

Nalini Bhushan & Jay L. Garfield. *Minds Without Fear: Philosophy in the Indian Renaissance.* Oxford University Press 2017. 344 pp. \$49.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190457594).

Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield's *Minds Without Fear* sets itself a broad mandate—that of redeeming Indian philosophy of the British colonial period. Little known outside of India, the work of this period has the additional misfortune of being largely dismissed within the contemporary Indian philosophical community, where it is regarded as out-of-step with India's long philosophical tradition, as a temporary lapse into a secular, technical, Western European philosophical idiom—and indeed, into a foreign *language*, since most of the work in question was written in English, rather than Sanskrit, the traditional language of philosophical discourse in India. According to Bhushan and Garfield, the perception of colonial Indian philosophy as discontinuous with the Indian philosophical tradition is supported by a broader narrative concerning Indian history as a whole. This narrative pictures India as a unified nation developing more or less independently of foreign influence; and it pictures British colonialism, by extension, as a singular disruption of Indian history and culture. Seen in this light, colonial-era Indian philosophy can only appear quite suspect, as a project that contributes to the disintegration of a specifically Indian cultural milieu.

In response to this deep-seated resistance to colonial-era Indian philosophy, the authors make two main arguments. First, they argue that the narrative of Indian cultural purity is false. India has never been a monolithic society; it has always been internally diverse and open to various forms of external influence and exchange. Intellectual culture prior to the advent of colonialism, they argue, did not simply take the form of Sanskrit-medium Vedic commentary. It included scholarly communities such as the *karanam*, South Indian scholars who produced and consumed works in a variety of languages and who embodied a 'modern secular sensibility,' and the *munshi*, intellectuals of the Mughal period who produced work largely in Persian—like English, a language of rule (22). To reject colonial-era Indian philosophy on the basis of its supposed impurity is therefore inconsistent. Precisely in its willingness to engage with ideas originating from elsewhere, the philosophy of the colonial period is quintessentially Indian.

Bhushan and Garfield's second argument is that the philosophers of the British colonial period do not actually abandon the perennial concerns of Indian philosophy, however deep their engagement with foreign ideas and influences. Rather than simply discarding the concepts and problems inherited from the Vedic and Islamic traditions, they recast those concepts and problems in the context of a broader global philosophical dialogue. Accordingly, their work is characteristic of what Bhushan and Garfield call a 'renaissance' in Indian intellectual life. Like their counterparts in the religious, political, and artistic spheres, Indian philosophers of the 19th and early 20th centuries look back to a classical tradition at the same time that they move forward into a rapidly expanding global horizon. Indeed, they look backward precisely *in order to* move forward, seeking to discover the seeds of renewal in the soil of tradition.

The development of idealism in India at the turn of the century is an example of this kind of 'renaissance gesture.' Indian idealism is born of a turn back towards classical Indian religious notions and a step forward in the direction of contemporary philosophical problems. Lying close at hand for the philosophers of this period is the problem of the boundaries of scientific knowledge. As science continues its inexorable advance, what room is left for the claims of religious understanding? In the Islamic tradition, the philosopher and poet Muhammad Iqbal answers this question by arguing that the Quran spells out the epistemological preconditions of scientific knowledge. By identifying thought as a *part* of reality, rather than locating it at a dualistic remove, the Quran succeeds in explaining the immediate access to reality that science manifestly enjoys (203). Philosophers in the

Hindu Vedantic tradition such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Ras Bihari Das meanwhile, argue that there is ultimately no conflict between scientific and religious understanding. The latter bears not on ordinary physical reality, the province of scientific inquiry, but on the dimension of meaning or value that infuses physical reality (238).

Of course, philosophical debate during the colonial period does not bear simply on abstract epistemological and metaphysical questions. In Chapter 6 of *Minds Without Fear*, Bhushan and Garfield also document a wide-ranging dialogue around India's national identity. Beyond the simple 'geographical fact' of India, what is it that binds India together as a single community? At one end of the spectrum, the religious thinker and missionary Swami Vivekananda argues that India's national identity is a function of a shared, specifically Hindu, spiritual heritage (96). Others reframe Vivekananda's basic construction in a more ecumenical spirit. Thus, Gandhi, along with the philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy, argue that India is bound together by a shared spiritual conception that transcends religious differences (95, 103). Jawaharlal Nehru, who would go on to become the first Prime Minister of India, generalizes Vivekananda's formulation even further, pointing to a 'feeling of oneness' that unites India's diverse communities (106). The philosopher Benoy Kumar Sarkar, finally—described as 'one of the intellectual titans of the Indian renaissance period'—rejects any such spiritualist account of Indian identity. According to Kumar, India's national identity has its basis in India's traditions of craft and technology (113).

More pressing than these questions regarding India's past are the questions regarding its future. Where is India *going* as it strives to shake off British colonial rule? Gandhi, for his part, sees the future of India in terms of a return to a more authentically Indian, pre-modern form of life—a form of life no longer marked by the impersonality and opacity of contemporary urban existence (145, 160). This view is met with criticism from two very different directions. According to Aurobindo Ghosh, Gandhi fails to adequately prioritize national liberation. Only once India has secured political independence from Britain—violently, if necessary—can anything like the self-development that he envisions get underway (138). For the poet, novelist and eventual Nobel prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, on the other hand, Gandhi's way of thinking about India's future is *overly* nationalistic. Pointing to an irony in Gandhi's effort to rid India of foreign ideas and practices, he argues that nationalism itself is an imported idea, an expression of collective egoism that succeeds only in instituting artificial divisions between people (145). Tagore is seconded on this point by Muhammad Iqbal, who regards nationalism as a pernicious concept that has led to violence in Europe and that is incompatible with Islam (152). (Iqbal later came to reconsider this view, becoming an early and influential proponent of statehood for Pakistan).

In the aesthetic theory produced during the colonial period, we see a similar concern with rooting out colonialism at its deepest level, as thinkers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Mysore Hiriyanna, and K.C. Bhattacharyya seek to identify a distinctively Indian form of aesthetic experience. All of them do so, Bhushan and Garfield suggest, by seizing on *rasa*, a Vedantic concept that they understood variously as a quality that inheres in Indian works of art or as the subjective feeling that such works evoke. Here, Benoy Kumar Sarkar again strikes a dissenting note. He ridicules the notion of a specifically Indian form of aesthetic experience, arguing that this is no more viable than the idea of a specifically Indian form of science. Aesthetic value, he claims, resides in the strictly universal property of geometrical form (303-4).

Bhushan and Garfield conclude *Minds Without Fear* with an admiring discussion of the artist who is pictured on the cover of their book, the painter Amrita Sher-Gil. According to the authors, Sher-Gil exemplifies the hybridity and cosmopolitanism that are such marked features of the colonial period. This is true at a biographical level: Sher-Gil was descended from an Indian father and a

Hungarian mother and spent the majority of her short life moving between India and Europe. It is also true at the level of her work, which draws on modern European idioms in its depiction of everyday Indian life. Most importantly, it is true at the level of her *attitude* to her work. According to Bhushan and Garfield, Sher-Gil was free of the anxiety around cultural authenticity that we have observed in several other contexts. Hers was truly a ‘mind without fear.’

Bhushan and Garfield’s book is an extremely valuable record of a community of philosophers that has fallen sadly into obscurity, and of the philosophical contributions of figures that are more often discussed in non-philosophical contexts—figures such as Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, and Vivekenanda. My only critical note concerns its occasional obscurity. Discussions of the way that Vedantic concepts are taken up in the colonial period often become bogged down in detail, leaving the reader with very little sense of the overall shape or significance of the dialogue around these concepts.

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