BOOK REVIEW

Aakash Singh Rathore and Rimina Mohapatra, *Hegel's India: A Reinterpretation, with Texts*, (OIP) India, New Delhi, 2017, x and 311 pp., 978 0 19 946827 0

Hegel's India: A Reinterpretation, with Texts is a ground-breaking book: it explores the paradoxical nature of Hegel's treatment of Indian art, religion and philosophy. This is mostly to be found in the various lecture series which were delivered, often with radical changes, on multiple occasions, for the most part in the 1820s, but published posthumously in editions that make them seem like finished works. A long review of Von Humboldt's essay on the *Bhagavad Gita* did come out in 1827. On the one hand, Hegel's language and attitudes often betray a real ethnocentrism: indeed some have called him downright racist. On the other hand he dealt with India in a more sustained and serious way than any other Western philosopher in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Indeed, in an age of multiculturalism and political correctness, modern philosophy departments on either side of the Atlantic continue to show very little interest in the undoubted riches of the Indian philosophical tradition. For over thirty years, Indian philosophers have demonstrated the real relevance of their classical philosophy to the analytic tradition, but this body of very rigorous and detailed work has not percolated through to the West. [1]

There has been some significant boundary-crossing between Indian thought and phenomenology - one thinks of J.N. Mohanty and Wilhelm Halbfass - but philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze have mainly been used as critical or post-colonial theory in non-philosophic disciplines, such as anthropology or religious studies. Postmodernism can often be presented as a mark of Western "progress" in the way that modernism used to be and therefore something more like a type of social, political or economic change in the West that non-Western people have to catch up with, not a philosophical quality that might be found within their own past. Although this is not something Rathore and Mohapatra set out to do, their book could actually help to bring poststructuralism and Indian philosophy together: the sides of Hegel that consistently get in the way of his easy assimilation of Indian thought in their account are very close indeed to what separates him from Deleuze.

---

[1] (Prasad 1999) is a particularly good example of this. Indian religio-philosophic concepts, such as *varnadharma*, *niskama karma* and *jivanmukti*, are subjected to a rigorous technical examination by a highly skilled analytic philosopher. The result is that they are seen to be ethically valuable in a general sense, not just elements of Indian "blind faith". The tone of the work can be seen in a quotation from the "Preface": "We have not so far used classical Indian ideas creatively because almost all writers on them have been mostly reportive and not critical or reconstructive." (p. x). The ongoing richness and creativity of Indian philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in spite of the experience of colonization, is well-documented in Bhushan and Garfield (2017).

This includes the notion of the self, the relationship between the ideal and the concrete, the nature of the sign, and the dialectic.

However, Rathore and Mohapatra's primary purpose is to rehabilitate Hegel's writings on India, and to a very real extent, they succeed in doing this, especially since what they are offering is only a roughly eighty page introduction to all of the relevant Hegelian texts, which take up about 190 pages, not a full-length study. As with earlier commentators, they attribute Hegel's acerbic criticisms of Indian culture to a desire to indirectly attack the German Romantics, his rivals, who were ardent partisans of India. There is also the fact that some of his sources for Indian religion would have been produced by Christian missionaries keen to emphasize the "backwardness of the natives", and Hegel was not of course immune to the generalized Eurocentrism of his age. Where *Hegel's India* goes well beyond a perfectly respectable work such as Michel Hulin's *Hegel et l'orient* (Hulin 2013) is in its extended analysis of the philosopher's very intense engagement with Indian thought and how much it is bound up with his own philosophy. In a subtle interpretation, Hegel is seen as responding to what he felt was an evil twin in Indian philosophy because it has so many concepts that seem to correspond to those in his own system: Brahman (Ultimate Reality) to his Absolute, *moksa* (liberation) to his freedom, the Trimurti (Brahma/Vishnu/Shiva) or the three *gunas* (qualities) to his dialectic, and so forth. This meant he was fascinated by India but had to denigrate its achievements in order to establish his own originality. Chapter four of Rathore and Mahapotra's introduction takes one through this slightly obsessive Hegelian wrestling with Indian concepts in impressive detail.

