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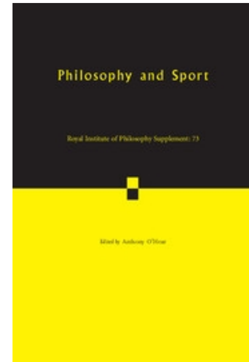

Philosophical Modernities: Polycentricity and Early Modernity in India

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Philosophical Modernities: Polycentricity and Early Modernity in India

JONARDON GANERI

Abstract
The much-welcomed recent acknowledgement that there is a plurality of philosophical traditions has an important consequence: that we must acknowledge too that there are many philosophical modernities. Modernity, I will claim, is a polycentric notion, and I will substantiate my claim by examining in some detail one particular non-western philosophical modernity, a remarkable period in 16th to 17th century India where a diversity of philosophical projects fully deserve the label 'modern'.

It used to be a commonplace in studies of modernity, and remains one still in philosophical historiography, that modernity is something that happened first, and uniquely, in Europe; and attempts were made to convert the supposition into a tautology through defnitions of modernity that exclude nonEuropean periodizations and geographies (for example, in terms of capitalist modes of production, the emergence of nation states and nationalist collective identities, the industrial revolution, secularization, and so on).[1] NonEuropean philosophies are traditional, and only European philosophy is modern. Progress of sorts occurred with the acknowledgement of the existence of alternative regional modernities, but the acknowledgement was tied to a centre/periphery model and to an associated ideology of European diffusionism. Eisenstadt, for instance, is willing to acknowledge 'multiple modernities',[2] but only insofar as these new modernities imitate and copy a first modernity centred in Europe. Post-colonial writers such as R. Radhakrishnan have

[1] The following quotation is representative: 'Historically, modernization is the process of change towards those types of social, economic and political systems that have developed in Western Europe and North America from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth' (Eisenstadt 'Multiple Modernities': 1). For similarly Eurocentric definitions of modernity, see also Giddens *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990); Hall and Gieben *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1992), 1–16

[2] Eisenstadlt, Shmuel N. (2000) 'Multiple modernities', *Daedalus* **129**(1): 1–29

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struggled with what they term 'the curse of derivativeness',[3] and have sought to find in the interplay between colonised and coloniser, between tradition and modernity, a more dialectical pattern of engagement.

What I will argue for in this essay is a more radical rejection of the commonplace picture. I will claim that we should think instead of modernity as a happening potentially indigenous to any culture, irrespective of period or place, that like the famous Indian banyan tree it is 'polycentric', here borrowing Susan Friedman's very useful term. 'The new geography of modernism', Friedman says, 'needs to locate many centres of modernity across the globe, to focus on the cultural traffic linking them, and to interpret the circuits of reciprocal influence and transformation that take place within highly unequal state relations'[4]; it involves a recognition that these modernities are different, not derivative. There is just one way to substantiate such a claim, and that is through the detailed, painstaking, excavation of modernities that have been lost or lost sight of, and I will spend the remainder of this talk doing precisely that, unearthing an incipient early modernity in pre-colonial Indian philosophical theory.

The arrival of modernity at a certain point in the history of philosophy seemingly admits of two non-compossible explanations. One model presents modernity as involving a thorough rejection of the ancient – its texts, its thinkers, its methods – as starting afresh and from the beginning. This was how the two figures who are emblematic of the 'new philosophy' in Europe, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650), chose to present themselves.[5]

[3] Radhakrishnan, R. (2002) 'Derivative discourses and the problem of signification', *The European Legacy* **7**(6): 783–95

[4] Freidman, Susan (2006) 'Periodizing modernism: postcolonial modernities and the space/time borders of modernist studies', *Modernism/Modernity* 13(3): 429

[5] Bacon: 'There was but one course left, therefore,—to try the whole thing anew upon a better plan, and to commence a total reconstruction of sciences, arts and all human knowledge, raised upon the proper foundations.' (*Instauratio magma, Preface*; 1857–74, vol. 4: 8 in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis and D. D. Heath (eds)(London: Longmans)). Descartes: 'As soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters... For it seemed to me that much more truth could be found in the reasonings which a man makes concerning matters that concern him than in those which some scholar makes in his study.' (*Discourse*, AT vi. 9; 1984: 115, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, John Cottingham (ed.)(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)). 'The following

A second model locates modernity not in a rejection of the past but in a profound re-orientation with respect to it. The ancient texts are now not thought of as authorities to which one must defer, but regarded as the source of insight in the company of which one pursues the quest for truth. This new attitude towards the texts does not imply abandonment but a transformation in their place within inquiry, a change in conception of one's duties towards the past. Going forward doesn't mean forgetting where one has been.

The first model has dominated the standard history of philosophy, which speaks of a revolution in philosophy in early seventeenth century Europe, one in which the Aristotelianism of the schools – with its obscure terminology, doctrine of forms and final causes, and schoolmen who 'loved Aristotle more than the truth'[6] – is cast aside in favour of a new mechanical conception of natural explanation. Recently, however, this familiar account has begun to unravel. John Cottingham says, for example, that 'any picture of Descartes as a lone innovator setting out on a new quest for certainty cannot survive serious scrutiny',[7] while Dan Garber, pointing out that Descartes' correspondents did not find his project seriously in conflict with their own progressive Aristotelian ambitions, speaks of 'the revolution that did not happen in 1637',[8] the year of publication of the *Discourse*. One of those correspondents, Libert Froimont, saw in Descartes' self-portrayal in the *Discourse* the renewal of a very ancient spirit:

> I seem to see a Pythagoras or a Democritus, a voluntary exile from his homeland who has traveled to the Egyptians, to the Brahmans, and around the entire globe, to investigate the nature of things and the nature of the universe.[9]

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text draws from material in Ganeri *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700 C.E.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012).'

