

## THE MANIFOLD PATHS OF A JOURNEY: THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE IN THE FACE OF THE XXI CENTURY

*Speech at the Indian Embassy in Rome on the occasion of the Lecture-cum-Seminar “70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Indian Independency”, August 15, 2017*

I am honoured to speak on this subject (the manifold paths of India’s journey after Independence) at the Indian Embassy in Rome today. The symbolic power of the city of Rome brings to mind the most important empire (first pagan, then Christian) of the Western world, to which the living presence of India in this Embassy introduces a dynamic and differential element. If you allow me, I shall take this image as a metaphor for historical reflection, adopting the standpoint of a philosopher and a comparatist of cultures with the aim of drawing transversal lines of thought, along which I hope you will accompany me.

There is no India after Independence without the India before Independence, or to be more precise: there can be no free India after a process of separation (from colonial power) and integration (of remaining elements) without the *reincorporation* of its severed roots. Both Muslim and Christian occupation (in the Middle Ages and modern times) changed the configuration of the traditional philosophy of India, which remained, almost invisible, in a context of asymmetrical acculturation and mental slavery typical of colonialism. In view of the cultural power of colonialist Europe, its emphasis on urbanity and its unity-principle, the first thing to be ruled out of local Indian culture was the plurality of religious approaches and resultant cultural perspectives. If you will allow a drastic simplification of the picture, the result of the colonization process was not only a separation and a political affirmation of the Indian – or the Hindu – against colonialists, but also an assimilation process in the face of the cultural power emplaced in Indian territory. Two paths (radically opposed to each other) resulted from this: the first is the consolidation of the *hindūtvā* movement with its own interpretation of Vedic religion (if we take the heritage of Dayananda Saraswati) related to a radical construction of identity surpassing the problem of colonialism (if we think of the implications of Sāvarkar’s *pūrṇa svatantrya* in the contemporary political milieu). The second is the secular, democratic and socialist republic of India reflected in the Constitution of 1949 and fully adapted to Western expectations, something that had (in the eyes of modern Westerners) noble values but assuredly little to do with more than 3500 years of Indian history prior to the independence movement.

The contrast depicted in the last example between a (forgotten) tradition and a (self-imposed) new model is clearly reflected in the way that India tried its first steps in the

Western world, showing that, as a culturally autonomous land (even after political independence), it had something attractive, convincing and even essential to offer in terms of “universal values”. The message of Neo-Vedantic masters like Yogananda, Shivananda, and Vivekananda for the Christian world, the transformation of Yoga for a Western audience at the hands of Patabi Jois and B. K. S. Iyengar, and the creation of a “contemporary Indian philosophy” through figures like Gandhi, Tagore and Aurobindo, were all characterized by the conviction that the new configuration of essential Indian truths still had to adapt itself to a dominant power (residing in the West). Examples of this abound and point to different but related paths (with a common source) of Indian self-legitimation in the post-independence period: Yogananda saw the *Bhagavad Gītā* as a kind of New Testament and Jesus Christ as the archetype of the Western yogi. For Iyengar the yoga tradition was plastic, and context variation sometimes demanded radical changes – even if it changes the philosophical basis of yoga practice out of recognition. Tagore advocated a poetic-mystic religion of mankind nurtured by the visionary aspect of Vedic religion, as well as by the religious movement *Brahmo Samāj* and its avant-gardist impulse for a modern reform of India. Aurobindo’s integral Advaitism attempted to bring together the acosmic soteriology of non-dualist Vedānta and a modern esoteric philosophy of spiritual evolutionism. For Gandhi, Christianity and Tolstoy were as important as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Buddhism, while *satyāgraha* appeared to him as a practical application of the teachings of Christ. During a great part of the XX Century, the Western world identified Hinduism with the Neo-Vedantic construction of a unified canon going from the hymns of Rigveda and the Upanishads down to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and some personalistic aspects of Vaishnava devotionalism. This is indeed an important part of Indian heritage, a part *very well adapted to the expectations of its Western canon of reception*, and it concerns not only religion but also an identitary cultural strategy and a broad political spectrum covering both universalist and nationalist aims. However, it is certainly not *the only* path of India’s journey after Independence. The exclusivity and validity of the path taken by India were measured in terms of “universal values”, but we should not forget that the term “universal” is an invention of the modern Western world (as it clearly appears for example in Immanuel Kant), already put to the test of critique within Western tradition. It was Karl Marx who revealed that bourgeois interests are hidden behind universal values, or in other words: even the highest ideas do not escape ideology and domination interests.

In the face of the manifold paths taken by India to achieve a reconfiguration of the cultural value of its own tradition, the question of traditional Indian society, of that society which created walls of custom, rites, ceremonies and social distinctions to keep an

immemorial system working, does not exhaust itself in the designation of its religious and philosophical core as retrograde, highly conservative and thus incapable of embarking on new and creative ideas. At this point I wish to mention Alain Daniélou, who, as a French traveller and artist, went to India in the 1930s and experienced the context of Indian Independence from the inside, studying with *pundits*, being initiated into Shaivism and delving into the musical, religious and philosophical tradition of Kashi. Paradoxically enough, Daniélou placed himself on the side of the traditionalist “reaction” both to colonialist influence and to the westernized Indian elite supporting it. He wanted to show the other side of the Indian coin, as well as the pitfalls of a modern India severed from its roots. His singular experience, reflected in its extensive production (with books on Yoga, Hindu Polytheism, Puranic literature, different aspects of Shivaism and especially classical Indian music), is a very interesting and challenging legacy for our post-colonial and intercultural century. According to Daniélou, traditional Indian society is fundamentally plural and highly functional. Even the term “tradition” cannot be used in the singular, since each path taken by a specific group has its own legitimacy as one of manifold perspectives within a well-ordered socio-cosmic prism. Where modern westernized authors (European or Indian) see narrow-mindedness and obsolescence, social oppression and rigid values, Daniélou sees an unprecedented openness of spirit, the best form of power distribution within the context of human limitations and a very flexible individual and social framework of self-development. His emphasis on plurality and the value of local religions overshadowed by the mainstream, his critique of anthropocentrism, his polemical view of the relationship between monotheism and violence, as well as his courageous evaluation of modern democracy may be seen as a new light shed on the journey of India after Independence, not only to see what has been achieved, but also to realize what was left behind and how it can be reintegrated in new contexts. From an intercultural point of view, we could say that the key to India’s future lies in its recovery of the unseen potential contained in that civilization, a potential challenging both the dreams of national unification as well as the impulse to blindly copy Western models and standards in order to secure a geopolitical niche in a globalized world. It is the task and the mission of FIND to pick up the challenge of its founder, Alain Daniélou, and to honour Indian culture by working on its visible but also on its hidden potential with a humble spirit and a total absence of political, social or historical prejudices.

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