However, one can again draw on poststructuralism to further enrich this approach. Indian philosophy is simply not Western philosophy: it has its own conceptual economy, internal logic and developmental history. Indian idealism is not Western idealism, Indian non-duality not Western monism, how India combines religion and philosophy is different from the West but not wrong, and so forth. Hegel was trying to incorporate apparently similar concepts that did not function in the same way as the ones in his system did into a hegemonic Western master narrative, and it did not work, so he had to blame India for it and focus on the caste system when many Indian spiritual leaders and thinkers had already done so ! For the moment, one should concentrate on this hegemony purely in relation to ideas. Hegel's master narrative has real affinities with how Socrates argues in Plato's *Dialogues*: the Greek philosopher is very adversarial, even downright bullying, and there is a certain notion of what truth is and how one arrives at it. This is the ultimate ancestor of Hegel's dialectic in which better ideas emerge through conflict. One can indeed see him trying to project a distinctly antagonistic Protestant versus Catholic shape onto the Indian philosophic schools, for which there was a slightly different taxonomy in his day.

However, this is simply not how classical Indian philosophy emergEd. There was serious disputation but also fruitful interchange and borrowing between what one now regards as the six schools of orthodox and three schools of heterodox philosophy, both within and between the two groups. *Anekantavada* is a Jain (a heterodox school) concept that very much expresses the tone of Indian philosophy: it establishes that no human being can have an absolute understanding of something and that all opinions

therefore have at least some validity[2]. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism - and incidentally an opponent of caste and supporter of women's rights - made cogent points but did not crush his opponents during his *udasis*, his extensive travels all over the subcontinent and to adjacent countries before he settled down at Kartarpur. In pauree 35 of *Japji*, he produces a rapturous vision of plurality in his description of *gian khand* (realm of spiritual knowledge), which is too long to quote in full, but to give a taste of it: "So many winds, waters and fires; so many Krishnas and Shivas...So many worlds and lands for working out karma. So very many lessons to be learnt...So many ways of life, so many languages...[3]" There is a distinctive Sikh version of social, political and economic thought closely associated with this plurality. One should add that something like Hindu nationalism can indeed appropriate aspects of Indian religion as ideological support, but it is never the complexity of this philosophic side, which does not have to be associated with religious authoritarianism, against which a more "advanced" religion or secular modernism has to fight, in either case "catching up" with the West. There can be many particular paths to universal values, whose universality will always be enhanced by differential complexification.

The beauty of Rathore and Mohaptra's book is that it takes Hegel's philosophic engagement with India seriously and does not stop at a simplistic charge of "racism". This means one can use their work as a platform for this kind of disjunctive synthesis between Hegelian and Indian philosophy, but before carrying on with this, one should say something about the translations they use. Pretty much all of Hegel's texts have been re-edited in German and subsequently retranslated into languages such as English and French over the last thirty-five years, but the impact on the late lecture series has been particularly markEd. The three on aesthetics, philosophy of religion and history of philosophy, where most of Hegel's comments on India are, all went through two editions in the years after the philosopher's death. The various editors put together autograph material by Hegel and students' notes to produce composite texts that combine lectures from different years into a smoothly flowing whole. The modern editions publish the lectures by the year (or sometimes two years) in which they were given. This means there is a lot more material and repetition, but one sees a much more open-minded Hegel exploring and developing his ideas. He is much less monolithic, a quality that very much comes from editors like Marheineke, Hotho and Michelet, and one can see why his followers could take his work in radical or left-wing as well as conservative directions. Rathore and Mohapatra use the translations