[6] Mercer, Christia (1993) 'The Vitality and Importance of Early Modern Aristotelianism', in Tom Sorell (ed.), *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 34

[7] Cottingham, John (1993) 'A New Start? Cartesian Metaphysics and the Emergence of Modern Philosophy', in Tom Sorell (ed.) The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 150

[8] Garber, Daniel (1988) 'Descartes, the Aristotelians, and the Revolution That Did Not Happen in 1637', The Monist 71(6): 471–486.

[9] Froimont 1637, quoted in Garber 'Descartes, the Aristotelians, and the Revolution That Did Not Happen in 1637': 476

New work has revealed a complexity in Descartes' relationship with late scholasticism, including a tension between the self-presentation of the *Discourse* and views expressed in his private correspondence.[10] In another vein, Julian Martin has described Francis Bacon's self-depiction as 'a studied pose', adding that 'when Bacon painted himself and his natural philosophy as modern and novel, he was moved to do so by local concerns and ambitions'.[11]

There can be no doubt but that the new philosophers in seventeenth century Europe were profoundly innovative, but the standard historiography simultaneously distorts two aspects of their relationship with the ancient. First, it misrepresents the dynamism and openness of progressive peripateticism. Many late scholastics, it is now becoming evident, were highly original in interpreting Aristotle and in fact saw no incompatibility between a re-cast Aristotelianism and the new philosophy.[12] The standard picture, furthermore, radically simplifies the complex ways in which the moderns drew upon the ancients. In the work of Leibniz, Spinoza, Basso, and Gassendi, what one finds is a firm conviction that there is truth in the ancient philosophers, truth which might well stand in need of radical rejuvenation and reconfirguration, but truth which provides a gateway to new philosophy and is not a roadblock to it. Leibniz described himself as seeking a 'reformed philosophy', one which put the mechanical philosophy on sound ancient foundations. Spinoza's engagement with ancient Stoicism has also, recently, begun to be more thoroughly explored and acknowledged (eg. Kristeller).[13] Susan James' assessment is that 'much of the substance and structure of the *Ethics* – its central doctrines and the connections between them – constitute a reworking of Stoicism'.[14] Something

[10] Ariew, Roger. *Descartes and the Late Scholastics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Secada, Jorge. *Cartesian Metaphysics: The Scholastic Origins of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

[11] Martin, Julian (1993). 'Francis Bacon, Authority, and the Moderns', in Tom Sorell (ed.) *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 74

[12] Schmitt, Charles. Aristotle and the Renaissance (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Mercer, 'The Vitality and Importance of Early Modern Aristotelianism' (1993)

[13] Kristeller, P. O. (1984). 'Stoic and Neoplatonic Sources in Spinoza's Ethics', History of European Ideas 5(1): 1–15.

[14] James, Susan (1993). 'Spinoza the Stoic', in Tom Sorell (ed.) *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 291

similar is true, as Richard Sorabji has recently demonstrated, of John Locke's theory of conscience. The fact is that the early modern philosophers had a far more subtle and interesting understanding of the relationship between their new work and the past than the standard model can accommodate. It is simply not the case that these early modern philosophers were merely residually scholastic; rather, a revival and retrieval of the ancient and a transformation of it into the modern was at the heart of their philosophical method. And that is not so different from those progressive Aristotelians who 'draw from the *springs* of Aristotle and the ancients rather than from the *cisterns* of the Scholastics'.[15]

When we come to look at early modern India it is especially important that we do so with eyes not blurred by the standard historiography of the battle between ancients and moderns in Europe. I am aware of no Indian thinker from the period who makes the sort of audacious self-proclamation that one finds in Bacon or Descartes, a sweeping dismissal of the ancient tradition and of everything associated with it. And yet a modernity there certainly was, one which had its equivalents of Leibniz, Spinoza, Basso, and Gassendi on the one hand, and Morin, Sennert, and Weigel on the other. I believe that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a remarkable project began to take shape in the Sanskritic philosophical world. It is not just that the philosophers are willing to describe themselves as 'new', though that is indeed a striking feature of the period. By the end of the seventeenth century we find in a work by Mahādeva a daunting array of terms denoting the new:

New	(*navya*)	Gaṅgeśa et al.
Newer	(*navyatara*)	Later Mithilā thinkers
Modern	(*navīna*)	Raghunātha
Very modern	(*atinavīna*)	Post-Raghunātha thinkers
Contemporary	(*ādhunika*)	Contemporaries of Mahādeva.[16]

[15] Loemaker, L. (ed.) *Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1956),124

[16] Mahādeva Punaṭāmakara (1967). Precious Jewel of Reason (Nyāyakaustubha) Anumāna-khanḍạ. Damodara Lal Gosvami ed. (Varanasi: Vidya Mandir Press, Saraswati Bhavana Texts 33, Part II); Mahādeva Punaṭāmakara (1982). Precious Jewel of Reason (Nyāyakaustubha), Śabdakhanḍạ. V. Subrahmanya Sastri ed. (Tanjore: T. M. S. S. M. Library). (*Nyāya-kaustubha*)

Yet others before them had done the same, and the question is in what this self-attributed newness consists and what the self-affirmation means. Was it only a newness in the ways that the ideas of the ancient authorities are described, a newness of style but not of substance? In asking this question, I have in mind Sheldon Pollock's well-known assessment of the new intellectuals of seventeenth century India, that their work displays a 'paradoxical combination of something very new in style subserving something very old in substance.'[17] That was certainly how a pre-modern, Jayanta, at the end of the first millennium, conceived of his own originality:

> How can we discover a new truth? So one should consider our novelty only in the rephrasing of words.[18]

