use made of the new legal system by untouchable communities to bring suits against their landlords in the 19th century.

On one interpretation of this point, the claim might be that after the moments of 'first contact', Indians used theories and practices associated with Western modernity to further their own ends, in the process making them their own. At the point at which decisions had to be made – say about some particular constitutional formation – the relevant concepts and practices had *already* been Indianized, and were a familiar part of the landscape. The problem of foreignness (what Bhargava calls the 'cultural inadaptability thesis') doesn't arise, then, either because the culture has already adapted to this Western construct, or the construct is part of the culture in some hybridized form. The passage of time, on this view, reduces the pressure of the question of origin.

I have been attracted to the method of historical bootstrapping myself, in pedagogical contexts involving the teaching of Western texts in the Indian classroom (Burra 2021a). I now believe that it is misguided. Let me sketch four problems with the approach, which I will label the problems of *continuity, regress, origin,* and *justification.* It may be possible to solve these problems; what is important for my purposes is that they are acknowledged as such.

A. The problem of continuity

The method of historical bootstrapping appeals to an ongoing indigenous tradition of encounters with Western political

thought. The existence of such a tradition, it is thought, can justify contemporary engagement with Western thought in the face of swarajist doubts. Leaving aside the nature of the justification, for the moment, we may ask the question whether such a tradition exists in the first place.

To be sure, there are plenty of earlier encounters and episodes of engagement with Western thought. Raja Rammohan Roy has already been mentioned in this connection. To this one might add, among others, Jotiba Phule's connection with the writing of Thomas Paine; Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi's Hindi translation of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*; Gandhi's reworking into Gujarati of Plato's *Apology* as 'The Story of a Soldier of Truth' (Vasunia 2015); and the influence of John Dewey's thought on that of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

While I do not contest the existence of these episodes, I have my doubts as to whether they constitute a *tradition*. For the moment, it seems enough to say that it would seem odd for a contemporary political philosopher in India to think of their engagement with Western political thought as *continuing* such a tradition. It may be fruitful today to read Plato's *Apology* and think about its significance in our current political and intellectual context; but it is hard to say that in doing this we are part of a tradition that includes Gandhi and his interlocutors from a century ago.

The problem of continuity, then, is the problem of showing that the existence of such episodes in the past constitutes a tradition of such engagement with Western ideas.

B. The problem of regress

The second problem with the method of historical bootstrapping is that it is prone to a regress. If present engagement with Western

political thought is to be justified in the light of past engagement with such thought, we leave open the question whether the original engagement was itself justified? Were Raja Rammohun Roy and Gandhi, for instance, justified in *their* engagements with the West? The swarajist challenge is simply moved back by a few generations. As long as one is confident of the "Indian-ness" of the first contact, perhaps one can get away by bootstrapping one's current engagement with the West onto earlier histories of engagement; but the question of the Indian-ness of that first contact may also be challenged by later generations.[5]

C. The problem of origin

The question of first contact naturally leads to the third problem with the method of historical bootstrapping. Let us grant that there is a tradition of engagement with Western political thought, whose starting point is sufficiently "Indian" such that we can speak confidently of an *indigenous* tradition of such engagement, of a kind sufficient to defuse swarajist worries.

Now whenever we have an intermingling or borrowing between traditions there will be a first point of contact. Why privilege a starting point located in the *past*? To put the point another way: suppose there was no prior tradition of engagement which we could rely upon. Could we not then say that in our engagement with Western political thought we are inaugurating a *new* tradition? The proponent of historical bootstrapping grants that some modes of engagement with the West are potentially justifiable, because actually justified in some historical cases. There is then no bar in principle to such engagement being

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

justified in the present, even in the absence of any such tradition. We might say: here are some good reasons to engage with Western political thought. We've not done it before; let's start now.

D. The problem of justification

This brings me to the last, and most important, problem with the method of historical bootstrapping. How could the mere existence of a tradition of encounters with the West justify continuing it in the presence? One swarajist move (in its more extreme, nativist formulations) might be to agree that some forms of 'Indianization' from the West are harmless (tea, cricket?), but claim that this is not so for others (English, the law courts?). It might depend, for instance, on what has been displaced or distorted by the Western import.

But such a person might argue, the tradition of encounters with Western political thought are of the wrong sort; it's a tradition whose existence was a mistake and which ought not to survive. This is the sort of thing which we might say, for instance, about Indian traditions involving the justification of caste hierarchy and domination.

The historical fact (if it is a fact) that there have been earlier traditions of engagements with Western political thought does not then, by itself, justify any form of such engagement in the present. This is the deepest problem faced by the bootstrapping response to swarajist concerns.

