

Liberalisms in India: A sketch

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Liberalism in India is relatively under-studied as *liberalism*, although liberal ideas have been examined as part of other ideologies, notably nationalism, socialism, and secularism (Bajpai 2011).¹ The labels ‘liberalism’ or ‘liberal’ are not common parlance, and do not possess an established set of referents (see also Guha 2001). A consideration of liberalism in India thus has to contend with questions of definitions and sources at the outset. How is liberalism to be understood, and where should we look for it? Liberalism comes in many guises. The classical liberalism of Locke with its belief in the sacredness of private property and limited government, is a very different creature from contemporary liberalism inspired by Rawls, with its emphasis on egalitarian principles and support for welfare states. Late 20th-century liberal concerns about distributive justice and the equal status of all individuals blur the boundaries between liberalism and democracy that 19th-century liberals such as de Tocqueville and J.S. Mill, were keen to preserve (see Parekh 1992). Is there sufficient common ground between the different traditions of liberalism to identify the object of our investigation? And in tracing the shape of liberalism in a non-European context, without the guiding-posts of an established canon, which thinkers or texts should we consult? Indeed, is it appropriate to quest for liberalism at all in places distant from its European Christian origins?

This essay offers an exploratory sketch of strands of liberalism in India in theory and practice, intended as indicative rather than comprehensive. Contrary to influential opinion, it argues that liberal ideas have had a substantial presence in the Indian polity. Developing two seminal accounts of Indian liberalism by K.M.

Panikkar (1962) and Rajendra Vora (1986), I distinguish three strands of liberal ideas that have been influential in 19th and 20th century India: colonial, nationalist and radical. The classification is heuristic and so beset with the usual deficiencies of simplification and overlapping cases, , but nevertheless useful. The Indian Constitution, arguably the foundational text of political liberalism in India, is a legatee of these three liberal traditions. In politics, these three ‘strands’ or ‘traditions’ have been both antagonistic, as well as mutually constitutive. In ideological terms, however, important convergences can be discerned. All express a strong belief in the state as the principal agent of liberal reform, and an acceptance of group-differentiated rights. Further, in the different strands of liberal thinking in India, while the civil and political rights of individuals are widely affirmed, sustained elaboration of why individual freedom is important, and how it might be protected from the incursions of state and society, is rare. While there are sophisticated accounts of individual freedom in modern Indian thought, found in the writings of Swami Vivekananda (1879-1924), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948) for instance, these are not ultimately focused on the *political* conditions for individual freedom, and as such, do not fit easily into a liberal frame.

At one level, this implies that strong liberalism are weakly articulated in India, even though weaker liberalisms are more pervasive than scholars have suggested. The normative importance of rule of law, equal citizenship, the need to restrict state power in order to protect the individual, have rarely been elaborated in philosophical terms. As such, liberal thought in India remains, in a sense, doctrinally incomplete. At another level, however, the Indian case is a useful reminder of the limits of liberalism as a category. As the dominant ideology of the Anglophone world, liberalism tends to be over-used as a normative and analytical frame, its existence taken for granted in

Western contexts. However, as Judith Shklar reminds us, even in its European heartland, liberalism has been ‘very rare both in theory and in practice’ over the last two hundred years (1998: 4). In the non-European world, while significant traditions of thought on individual freedom are to be found, the category needs to be used with even more caution. Comparative explorations thus serve as necessary reminders of the ontological and ethical limits of liberalism, and of the significance also of other moral horizons for the pursuit of individual freedom.

A note on the usage of the category ‘liberal’ is in order at the outset. A strand of Indian thought is characterized as ‘liberal’ in this essay if it reflects a set of features associated with the protection of individuals from abuses of power, as discussed below. These features may also be found in other ideologies (eg. anarchism), derive from Indian rather than Western sources (eg. the practices of Hindu or Muslim rulers), and/or reflect adaptations of Western liberal institutions. My contention is not that the strands of Indian thought discussed here are only, or wholly, liberal. Nevertheless, our understanding of liberalism is inadequate without some assessment of variants of liberal thinking in non-Western contexts, howsoever fragmentary and limited these may be.