This characteristically pre-modern attitude of deference to the past changes fundamentally in the work of Raghunātha Śiromaṇi (c.1460–1540). Raghunātha belongs to a tradition of philosophical speculation known as Nyāya, a term more or less synonymous with the appeal to reason and evidence-based critical inquiry – rather than scriptural exegesis – as the proper method of philosophy. Raghunātha concludes his most innovative work, the *Inquiry into the Nature of Things,* with a call to philosophers to think for themselves about the arguments:

> The demonstration of these matters which I have carefully explained is contrary to the conclusions reached by all the other disciplines. These matters spoken of should not be cast aside without reflection just because they are contrary to accepted opinion; scholars should consider them carefully. Bowing to those who know the truth concerning matters of all the sciences, bowing to people like you [the reader], I pray you consider my

[17] Pollock (2001) 'The Death of Sanskrit', Comparative Studies in Society and History 43(2): 407

[18] kuto vā nūtanaṃ vastu vayam utprekṣitum kṣamāḥ | vacovinyāsavaicitrya mātram atra vicāryatām || (Jayanta Bhaṭṭa. *Nyāya-mañjarī*. With the commentary Granthibhaṅ ga by Cakradhara, Gaurinath Shastri (ed.) (Varanasi: Sampurnananda Sanskrit University, 1982): 1, v. 8). Though certainly exaggerated, Jayanta's disclaimer is still less than that of the influential eighth-century Buddhist writer Śāntideva: 'Nothing new will be said here; nor have I any skill in composition. Therefore I do not imagine that I can benefit others. I have done this [simply] to improve my own mind' (na hi kiṃcitapūrvam atra vācyaṃ na ca saṃgrathanakauśalaṃ mamāsti | ata eva ne me parārthacintā svamano vāsayituṃ kṛtaṃ mayedam || (*Bodhicary āvatāra*1.2).

> sayings with sympathy. This method, though less honoured, has been employed by wise men of the past; namely that one ask other people of learning to consider one's own words.[19]

The new attitude was summarised at the time by Abū'l Faẓl, in a work – the *Āīn-i-Akbarī* – which relates the intellectual climate during the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar. Abū'l Faẓl describes the philosophers as those who 'look upon testimony as something filled with the dust of suspicion and handle nothing but proof'.[20] In the writings of those philosophers who follow Raghunātha from about the middle of the sixteenth century until the end of the seventeenth there is a fundamental metamorphosis in epistemology, metaphysics, semantics, and philosophical methodology. The works of these philosophers – some of whom lived in Raghunātha's home-town of Navadvīpa in Bengal, others in the newly invigorated city of Vārāṇasī – are full of phrases that are indicative of a new attitude, phrases like 'this should be considered further (*iti dhyeyam*)', 'this needs to be reflected on (*iti cintyam*)', 'this is the right general direction to go in (*iti dik)*'. Openness to inquiry into the problems themselves, a turn towards the facts, is what drives the new work, not merely a new exegesis of the ancient texts, along with a sense that they are engaged in a radical and on-going project. The spirit which Raghunātha sought to provoke is clearly on display in a passage which asks about the meaning of historical and fictional terms:

> How does it come about that, from hearing the word 'Daśaratha', people now, who never saw Daśaratha [the father of the legendary king Rāma] come to know of him? Likewise how, from the words [for fictional entities like] 'hobgoblin', do others come to know of them? I leave this for attentive scholars to meditate upon. I shall not expand further here.[21]

[19] Raghunātha Śiromaṇi (1915). Inquiry into the Truth about Things (Padārtha-tattva-nirūpaṇa). V. P. Dvivedi (ed.) (Varanasi). Text and trans. Karl H. Potter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Harvard Yenching Institute Studies, vol. 17, 1957), 89, 90

[20] [1597] 1873: 537 (cited in D. C. Bhattacharya 1937. 'Sanskrit Scholars of Akbar's Time', *Indian Historical Quarterly* **13**: 31–36). Abu'l Fazl does not mention Raghunātha in the list of philosophers he provides to accompany this description, Raghunātha presumably already dead when Akbar came to the throne; but he does name someone with close ties to Raghunātha, Vidyānivāsa, and he also mentions Raghunātha's best-known student.

[21] Raghunātha Śiromaṇi (1915). *Inquiry into the Truth about Things* (Padārtha-tattva-nirūpaṇa). V. P. Dvivedi (ed.) (Varanasi). Text and

Other branches of scholarship, including linguistics (*vyākaraṇa*), philosophical theology (*advaita* and *viśiṣṭādvaita vedānta*), ritual exegesis (*mīmāṃsā*), and jurisprudence (*dharmaśāstra*), encountered early modernity in ways that borrow from but do not always agree that of the 'new reason', the later Navya Nyāya. Particularly worthy of notice are the Kerala mathematical astronomers, whose sensational work in the foundations of infinitesimal calculus and spherical geometry is increasingly being appreciated.[22]

The existence of this modernity, I have emphasised, can be seen only when we free ourselves from the idea that modernity involves a complete rejection of the ancient sources. Our philosophers still, for example, write commentaries, and still use concepts and categories that might, if looked at from a distance, seem archaic. What must be recognised is that the mere activity of writing a commentary, though now strongly associated with conservative scholasticism, does not by itself tell one very much about the author's attitude towards the text being commented on. The fundamental role of a commentary was to mediate a conversation between the past and the present. It therefore offers *us* a route into the question that lies at the heart of *our* study of early modernity in the sixteenth and seventeenth century: the question of *their* sense of *their* duties towards, or separation from, the ancient philosophical world. There are different sorts of commentary, and a fundamental

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trans. Karl H. Potter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Harvard Yenching Institute Studies, vol. 17, 1957), 76