I don't intend the four problems identified in this section to be "knock down" arguments against the method of bootstrapping. But they do require proponents of bootstrapping to be more self-conscious, and self-critical, of their response to

swarajist challenges. This in turn requires the swarajist challenges to be framed more carefully than is often the case.

III. The method of excavation

I turn now to another approach one might take with respect to swarajist concerns about engagement with the West. Faced with the challenge that a concept such as secularism is an *alien* concept, one might seek to provide an alternative genealogy of the concept within Indian traditions themselves. For instance, one might appeal to the views of historical figures such as Ashoka and Akbar on questions about respecting religious pluralism. In response to the claim – secularism is not *ours*, we say: *we* also had it (or something near enough like it). I will call this approach the 'method of excavation'.

For an application of this method, consider again the work of Rajeev Bhargava.[6] Bhargava introduces the possibility of alternative genealogies of secularism in "What is Secularism For?" (Bhargava 1998), in which he points out that European secularism can be seen as arising from two alternative historical models: the "church-state" model on the one hand, and the "religious-strife" model on the other.

On Bhargava's view, scholars such as TN Madan who reject secularism as alien make the mistake of thinking that the church-state model as the only available one from which a theory of secularism can be constructed. Even if secularism on the church-state model is rejected as alien, secularism drawing from the "religious-strife" model is not: (Bhargava 1998, 525–26), emphasis mine:

[6] My choice of Bhargava's work as a foil for the arguments I discuss is a historical accident, since some of these thoughts were developed in the context of a symposium on his work. I could just as easily have appealed to writings by other scholars.

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

In other work, Bhargava has attempted to establish a "religious-strife" genealogy of Indian secularism through the historical figures such as Ashoka. The appeal is of course not new, and can be traced to Nehru's attempt to appropriate Ashoka as a fore-runner of the modern-day secular state (Bhargava 2014, 173–74).

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

Men of religion have seldom, very seldom, been as tolerant as Ashoka. In order to convert people to their own faith they have seldom scrupled to use force and terrorism and fraud. The whole

of history is full of religious persecution and religious wars, and in the name of religion and of Gods perhaps more blood has been shed than in any other name. It is good therefore to remember how a great son of India, intensely religious, and the head of a powerful empire, behaved in order to convert people to his ways of thought. It is strange that any one should be so foolish as to think that religion and faith can be thrust down a person's throat at the point of the sword or a bayonet.

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

In this section I wish to outline a parallel set of four problems with the method of excavation, some of which have already been noted by Bhargava himself (he is careful to distance himself from the Nehruvian mode). Again, the point is not to reject the method outright, but rather to provide intellectual constraints for applications of the method to be philosophically satisfying. I will call them the problems of continuity, justification, selection, and translation. The first two are already familiar from the preceding section.

A. The problem of continuity

Let us accept that Ashoka's edicts display some concern for the reduction of religious strife, of a kind which resonates in the

present-day. This resonance does not establish the existence of an *ongoing* tradition of thinking about secularism or 'deep diversity' stemming from the reign of Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. After all, Ashoka has not been part of our historical consciousness for many centuries until James Prinseps deciphered the rock edicts in the middle of the 19th century. What we can get from the example of Ashoka is that *some* historical figures from the Indian past have displayed *some* concerns which seem similar to concerns we have today. But our articulation of those concerns does not build itself in conversation with the earlier tradition.

One is reminded here of a comment on a certain mode of thinking about the history of ideas, made by the intellectual historian John Dunn (Dunn, 1968):

> Apart from odd examples in the history of religious development or scientific discovery, few branches of the history of ideas have been written as the history of an activity…Reified reconstructions of a great man's more accessible notions have been compared with those of other great men; hence the weird tendency of much writing, in the history of political thought more especially, to be made up of what propositions in what great books remind the author of what propositions in what other great books.

B. The problem of translation

The problem of continuity is closely connected to another, which I will call the problem of translation. Bhargava explains the problem with characteristic clarity in an essay whose title, "Is There an Indian Political Theory?" echoes the themes of this talk (Bhargava, 2010). The reference is to attempt to provide

alternative genealogies of concepts such as secularism and equality:

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

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

In order to establish that ideas such as equality and secularism are *not* alien to the Indian scene by appealing to the ancient Indian past – and thus to defuse swarajist anxieties about traffic in these ideas today – we would have to establish that the

terms used in the past, and the contexts in which they were used, are at least *somewhat* similar to their present-day uses. The issue is not merely lexicographical: proponents of a radically contextual approach to the history of ideas, such as Quentin Skinner, would deny that this is even possible (Hansong Li, 2016).