This essay is divided into five sections. The first section addresses how liberalism is understood in the essay, and why it remains under-appreciated as a distinct ideology in India. The following three sections discuss variants of colonial, nationalist, and radical liberal thinking in India. In final section, some comparisons are drawn across different liberal traditions and tentative conclusions suggested for future inquiry.

The neglect of liberalism in India

A sketch of liberalism in India is necessarily an exercise in retrieval, involving a delimitation of ideas usually located within other ideological frames. This requires a minimal identification of its object at the outset, however rough. This essay is influenced by the seminal accounts of liberalism found in the writings of Judith Shklar and Michael Freeden. Judith Shklar characterizes liberalism as a political doctrine that seeks to ‘secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom’ (1998: 3). Liberals have differed over why the freedom of individuals is valuable: importantly, enhancing personal autonomy is not always the ultimate goal (Kelly 2005). Liberals have also disagreed over what the political conditions required for the realization of individual freedom are, in particular whether these involve greater or lesser intervention by the state in the economy and society. Nevertheless, advocates as well as critics of state intervention in the economy agree that the civil and political liberties of individuals should be protected ‘beyond the reach of the coercive claims of the state or society’ (Kelly 2005:10). Liberalism is fundamentally concerned with political institutions that protect the freedom of individuals from abuses of power.

Michael Freeden has argued that liberalism should not be identified with its historical variants that emphasize the autonomous individual, property rights, economic freedoms and a limited state. Liberals since at least the late nineteenth century have also been concerned with social welfare, community responsibility, and state intervention. Furthermore, in order to properly appreciate the complexity of liberal thought, Freeden has urged that we broaden our net beyond the standard canon, to examine the writings of political practitioners explicitly responding to the ‘burning political and social problems of their times’ (1978: pp. 1-2). Ideology—action-

oriented political thinking forged in the heat of public debate—may lack the consistency and rigour of philosophy, yet is an important form of political thought. Without a proper appreciation of liberal ideologies, our understanding of liberal thought is radically incomplete. Does liberalism so construed have a significant presence in India, and if so, where is it to be found?

Any account of liberalism in India has to contend at the outset with at least three powerful sources of skepticism. The first comes from Marxist and postcolonial perspectives that have been influential in India. In Marxian perspectives, liberalism tends to be associated with the rise of capitalism in the modern West and colonialism in Asia and Africa and identified with neo-liberalism, or with weak egalitarianism. Postcolonial theorists have also sought to unmask the universalist claims of liberalism as serving the interest of particular, privileged groups such as the bourgeoisie (see eg. Chatterjee 2004). A second influential line of skepticism is provided by cultural difference perspectives, notably those that emphasize the Christian roots of values such as secularism in the history of the modern West (see eg. De Roover, Claerhout, and Balagangadhara 2011). Culturally alien to India and other non-European contexts, unsupported by local religious and normative traditions, secularism may be seen as doomed to unintelligibility and failure. Post-colonial and cultural difference perspectives converge in their dismissal of liberalism as weakly articulated in India, as normatively inadequate (e.g., secularism is not capable of dealing with the problems of Indian diversity), and as lacking epistemic power (e.g., can Indian realities be adequately comprehended through Western categories?) A third possible reason for the neglect of the study of liberalism in India is that in the narrative of Indian nationalism, liberalism figures as its first, feeble stage. In retrospect, the constitutional liberalism that defined the Congress party's stance in its early years

(1885-1905) seems a timid nationalism, weak and ineffective against colonialism it is felt, in large part *because* it was liberal (Seth 1999: 102, 107). In the standard Indian nationalist narrative, democracy overcomes the limits of liberalism, with Gandhi's alchemy transforming a mendicant nationalism into a mass movement. It is democracy that provides the master-frame for understanding India's history and future, not liberalism.