[22] Nīlakaṇṭha (1444–1545) and Jyeṣṭhadeva (c. 1530) are exemplary figures. Jyeṣṭhadeva's Malayalam *Rationales in Mathematical Astronomy*, for example, contains results, using methods closely analogous to the infinitesimal calculus, for computing the equation of centre and latitudinal motion of Mercury and Venus, derivations in spherical astronomy, and proofs of the infinite series for π, the arc-tangent and the sine functions. See Sharma, K.V., Ramasubramanian, K., and Sriniva, M. D. and Sriram, M. S. Ganita-yukti-bhāsāạ̄ (*Rationales in Mathematical Astronomy*) of Jyesṭḥ adeva (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008); Narasimha, Roddam (2009). 'The Chequered Histories of Epistemology and Science', in Bharati Ray (ed.), *Different Types of History*. *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, vol. 14, part 4 (Delhi: Pearson Longman). Raju presents the case for thinking that Keralan mathematics was transmitted to early modern Europe (Raju, C. K. (2007). Cultural Foundations of Mathematics: The Nature of Mathematical Proof and the Transmission of the Calculus from India to Europe in the 16th Century. History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization, vol. 10, part 4 (Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations).).

distinction is between those whose ambition is to clarify or systematize the 'truths' already in the ancient treatise, and those which are using the treatise in the process of a creative pursuit of an inquiry into the truth itself. Modernity expresses itself as a distinctive way of reading the past, and in our period this also finds a voice in a new genre of commentary, the commentary which digs up the deep or hidden meaning (*gūḍhārtha*) in an ancient text. A mistaken understanding of the ambitions of commentary has also led to a tendency to read new developments back into the original works, with the result that the originality of the later thinkers tends to disappear from view.

Other works structure themselves as auto-commentarial glosses on groups of tersely stated principles (*sūtra*s; *kārikā*s), in a style familiar to historians of early modern European philosophy through texts like Spinoza's *Ethics* and Descartes' *Principles*. Raghunātha is, nevertheless, also striking in his new promotion of the genre of philosophical treatise in which a problem is discussed directly; his *Inquiry into the Nature of Things* is just such a work. In general, however, the discursive style in the works of the early modern Indian philosophers – mostly devoid of boastful self-assertion – can make it easy to overlook the originality of their ambitions. So the relation between style and substance is more complex: innovations in style sometimes served to camouflage innovativeness about content.

Central to later Navya-Nyāya, the 'new reason', the school founded by Raghunātha, were three ideas. The first was that methods of inquiry have to be evidence-based and collaborative, relying on proof-strategies that are open to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation and involving reasoned decision-making mechanisms in multi-agent environments. The second idea was that of a stratified or layered conception of the world, in which atomism at the lowest level is compatible with the reducible or irreducible reality of other categories of entity, including composite bodies, at higher levels. The third was that a new philosophy needs a new language, one in which the underlying logical form of philosophical claims is exposed and transparent, and which can therefore serve the needs of demonstration in a calculus of relations. These key ideas – and the concomitant reworking of the ancient tradition they presumed – were all essentially in place by the middle of the seventeenth century. Indeed, we can read two very remarkable works of Jayarāma, the *Garland of Principles* and the *Garland of Categories*, as constituting a direct intellectual confrontation between the 'new reason' and Cartesian new philosophy. 'Cartesian' ideas are rejected in favour of a philosophy that could have held its own among any of the early modern philosophies of later seventeenth century

European thought. Generally speaking, what we can say is that early modern forms of philosophical inquiry in India are governed by data drawn from logical form and linguistic practice rather than the microscopic and distal observation of natural phenomena. Philosophy in early modern India made the discipline rest instead on the sort of linguistic turn that characterised, much later, the origins of analytical philosophy in European thought. Bearing this point in mind, it is no surprise that profound affinities should have been discovered between early modern theory in India and twentieth century analytical philosophy; I have in mind in particular the discoveries made by Bimal Matilal,[23] in whose name the Matilal lectureship at the University of London was created some years ago.

Raghunātha's fundamental criticism of the orthodoxy might be said to consist in the thought that the traditional Vaiśeṣika view of the world is myopic and flat, seeing only a mechanistic space of objects, compounded from atoms, bearing qualities of various sorts, and moving about in various ways. The inclusion into this picture of human inquirers has them fall under an identical descriptive model, located in space and time, displaying a range of qualities, many of which overlap with those of ordinary physical objects. That might seem like an attractively naturalistic picture, and later 'new reason' thinkers are keen to preserve the naturalism, but the very flatness of the model causes serious fault-lines within it. What it fails to see, according to Raghunātha, are the irreducibly normative structures introduced by the presence of thinking beings who represent and reason about the world they inhabit, and have duties and rights with respect to each other.[24] To say that we therefore need new categories is just a way of claiming that the old model can not accommodate these facts; and part of the point is to throw down a challenge to his contemporaries to show how, if at all, a naturalistic reduction is to be achieved. The force of Raghunātha's challenge is to call for an account of just how to achieve an acknowledgement of the reality of features of human life which the orthodox model seems ill-equipped to accommodate without abandoning naturalism as that model conceives of it (a unified explanation of all objects of inquiry including inquirers).

[23] E.g. Matilal, Bimal Krishna. Perception: *An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

[24] The question about whether there are irreducibly normative properties continues to be a live issue of debate. Many agree with Raghunatha that there are; for example, Shafer-Landau. Moral Realism: A Defence (Oxford University Press, 2003).