Any swarajist attempts to excavate the Indian past, including those employed by the method of excavation, must find a way of responding to these concerns. I return to this point below.

C. The problem of justification

The problem of justification, again, is the problem of explaining how the fact that such traditions exist show that they ought to persist. The debates within which the historical bootstrapping move is often made are often normative in nature. Should we have freedom of speech? Should we treat people equally without regard to their religious beliefs or their sexual preferences? Should the state intervene in religious matters in order to protect the very vulnerable or marginalized? Whether or not we should do so seems to me clearly a question which is independent of the question of whether we *have* done so, or have even thought of doing so. Even if no such traditions existed, there would be good reasons to inaugurate them.

D. The problem of selection

One route into the problem of justification is to think of how a swarajist of the nativist variety might respond to historical evidence of Indian traditions of secularism, dissent, and so forth. They might say: yes, you have shown us that there were multiple discursive and dissenting traditions in the Indian past. But this does not settle the question of which tradition we *should* try to

extend into our Indian present. It's all very well to celebrate the *charvakās*, say (a favourite example of ancient Indian dissidence for modern Indian liberals); but they were mistaken in their hedonism and materialism. So too with depictions of sexuality in temple art and texts such as the *Kāmasūtra*. Even if there have been such traditions in the Indian past; there have also been more conservative sexual traditions, and it is these to which we should give our allegiance.

The problem of selection makes vivid the underlying issues of justification. Let us accept the accuracy, as a historical matter, of claims to indigenous traditions of thinking about concepts which are otherwise seen as modern or Western. For any normative claims in these traditions, there will be other traditions which reject these claims. History alone cannot answer the question of which of these traditions we should owe present-day allegiance, even if that were possible.

IV. Intimacy and estrangement

The methods of historical bootstrapping and excavation were supposed to respond to swarajist concerns on their own terms. In the last two sections, I have sketched some reasons to think that these responses are inadequate, even on their own terms. It may be that more sophisticated versions of these responses will escape the problems I identified.

I have not however shown that the underlying swarajist concerns are themselves illegitimate. Recall that I see as foundational to these concerns is a distinction between 'Indian' and 'Western' political thought, and a claim that there is a fundamental *asymmetry* between the traditions in terms of their appropriateness for thinking about Indian political realities. I now wish to discuss this issue directly.

I should note in passing one objection to my characterization of the swarajist concern.[7] Perhaps one should see the fundamental issue as involving, not the engagement with Western ideas *per se,* but the terms upon which such engagement takes place. For instance, K. C. Bhattacharya's concern is quite explicitly with the 'docile acceptance' of foreign ideas within a context of the 'forcible imposition' of Western culture. A rejection of ideals merely because they come from a foreign country is, for him, a form of "national conceit" (Bhattacharya [1931] 1977, 20). A similar thought is expressed in a famous passage by Mahatma Gandhi:

> 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. 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.

Here I should note two points. First, one might see in these formulations an alternative conception of *swaraj*, one involving thinking for oneself, autonomously, in a spirit of critical inquiry. I have no objection with swaraj construed in this way, as an *attitude* towards systems of thought, or a mode of engaging with them. This does indeed seem the right attitude to take. Note, however, that it has little to do with the presumed division of thought into Indian and Western. An uncritical appraisal of our *own* indigenous traditions would be, on this view, equally problematic.[8]

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[7] This was a point raised by Professor A. Raghuramaraju in discussion after the NBU talk.

[8] Bhattacharya is quite explicit about this point, though he thinks that the "danger of national conceit and the unthinking glorification of everything in our culture and depreciation of everything in other cultures appears to me, in

More importantly, for my purposes, is the fact that both Gandhi and Bhattacharya rely upon the division of traditions of thought into "Western" and "Indian," and identify only the latter as *ours*. This is core to the swarajist concerns I outlined at the beginning of this talk, in their pre-occupation with issues of foreignness and indigeneity. I have no objection to identifying bodies of thought by geographical origin, and in terms of a certain unity of concerns and methods – "Western" and "Indian" thought may be unproblematic labels in this regard.

What is problematic, however, is the issue of *identification* with one or the other of these traditions. What makes it the case that, say, Ashoka belongs in "my" (or Gandhi's) house, while Mill belongs to the house of someone else, in which we can enter only as guests? We need some philosophical justification for these claims to cultural and intellectual belonging.

This is a complex issue, and I will only make one point, which is that this identification cannot be based merely on familiarity with the tradition in question: for cultural familiarity is not a fact given in nature, but *made* by human beings in concrete political and intellectual contexts. A great deal of work – archaeological, lexicographical, political -- has to be done before we can see Ashoka as part of this nation, and characterize his concerns in a way that brings them to bear upon our own circumstances. This work is invisible to us in the present, and it allows us to stake a claim to belonging.

