

BOOK REVIEW

HEGEL'S INDIA

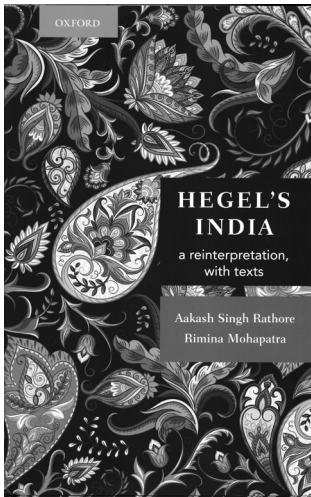
A Reinterpretation, with Texts

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**HEGEL'S INDIA:
A REINTERPRETATION, WITH TEXTS**

Authors: Aakash Singh Rathore
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Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2017
Details: pp. 310; Price: ₹950



A book that speaks of and to the times is a good book, and *Hegel's India*, co-authored by Aakash Singh Rathore and Rimina Mohapatra, does just that! It offers a refreshing and an insightful reading of Hegel and how, underneath his rejection of Indian thought, there lingers a deeper affinity and identification with it. But what is also important is how, curiously, it may throw light on the volatility of our polarised times. It opens up multiple registers: First, it offers us a glimpse into the genesis of the idea of a 'Pure Absolute', one that is accompanied with both certitude and a sense of correctness to which some may even ascribe the 'formula of modern racism'. Second, it represents an era of idealisation and unreserved valourisation of modernity, i.e., freedom, justice and truth, which become instrumental in the Europeanisation of the Earth. And, finally, it delivers a substantial critique of Indian thought, pointing out the incongruities between its greatness and meanness, an incongruity upon which might rest the hegemonic agenda of Hindu supremacists. The book is well-timed, because both what

Autumn 2017, Volume 44, Number 2

Hegel stands for and what he critiques, i.e., an absolutist premise, an idealist vision, and doctrinal inconsistencies within Indian thought all make up the stuff of Hindu nationalism that is on the rise today.

The modern idea of political freedom remains central to Hegel. 'The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit—Man as such—is free', and he ascribes the development of this consciousness to Christianity (Protestantism). One of his primary critiques of Indian thought rests on this very basis:

Any group of society so vehemently denying freedom to such a large portion of its own people, even going so far as to codify this bondage through religious scripture, which, being holy, rather than enslaving people should be elevating them, has got to be fundamentally corrupt in character, and this the words they pen must stand as suspect.

Nonetheless, he does find Indian thought profound, sublime, seductive, but not moored in reality—history, to be precise. For example, for him it lingers exhaustlessly in the realm of the imagination alone, and thus he calls it 'sommnambular', 'static', and 'vegetative' (a term that later even Karl Marx uses to describe India). According to Hegel, it is precisely the historical process which is the *locus* of the divine: 'He gives Spirit the potential access to absolute knowledge.' In other words: 'He makes absolute knowledge possible', wherein the knowledge is 'concrete, historically mediated, derived, evolved, striven for, experienced, lived, and realised.' And in that regard, he finds the Indian idea of the Absolute as 'insufficiently mediated', an empty consciousness masquerading as consciousness, one that defies reason and logic and, most importantly, lacks the 'recognition of freedom and inward morality'.

The authors are careful to present Hegel in a balanced manner and attempt to gently orchestrate a mature reading into his harsh dismissal of Indian thought, which probably betrays his frustration with something that comes so close to and then strays far from his ideal. Clearly, neither is Hegel's reading of Indian texts (primarily Vedantic) cursory, nor is he hasty in his comments. He deliberates over his opinions repeatedly and in that he cannot be seen in the same light as prejudiced missionaries or colonists. Hegel is open-minded and genuinely looking, is fascinated and appreciative, but

in the final analysis he is always disappointed. It seems as though he almost ‘smells’ something both within the ‘greatness’ and the ‘meanness’ of this thought system, something both greater and meaner, and in that he cannot let go of these incongruities. Rather, he digs his heels deeper into the gap, refusing to buy the package! Trying as much as he does, over and over again, he is unable to bring about a reconciliation between the inside and outside of Indian thought.

For instance, he is drawn to what he terms the ‘true science’ of Samkhya, as this school abstracts knowledge out of ‘sensible’ matter. Yet he cannot unravel the confusion regarding its heterodox/orthodox status (while the Samkhya texts are heterodox and remain resolutely silent about the existence of God, the usage of Samkhya in the Bhagavad Gita makes it categorically theistic and orthodox). As a yoga practitioner and a keen follower of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras (a Samkhya text), I am often disturbed by how Patanjali’s secular definition of yoga—as he sees God as optional—is popularly eclipsed by the Bhagavad Gita’s definition of yoga being ‘union with God’. I am, therefore, heartened to see how Hegel pointedly draws attention to such inconsistencies, and tries to make distinctions between Indian philosophy and doctrine.

The path which philosophy is directed to, shows itself entirely peculiar and valuable when comparing it with the path which Indian religion partly prescribes...one would do utterly wrong to Indian philosophy, which is Samkhya doctrine, if one would judge it and its procedure by...what is called Samkhya doctrine in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and what does not go beyond the common, popular religious views.

Philosophy is not divorced from polity, as Hegel keeps reminding us, i.e., philosophy is not insulated from the times. Over the last few centuries, the dominant branch of Hinduism may have succeeded at both segregating and superseding what it branded as the *nastika darshanas* (or philosophical schools not adhering to the Vedas) of the Buddhists, Jains, and even the Shaivas, and has not even deigned to acknowledge Islam or Christianity which became integral parts of the subcontinent centuries ago. What we cannot ignore is the new *darshana* of Modernity, of which Hegel happens to be an adherent,

and of which we have wholesomely partaken. In fact, Hinduism's redefinition that emerged towards the end of the 19th century has been tailored to the *flatterings* and *shamings* of our belief systems by the West, be it the Romantics, the Indologists, the colonists, or the missionaries. This dispassionate compilation of Hegel's critique of India can help us read his views objectively so as to carefully study the cast which may have moulded our sense of self: our national identity, to be precise.

This book falls into a new, emerging category of books such as the *Rasa Reader* by Sheldon Pollack and *The Roots of Yoga* by James Mallinson and Mark Singleton which offers a well organised, exhaustive compilation of texts relating to a select topic, offering a succinct frame of reference while withholding comment for the most part. *Hegel's India* makes Hegel both accessible and pertinent to the Indian reader who may be looking to constructively find distinctions between Indian philosophy, religious doctrine and hegemony.