---

[2] *Anekanantavada* was very much part of an emerging post-Independence identity as India tried to distinguish itself from the West, and a certain amount of sentimentalization did occur. However, classical texts, such as Vimaladasa's *Saptabhangi-tarangini*, are technically very sophisticated and have a great deal to offer to modern philosophers anywhere. Jain (2008) intersperses the Sanskrit original, paragraph by paragraph, with an excellent English translation. Mookerjee (1995) is a good modern study of *anekantavada*.
[3] The Khalsa Consensus translation is the one used. SGGS, 7: "kaytay pavan paanee vaisantar kaytay kaan mahays...kaytee-aa karam bhoomee mayr kaytay kaytay dhoo updays...kaytee-aa khaanee kaytee-aa banee..."

based on the early editions, although they do put the newer translations by Hodgson (and others) of the philosophy of religion lectures and Brown of the history of philosophy ones in their excellent bibliography. Presumably the older translations were used for greater compactness, but one should definitely move on to the Hodgson and Brown volumes.

It is reasonable to assume that Hegel never met an Indian, but he did know Jewish people at a time when their emancipation was hotly debated in the German lands. Hegel's position on it was impeccably "liberal": it was logical that they should be incorporated as full citizens, they should not have to abandon their religion, and there is even a hint that the modern state requires diversity. He was influenced by Montesquieu's ideas on the links between geography, climate and the characteristics of peoples, but he never accepted the racist theories of a Gobineau. He explicitly rejected categorizing humans on the basis of skull measurements or physical appearance, and he attacks black slavery and the oppression of Irish Catholics, but this is where the distinction between overt racism and ethnocentrism becomes problematic: he also sees Africans as incapable of creating a proper state and Catholicism as inferior to Protestantism. How much is one truly accepting of another if one regards her as capable of being "civilized" as an individual but from a backward culture relative to one's own ? The situation gets much more complicated in a passage where Hegel severely criticizes the Jewish attitude to beards. This is from a short early essay: "Oriental Spirit", which Rathore and Mohapatra have translated into English for the first time. There is rational argument, but it is hard not to be reminded of racist jokes about certain groups, such as those about Italian women and underarm hair that used to be very common in big American cities, and Judaism is seen as a trivial, lesser religion that fetichizes facial hair and gawdy dress.

It would be simplistic to reject an entire philosophy because of ethnocentric bias, but one can show that real limitations were imposed on what it could think. A process of reciprocal reinforcement exists between Hegel's prejudices about aspects of the physical in certain religions and his understanding of how the spirit should be actualizEd. His attitude to Indian art makes one think of a Northern European Protestant having cultural difficulties with the baroque, but he also has definite philosophic ideas about the proper relationship between symbol and concept: the two should be clearly distinguished from each other. One could say that he believes in transparency of the signifier and a minimum of figurality. The problem is that he cannot see how powerful the sign can be when it mingles symbol and concept on a plane of immanence.

Observant Sikh men and women do not cut their hair, but Sikhism is very close to Hegel in its rejection of irrationality, superstition or empty ritual. This means the hair becomes part of a care of the self at the boundary between that self and the surrounding cosmos and therefore capable of being a kind of transversal conductor of spirit. Mona Arshi conveys this beautifully in "My Mother's Hair", a poem from *Small Hands* (Arshi 2015, 13). The final image has the mother sitting while her spread out hair dries as she removes little stones from dal, an everyday domestic activity, which is linked via her "sacralized" hair to the spirituality of the cosmos. Sikhism has what is called a *gristi* (householder) ethic, emphasizing family life, but in

a way that inserts it into a wider community, so there is poetic, spiritual and ethical resonance here. Hegel would not have accepted either how the hair functions as a symbol or how that functioning could be profound. He would also not have seen Sikhism as part of the progressive unfolding of the spirit in an Indian context, just as valid as the stages of *Phenomenology of Spirit* are in a Western one.