In the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the town of Navadvīpa, Raghunātha's home town, which is also known by its latinized name Nadia or Nuddea, was one of the great sites of scholarship in South Asia. During his lifetime Navadvīpa was a place of great scholarship under a comparatively peaceful and cosmopolitan Muslim rule, creating the conditions for an Islamic Bengal politically independent of the Northern Indian sultanate, and drawing Bengal into relationship with the *khalifah* of Baghdad and a wider Muslim world. Considerable historical documentation relates to Navadvīpa in the period, in the form of Islamic histories of Bengal, biographies-cum-hagiographies of the Vaiṣṇava saint Caitanya, documentation internal to the scholarly community of Navadvīpa, chronicles of the Mughal court, and, for the final years, the records of the East India Company. One text from the period concludes by saying that it was written in Navadvīpa in 1494, a place full of learning and learned men, under the peaceful governance of Majlisav-arvaka.[25] Raghunātha, of course, would have been among them. In the century to follow, students from all over the subcontinent, indeed from Nepal and possibly even Tibet, were attracted to a strict programme of studies in the 'new reason', a vigorous intellectual community, and the eventual prospect of prestigious certification by title. The programme of studies was provided in ṭols run by a series of celebrated paṇḍits, whose more important works were frequently transcribed and swiftly distributed throughout India.

It is indeed of enormous significance that ours should be a period of strong Persianate influence and Islamicate power. The problem is to square this fact with another: that one finds very few direct traces, if any, of Islamic or Arabic ideas in the work of the Sanskrit philosophers of the time. It is not at all similar to the situation in astronomy, for example, where the confrontation between ancient Hindu cosmological models and the new Arabic sciences is a topic of heated debate. In philosophy, the causality, if it exists at all, is much more indirect. The Persianate context nevertheless created incentives that had not existed before. One fact to note is that the brightest and best Sanskrit intellectuals were actively encouraged, for instance by Akbar's great minister the Hindu Ṭoḍarmal, to learn Persian and join Mughal imperial office. Those who preferred instead to remain within the intellectual world of Sanskrit faced a very clear challenge to demonstrate the

25 Mahādevācārya Siṃhā's commentary on Bhāvabhūti's *Malatimādhava (*Sāhitya Pariṣat Patrikā, 245; D. C. Bhattacharya Vāṅgālīr Sārasvat Avadān: Baṅge Navya-nyāya Carcā (Calcutta: Sahitya Parisạt, 1952), 35).

relevance and vitality of that world.[26] They did this by drawing on its resources without burying themselves within its folds. If in Europe power lay with the Aristotelians in the university departments, in India it was located in the Islamicate administration. By not becoming a part of it, the new philosophers were, one could say, in a state of internal exile. Modernity was the alternative to irrelevance. Another possibility is that rather than writing directly about Islamic thought they wrote instead about constructed surrogates within the Sanskrit milieu, with Advaita Vedānta in particular serving as a pretext for the examination of Islamic ideas. In any case what is clear is that the sheer presence of alternative modalities of thought presented motivations and opportunities that could not have existed before.

India in the seventeenth century, the century after Akbar, was in intellectual overdrive. Muslim, Jaina and Hindu intellectuals produced work of tremendous vitality, and ideas circulated around India, through the Persianate and Arabic worlds, and out to Europe and back. For a flavour of the times let us fix our gaze on a single year, the year 1656. In India, this was the year in which a long running process of religious isomorphism, pioneered by Akbar's chronicler Abu'l Fazl and orchestrated around Ibn al'Arabi's idea of unity in being (*wa ḥdat al-wujūd*), reached fulfilment in Dārā Shukoh's grand project to translate fifty-two Upaniṣads into Persian, a project for the sake of which he assembled in Vārāṇasī (Benares; aka. Kāśī) a large team of bilingual scholars. Dārā believed that he could establish that the differences between Hinduism and Islam were largely terminological, and even that the Upaniṣads can be read as a sort of commentary upon the Qur'ān. The fallout from this remarkable project of Dārā, Akbar's great-grandson and heir-apparent to the Mughal throne, would reverberate throughout the period and long afterwards. (And I am happy to see that today is the opening day of a new exhibition on the Mughal Empire at the British Museum).

1656 would also be the year in which the French philosopher and physician François Bernier would leave behind him the France of *les libertins érudits* on a journey that would bring him soon to Mughal India. In Bernier's travel writings we will find a fragment of

[26] An example is Bhārat Candra Raī, a prominent scholar in the court of Kṛṣṇa Candra. According to an early report, 'his fondness for Sanskrit studies displeased his relations, who thought that an acquaintance with Muhammadan literature was a better passport to wealth and distinction than the Vedas and Purāṇas.' (Wilson, W. W. (1877). A *Statistical Account of Bengal*; vol. 2: Districts of Nadiyā and Jessor (London: Trubner & Co. Reprinted 1973, D. K. Publishing House, Delhi): 155–6).

testimony to the aftermath of Dārā Shukoh's translational project. Before embarking on his travels, Bernier had been the protégé of the early modern philosopher, scientist, and mathematician Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655). Indeed it was Bernier who would eventually – on his return to France – devote himself to making Gassendi's work available to French and British audiences. Before doing so, however, he was to spend years as the court physician first of Dārā Shukoh and then of Aurangzeb. In a letter written from Shiraz in 1667, some ten years after the Vārāṇasī project, Bernier describes how he had come to know one of the paṇḍits whom Dārā Shukoh had used, someone fluent in both Sanskrit and Persian, how they had exchanged the latest medical and philosophical knowledge, and, fascinatingly, how he had translated work by Descartes and Gassendi into Persian for the paṇḍit's benefit:

> Do not be surprised if without knowledge of Sanskrit I am going to tell you many things taken from books in that language; you will know that my Agha, Danishmand Khān, paid for the presence of one of the most famous paṇḍits in India, who before had been pensioned by Dārā Shukoh, the oldest son of Shāh Jahāṇ, and that this paṇḍit, apart from attracting the most learned scientists to our circle, was at my side for over three years. When I became weary of explaining to my Agha the latest discoveries of William Harvey and Pequet in anatomy, and to reason with him on the philosophy of Gassendi and Descartes, which I translated into Persian (because that is what I did during five or six years) it was up to our paṇḍit to argue.[27]