Were we to be faithful to the particularities of Ashoka's own situation over two thousand years ago, and try to insert his ideas into the present without mediation by a Nehru or a

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our circumstances, to require less stressing." In this respect, perhaps, our circumstances have changed since he wrote these words.

Bhargava, it is quite possible that we would be equally estranged from him as we are supposed to be from Western philosophers. This to me, is the crux of the matter. Recall L.P. Hartley's famous lines, quoted above: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." I think we should take this adage seriously when it comes to the question of indigeneity. If the problem with the "alien" concept (e.g., secularism or tolerance) has to do with inapplicability/inadaptability/incommensurability in our current context, then we do not – necessarily – solve the problem by substituting historical for geographical distance.

In addition, we need not assume that geographical distance is so hard to bridge by cultural and political work of the same kind. The intimacy which many Indians have with figures such as Marx and Christ may be no different in kind from that which others might have with Manu or Kautilya. And for the English educated Indian of Gokhale's generation, this would have been true also of Mill and Locke.

What would happen if we tried something similar for figures in the Western philosophical tradition today? One might attempt to "familiarize" the work of a figure like Locke, and find that he has little to say to us after all. But that would not be because he is un-Indian, but because what he has to say has little purchase on our own circumstances and concerns, given the particularities of our history, the natural of contemporary religions in India, and so forth. The question of origins here is a red herring – I am sure many writings produced at the same time on the Indian land mass would seem equally alien.

To the extent that swarajist anxieties are driven by an assumption of *asymmetry* between Indian and Western thought insofar as they speak to our concerns today, I think they are misguided. To this one might add a further point, which is that

metaphors of place and belonging can be misleading when applied to the realm of the intellect. It is true that one cannot be in two places at once, and also that one cannot change the cultural and geographical location of one's birth and growing up through later acts of choice. The idea that we belong *naturally* to intellectual traditions based out of the Indian land mass becomes attractive because these metaphors seem so apt.

However, other metaphors are possible as well. I find particularly attractive a metaphor from Rabindranath Tagore. It arises earlier in the exchange with Gandhi from which I just quoted. Introducing the metaphor of the "house," Tagore writes:

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.

Seen in this spirit, one might regard *both* Indian and Western traditions as being the common 'property' of all of us, though we might pick and choose from this common stock which traditions to identify with. Cultural and intellectual familiarity with a tradition may affect the process, but it will only be a part of the process.[9]

My aim in this section has been to defuse the swarajist concern with issues of division and belonging. I wish to conclude with a methodological observation, relating to the way in which intellectual history is mobilized in the methods of bootstrapping and excavation. There is a tradition associated with Collingwood which takes the point of engagement with intellectual history to be one of *defamiliarization.* Here is how Rawls puts the point in his lectures on the history of political philosophy (Rawls, 2008):

[9] I have explored some of these concerns with the Gandhi-Tagore contrast elsewhere, in the context of post-colonial pedagogy (Burra, 2021a).

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.

Rawls' attitude towards the study of historical texts and traditions is that their value to us lies in the way they *differ* from us, revealing the contingencies and limitations of our own points of view. We should note that swarajist concerns with the Indian past – as well as the responses of bootstrapping and excavation – do exactly the reverse. Rather than try to make the past unfamiliar, the aim is now to make it familiar enough for it to have something to say to us in the present.

This is not to say that Rawls' approach is the only one we might take towards intellectual history; but it is worth noting that adopting a swarajist lens commits us to philosophical methodologies which are themselves contested.

V. Conclusion

What, then, is 'Indian' about Indian political thought? I do not think we should offer a definitive answer to this question – there are many ways of being Indian, and many ways in which political thought might be said to be Indian. One takeaway from these remarks is that this question is less significant than it might seem.

If pressed to answer the question, however, I can do no better than cite the following lines from the late African philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, in a collection of essays titled *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Wiredu, 1980):

> We will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation, and we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike others…The test of a contemporary African philosopher's conception of African philosophy is whether it enables him to

> engage fruitfully in the activity of modern philosophizing with an African conscience.[10]

On this view of the matter, *one* way in which one can do 'Indian political thought' is by engaging in philosophical work which illuminates Indian political realities. Such philosophical work may involve an intimate engagement with the Western philosophical tradition. It needs no less Indian for that.[11]

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[10] My thanks to Anthony Appiah for pointing me towards this quotation.
[11] I have elsewhere elaborated upon this point in a discussion of the work of John Rawls, and how it might speak to the Indian scene (Burra, 2022).

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