Hegel's own ideas also block his understanding of what Indian philosophy says about the the self and Ultimate Reality. His self is very defined and individualized: it has a very rational and interactive relationship with spirit, which it concretely conceptualizes in an ongoing way, thereby acquiring an increasing sense of self-awareness and freedom. This idealism always takes place within a very material world of subject-object relations. The Indian self loses its ego and descends into the deepest level of impersonal consciousness. The *Mandukya Upanisad* and the two famous commentaries by Guadapada and Sankara are the key texts here. Four "descending" states of consciousness - waking, dreaming, deep sleep and that of sensing oneself as *atman* (deep self or soul) - are describEd. The progression involves perception being freed from the duality of subject-object relations, the elimination of the barrier between inner and outer and a final fusion of the self with Ultimate Reality or the World Soul: this is *moksa* (freedom).

It is important to remember that there is not a mind-body split in Indian philosophy: *cit* (mind) is as much a part of *maya* (the world of illusion) as body is. This means one does not have the knowing subject transcending the sensible by recourse to the intelligible that one finds in much Western idealism. Access to *atman* is pre-conscious and intuitive, and one does not really have transcendence. Ultimate Reality is actually in *maya*: one simply does not see it until one's consciousness has been alterEd. This is why *moksa* does not have to involve detachment from "everyday reality". Indian thought is full of "real world" problems very much like those of analytic philosophy, and a *jivanmukta* is someone who continues to participate in normal life after self-realization and can be very socially committEd. This was particularly important for the Bhakti movement, a kind of Indian Renaissance, which Hegel does not discuss. A great deal of the passionate social engagement in India after independence came from this movement rather than from Western influence. The lack of ego and pre-conscious or intuitive basis to *moksa* give it a very different quality to Hegel's freedom. The latter is associated with reliable state institutions, but today everyone is a consumer in a politically and economically unpredictable sea of "free choice": surfing has replaced sport in Deleuze's societies of control. The type of resistance Indian thought can offer is a self that is no longer an easily exploitable bundle of desires, but one that is ecologically grounded through esoteric discipline and therefore capable of non-egocentric and pluralistic ethics: the surfer needs to be deeply anchored from within when there is nothing but bottomless ocean around her[4].

---

[4] The reference to Deleuze is to a famous essay: "Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle" or "Postscript on Control Societies" in English (Deleuze, 1990/2003, 240-7, 1997, 177-82). While certain post-structuralist concepts, such as disjunctive synthesis and the hegemonic master narrative have been used to explore the gap between Hegel and Indian philosophy in this

This kind of speculative work between India and the West requires many more splendid books like Rathore and Mohapatra's *Hegel's India* to build on. A richly textured, truly globalized philosophy based on disjunctive synthesis is the only way forward.

References

Arshi, Mona. 2015. *Small Hands*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
Bhushan, Nalini and Garfield, Jay L. 2017. *Minds Without Fear: Philosophy in the Indian Renaissance*. New York: OUP.
Deleuze, Gilles. 1990/2003. *Pourparlers: 1972-1990*. Paris: Minuit.
Deleuze, Gilles. 1997. *Negotiations: 1972-1990*. Translated by Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.
Doniger, Wendy. 2010. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Oxford: OUP.
Hulin, Michel. 2013. *Hegel et l'Orient: Suivi d'un texte de Hegel sur la Bhagavad-Gîtâ.* Paris: Vrin.
Jain, S. C. 2008. *Vimaladasa's Saptabhangi-tarangini: The Seven Facets of Reality*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith.
Mookerjee, Satkari. 1995. *The Jaina Philosophy of Non-Absolutism: A Critical Study of Anekantavada*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
Prasad, Rajendra. 1999. *Varnadharma, Niskama Karma and Practical Morality: A Critical Essay on Applied Ethics*. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld Pvt Ltd.

Dr. Nardina Kaur, Independent Philosopher. Email: madeleinenardina@hotmail.co.uk.

review, there has also been an attempt to show that Indian philosophy may offer a rather deeper critique of Hegel and Western bourgeois liberalism than a philosopher such as Deleuze.