It is of considerable interest to those who are interested in the global circulation of ideas to be told here that the work of Descartes, by this time the leading French philosopher and a key figure in the Early Enlightenment, was available to the Vārāṇasī paṇḍits already in the early 1660s, barely ten years after his death. If Bernier's testimony is reliable, the migration of ideas was already remarkably swift. As for the name of Bernier's paṇḍit, and the nature of his reaction to the work of Descartes or Gassendi, that is a story which Bernier

[27] 'Letter to Monsieur Chapelain, Despatched from Chiras in Persia, the 4th October 1667', translated in Bernier (1934 [1670–1]). *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Gran Mogol*, 4 vols (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1670–1671); edited as Voyage dans les États du Grand Mogol, France Bhattacharya (Paris: Fayard, 1981). Trans. Irvind Brock, Travels in the Mogul Empire AD 1656–1668 (London: W. Pickering 1834; 3rd edn), 323–5.

neglected to tell. He has now been identified[28] as the very influential scholar-poet Kavīndra Sarasvatī, an important mediary between the Sanskrit intelligentsia and the Mughal court, and someone who built up a great library of beautifully transcribed manuscripts.[29] The patron of Bernier and Kavīndra during this period was the Persian nobleman Danishmand Khān, who was the only person to oppose the capital sentence against Dārā[30] and who afterwards offered Kavīndra and Bernier employment. His generosity and openness created the space for a remarkable exchange of French, Persian and Indian philosophical ideas in the three years from 1658/9 to 1661/2. Kavīndra was on good terms with perhaps the most important of the 'new reason' philosophers in Vārāṇasī, Jayarāma Nyāya-pañcānana. It would be during this period that Jayarāma would write two very unusual and significant works, *The Garland of Principles about Reason*, and the *Garland of Categories*.

Some of the most powerful intellects of South Asia were working in Vārāṇasī and Navadvīpa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among them were prominent contributors to the revitalised 'new reason', and it seems very probable that some would be among the 'learned scientists' who associated with François Bernier.[31] These philosophers were engaging in a profound and radical dialogue, with each other and with the tradition from which they had

[28] Gode, P. K. (1954). 'Bernier and Kavīndrācārya Sarasvatī at the Moghal Court', in P. K. Gode, Studies in Indian Literary History (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan), vol. 2: 364–379.

[29] Shastri, Haraprasad (1912). 'Dakshini Panḍ ị ts at Benares', Indian Antiquary **XLI**: 7–13. Gode, P. K. (1945). 'Some Evidence About the Location of the Manuscript Library of Kavīndracharya Sarasvati at Benares in A.D. 1665', in C. Kunhan Raja (ed.), *Jagadvijayachandas of Kavindracharya* (Bikaner: Anup Sanskrit Library). Shastri tells us that 'he was a great collector of manuscripts. It is not known how many thousands of manuscripts he collected, but all the manuscripts of his library bear in large, bold, and beautiful Devanāgarī character his signature *sarva-vidyā-nidhāna-kavīndra-sarasvatī*. That signature is a guarantee for the correctness and accuracy of the manuscript. It is not known when and how the library was broken up, but the manuscripts of his library can now be procured in Benares, and they are preferred by all Paṇḍits to other manuscripts.'

[30] Smith, V. A. (ed.) *The Oxford History of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn., 1923), 415, 425.

[31] Jayarāma, for instance, who knew Bernier's discussant, Kavīndra Sarasvatī, might well have been one of them. Bernier reports that he was introduced to 'the six most learned paṇḍits in the town' of Vārāṇasī (Bernier, *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Gran Mogol*, 342).

emerged. Educational networks centred on individuals and their families provided the structures needed for the 'new reason' to flourish in Islamicate India, but I would also argue that their very nature, particular the fiscal arrangements surrounding them, hampered as well as nurtured innovation. It is striking that several of the most original 'new reason' philosophers existed on the periphery of these structures, benefiting from them without being too closely implicated in their perpetuation. Others were able to participate in broader networks, such as those existing in Navadvīpa at the time of Raghunātha, or the type of informal umbrella of association created by a patron like Danishmand Khān, which 'brought together a Frenchman of Paris, a Muslim of Persia and a Brahmin of Benares'.[32]

I believe that in a very complex political and intellectual climate the early modern 'new reason' thinkers were developing philosophical ideas of great radicality and originality, initiating a line of philosophical inquiry that did not so much run its course as was brought to a virtual stand-still, in the first instance by the collapse in stable Mughal power and patronage, and in the second by the disruption caused to established patterns for conducting and financing education by the British imposition of new fiscal arrangements and educational policies. Work in the 'new reason' continued into the nineteenth and twentieth century in an educational set-up now sharply bifurcated between low-prestige traditional networks and well-funded colonial colleges and universities.[33] Sheldon Pollock writes that 'when colonialism made the norms of Europe the norms of India the Sanskrit intellectual formation melted like so much snow in the light of a brilliant, pitiless sun'.[34] I don't see in contemporaneous European epistemology ideas so superior to the Indian ideas surveyed by Mahādeva as to have been powerful enough in and of themselves to accomplish this: what caused the dissolution of Sanskrit culture under colonialism was the dismembering of the systems of education and patronage that held that culture together, along with the simultaneous creation of well-funded colonial universities and colleges. More importantly, it was precisely the 'norms of

[32] Gode, P. K. 'Bernier and Kavīndrācārya Sarasvatī at the Moghal Court', 376

[33] See Krishna, Daya. *Developments in Indian Philosophy from Eighteenth Century Onwards. History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, vol. 10 part 1 (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2001).

[34] Pollock (2001). 'The New Intellectuals in Seventeenth century India', The Indian Economic and Social History Review **38**, 24

India', its modern model of engaging the new in a dialogue with the old, of the outsider with the insider, which enabled it to emerge from British colonialism if not unscathed then at least uncrushed.

Early modernity in India consists in the formation of a new philosophical self, one which makes it possible meaningfully to conceive of oneself as engaging the ancient and the alien in conversation. The Sufi Dārā Shukoh, Akbar's great grandson, is an exemplary early modern thinker, his belief that the Upaniṣads could be read as a commentary on the Qu'rān envisaged a relationship that was based neither on deference nor on rejection.[35] For Dārā the Hindu text was not an authority to which Islam must defer but a partner in a single quest for truth – his sectarian contemporaries' inability to make that distinction cost him his life. The Jaina philosopher Yaśovijaya Gaṇi is a quintessential early modern thinker too: in his case this was due to his search of a theory of individuals and community in which liberal political values occupy the centre stage. Yaśovijaya articulates a key feature of the early modern self when he says that public discussion must rest in balance, neutrality and an openness to the reasonable opinions of others.

What distinguishes the modernity of the 'new reason' philosophers is a new sense of one's duties towards the past. They saw themselves as engaging in 'dialogues with the dead',[36] not in deference, but to collaborate in a new search for the truth. I have characterized *early* modernity not as real modernity mixed up in a confused muddle with premodern habits, as many historians of early modern Europe do, but as the embodiment of a distinctive understanding of one's duties towards the past. The texts of 'new reason' philosophers are full of exhortations to the reader to direct their attention to what matters. The *Inquiry*, in particular, is a challenge: deliberately provocative, it led other philosophers to a far-reaching and sophisticated reformation of realism. The new spirit is succinctly captured by Veṇīdatta at the end of his *Embellishment of the Categories*. He appeals to a model of reasoning as 'adaptation' (*ūha*) and claims that an adaptation of the ancient metaphysics is legitimate as long as it done on the basis

[35] Dārā Shukoh (1929 [1655]). *Majma-ul-Barhain, or The Mingling of the Two Oceans by Prince Muhammad Dārā Shikuh*. M. Mahfuzul-Haq (ed.) and trans. (New Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1929; 2006 edn); Dārā Shukoh (1957 [1656]). *Sirr-i Akbar: The Oldest Translation of the Upanisạds from Sanskrit into Persian*. Tara Chand & S. M. Raza Jalali Nayni (eds) (Tehran: Taban, 1957).

[36] Curley, Edwin (1986). 'Dialogues with the Dead', Synthese 67(1): 2249.

of a proper deliberation.[37] Veṇīdatta here finds a new application for a conception of reason as modification or adaptation (*ūha*) that had already achieved considerable theoretical articulation, especially in the work of Mīmāṃsā ritualists who sought rationally to adapt the ancient ritual prescriptions to suit the circumstances of contemporary ritual performance. This is the *via moderna*, working with the ancients but not hamstrung by them. Raghunātha revealed himself to be at best uncomfortable with the idea that one can be a reductionist and a realist at the same time: for him the way to defend claims about metaphysical autonomy was by the identification of new irreducible categories of being. The position which emerges as the most attractive in the seventeenth century, consists in a new demonstration that realism is not, as the earlier tradition assumes, incompatible with reduction. The ability to see that there is a way to escape the ancient antinomy produced by the false dichotomy between realism and reduction is one of the great 'conceptual breaks' of the period. It enabled the emergence of a new natural philosophy in the early modern thought of late seventeenth century thinkers, most notably Jayarāma, a philosophy of nature the equal of any to appear in the new mechanical philosophy of early modern Europe or in their progressive Aristotelian interlocutors.

The construction in the nineteenth century of what I earlier called the 'standard history' of early modernity fabricated a mythology which served to exaggerate and dramatize the differences between India and Europe.[38] The standard history about the distinctively European origins of modern philosophy in the seventeenth century was shaped, it seems, by distinctly nineteenth century needs. It is actually rather shocking that this history of the birth of modern philosophy continues to be taught uncritically in university philosophy departments still today.

I spoke at the beginning of Susan Friedman's coining of the term 'polycentric modernities' to capture the idea that modernity has a

[37] vic āra; Venīdatta. *Embellishment of the Categories* (Padārthamanḍa na), Gopala Sastri Nene ed. (Benares: Vidya Vilas Press; Princess of Wales Sarasvati Bhavana texts 30, 1930), 36

[38] Edmund Husserl, for example, identifies 'Cartesian freedom from prejudice' as what distinguishes 'European mankind' from India and the Orient (Halbfass, Wilhelm. *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 157). Gottlob Frege says that 'in arithmetic, if only because its methods and concepts originated in India, it has been the tradition to reason less strictly than in geometry, which was in the main developed by the Greeks'. Frege. *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. Trans. by J. L. Austin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950), §1

spatiality and a geography, and should not be thought of simply in terms of periodization. 'Rupture' is the term she prefers to characterise the onset of a new modernity, suggesting that 'modernity involves a powerful vortex of historical conditions that coalesce to produce sharp ruptures from the past that range widely across various sectors of a given society… Across the vast reaches of civilizational history, eruptions of different modernities ofen occur in the context of empires and conquest',[39] and she stresses that a polycentric model 'recognizes the modernities that have formed not only after the rise of the West but also before the West's post-1500 period of rapid change – the earlier modernities of the Tang Dynasty in China, the Abbasid Dynasty of the Muslim empire, and the Mongol Empire, to cite just a few'.[40] Modernity, and this is a point that has been made forcefully by Sanjay Subrahmanyam in his use of the term 'conjuncturality', is also characterised by the 'intensification of intercultural contact zones… heightened hybridizations, jarring juxtapositions, and increasingly porous borders both characterize modernity and help bring it into being.' Subrahmanyam says, perfectly accurately, that 'modernity is a global conjunctural phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to another'.[41] It has its own distinctive phenomenology too, the phenomenology of the new and the now: there is something that it feels like to be in the grip of modernity, incorporating 'a gamut of sensations from displacement, despair, and nostalgia to exhilaration, hope, and embrace of the new…'. 'Modernity', Friedman says, 'invents tradition, suppresses its own continuities with the past, and often produces nostalgia for what has seemingly been lost. Tradition forms at the moment those who perceive it regard themselves as cut off from it.' I have found all these indicators to be present in my study of the early modernity of India. Friedman, I think, only oversteps the mark when she places too great an emphasis on the centrality of rupture, of a 'dislocating break with the past', citing with approval Paul de Man's statement that modernity, 'a ruthless forgetting' of the past, 'exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier.[42] In this essay I have argued instead that it is better to see modernity as

[39] Freidman, Susan (2006). 'Periodizing modernism: postcolonial modernities and the space/time borders of modernist studies', 433

[40] Ibid.

[41] Subrahmanyam, Sanjay (1998). 'Hearing voices: vignettes of early modernity in South Asia, 1400–1750', Daedalus 127(3): 75–104.

[42] de Man, Paul (1983). 'Literary history and literary modernity', Blindness and Insight (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 147–8

involving not radical rupture but a shift of allegiance, a new sense of one's duties to the past, and a transition from deference to dialogue.

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Appendix: A Chronology

Until 11th Century. Nyāya philosophy develops in dialogue with Buddhism. Udayana and Vallabha are the last important voices.
12th Century. **Śrīharṣa** writes a set of sceptical 'refutations.'
c.1325. **Gaṅgeśa** writes the *Gemstone for Truth*, and a renovated Nyāya takes root in his hometown of Mithilā.
1460–1540. **Raghunātha Śiromaṇi** invents the 'new reason' in Navadvīpa, a town in Bengal. His immediate followers develop and teach his ideas both in Navadvīpa and also in Vārāṇasī.
1486. Birth of **Caitanya** in Navadvīpa.
1493–1519. Reign of the liberal sultan **Husain Shāh** in Bengal. His ministers include Rūpa and Sanātaṇa Gosvāmi, exponents of Caitanya's Vaiṣṇavism.
1556. **Akbar** assumes the Mughal throne; the empire spreads throughout northern India. His ministers include the Hindus Man Singh and Ṭoḍarmal, both of whom encourage 'new reason' philosophers.
1582. Debate between **Vidyānivāsa,** a 'new reason' thinker, and Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa at Ṭoḍarmal's house.
1597. Abu'l Fazl writes the *Āīn-i-Akbarī*, a synopsis of life at the time of Akbar. Several 'new reason' philosophers are mentioned.
1605. Death of Akbar. He is followed by Jahangīr r.1605–1627, Shāh Jahāṇ r.1628–1658, and Aurangzeb r.1658–1707.
1613. **Roberto Nobili** writes the *Informatio*, containing a description of the new 'natural philosophy.'
1615. **Dārā Shukoh**, eldest son of Shāh Jahāṇ, born 20th March.
1620. **Francis Bacon** publishes the *Novum Organum*.
1621. **Sébastien Basso** publishes the *Natural Philosophy Directed Against Aristotle*.
1634. **Viśvanātha**, son of Vidyānivāsa, writes a commentary on the *Ny āya-sūtra*.
1637. **René Descartes** publishes the *Discourse and Essays*.
1638. **Kavīndra Sarasvatī** petitions Shāh Jahān to repeal a tax on Hindu pilgims.
1650. Death of Descartes.

1655. Death of **Pierre Gassendi**. His protegé **François Bernier** is with him.
1656. Dārā Shukoh assembles a team of Vārāṇasī scholars to translate the Upaniṣads into Persian. Bernier arrives in India, and works as physician to Shāh Jahāṇ and Dārā Shukoh.
1657. Leading Vārāṇasī intellectuals publically meet and sign a letter of judgement.
1659. Dārā Shukoh is sentenced for heresy and executed, after a conflict with Aurangzeb. The key 'new reason' philosopher **Jaya rāma**, an acquaintance of Kavīdra, finishes the *Garland of Categories*. He writes the *Garland of Principles about Reason* around this time too. **Raghudeva**, another 'new reason' philosopher, is doing similar work too and moving in the same circles in Vārāṇasī.
1658–61. **Danishmand Khān**, an accultured nobleman who opposes the execution of Dārā, takes on Kavīndra, Bernier and others when they lose their patron. They exchange ideas, Bernier translating Gassendi and Descartes into Persian, Kavīndra bringing Vārāṇasī thinkers and Bernier into discussion.
1660. Foundation of the Royal Society in London.
1670. Bernier, back in France, publishes his *Travels in the Mogul Empire*. Henry Oldenburg, the first secretary of the Royal Society, will arrange for their English publication; John Dryden bases his 1675 play *Aureng-zebe* on them.
1677. Death of **Spinoza**. The *Ethics* is published.
1678. Bernier publishes his *Abr égé* of Gassendi's philosophy.
1688. Death of **Yaśovijaya Gaṇi**, a brilliant Jaina philosopher responds to the 'new reason' and perhaps also to Dārā's project.
1690. **John Locke** publishes his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He seems to have read Bernier's *Abr égé*.
1690s. Several 'new reason' thinkers are active in Vārāṇasī: **Mahā deva** writes the *Precious Jewel of Reason,* and **Mādhavadeva** the *Essence of Reason*.
1707. Death of Aurangzeb.
1757. The Battle of Plassey.
1765. East India Company obtains taxation rights over Bengal.
1769–70. Great Famine, caused by punative taxation and grain stockpiling.
1776. Britain, defeated in the American war for independence, turns its attention to India. Warren Hastings prepares a 'plan for the administration of justice.'