For an account of Indian liberalism, then, some quick points of rebuttal are in order. First, the dismissal of liberalism derives in many cases from its identification with its individualist strands, either rights-based or utilitarian. As Michael Freeden reminds us, however, liberalism has a significant welfare tradition, concerned with the social conditions and collective provision required for enabling individual freedom and development. Furthermore, as Rajeev Bhargava has noted, in a context defined by inegalitarian collectivism, individualist ideas, both utilitarian and rights-based, represented an egalitarian impulse (2000:34). Second, critics of liberalism in India often assimilate liberalism into phenomena with which it was contingently associated in the course of its historical development – capitalism, colonialism, nationalism, state centralization. As Judith Shklar reminds us, however, historical associations and even 'psychological affinities' are distinct from 'logical consequences' (1998:6). Third, the historical origins of ideas do not, of course, dictate their subsequent fate. It has been argued, for instance, that Indian liberalism was 'crippled from its origins' in colonial utilitarianism, 'squeezed into a culture that had little room for the individual' (Khilnani 1997:26). This influential view has some merit. However, democratic ideas and institutions were introduced in India by a colonial state, in an anaemic form, in a society that had little place for the idea of social equality. Yet, no serious analyst claims today that democracy in India has remained trapped by its colonial origins.

While I am making a case for the study of liberal ideas in India, my case is not that liberalism is necessarily strongly articulated in India. Sustained meditation on the importance of constraints on political and social power, of choice for individuals to shape their lives as they will, is hard to come by even in the writings of defenders of liberalism. It is true that political practice in India has been characterized by greater accommodation of political dissent than many other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. As Chris Bayly (2011) has shown, India has a long history of liberal newspapers in English and vernacular languages such as Hindi, Bengali and Marathi dating back to the nineteenth century, which is exceptional not just in relation to the developing world, but also Europe. However, to the extent that the protection of civil and political liberties exists in India, it appears to be a result more of the functioning of democracy, where intense electoral competition has produced liberal outcomes (see Manor 2011), rather than a consequence of a staunch ideological commitment to the inviolability of the individual. Having conceded that strong liberalism remains weakly articulated in India, I do want to claim that liberalism is more significant in India than is commonly believed. Historically, three main liberal traditions can be identified.

Colonial liberalism

The first strand of Indian liberalism, associated with British rule or the Raj, might be termed colonial liberalism, something of an oxymoron. The Raj was not predominantly liberal. Scholars have shown that those who were liberals in Britain were often authoritarian in relation to India, including such distinguished figures as James Mill, James Fitzjames Stephen, even John Stuart Mill (Stokes 1959, Majeed 1992, Metcalf 1994, Mehta 1999). Moreover, even when the Raj was liberal, colonial hierarchy prevailed. Macaulay's famous dismissal of 'the entire literature of India and

Arabia' as not worth 'a single shelf of a good European library' stemmed, Thomas Metcalf notes, not from 'some chance prejudice but the liberal project itself': the 'future triumphs of "reason" demanded as their counterpart the present existence of "barbarism"' (1994: 34-5, see also Mehta 1999:75). Nevertheless, hierarchal, constrained and infused with racial superiority as it was, colonial liberalism was an important source for liberal ideas and practices in India such as the rule of law, equality before the law, and education as a means of improvement.

Colonial liberalism developed in India from the late 18th century, at the intersection of debates between Orientalists who sought to preserve Indian traditions in the governance of India and Anglicists who sought to remodel Indian practices in line with general principles of law as scholars have shown. Liberals of the Raj, of different generations, were for the most part Anglicizers. Early strands of colonial liberalism reflected key concerns of classical Lockean liberalism with the limitation of government power and respect for property rights. As Eric Stokes' magisterial study shows, Governor-General Cornwallis's (1786-93) policies were driven by Whig doctrines. The Permanent Settlement of Bengal (1793) for example, which introduced rights to private property in land for the landlords (*zamindars*), also sought to limit the discretionary power of the executive and subject it to the rule of law, through an independent judiciary (Stokes 1959: 4-5, 26). The influence of Whig liberalism in India should not be exaggerated. The Permanent Settlement represented one type of revenue settlement, used in parts of British India, and in practice, it did not achieve a massive shift to Western style private property rights and capitalist agriculture (Metcalf 1994:36, Washbrook 1981). From an egalitarian liberal standpoint, the effects of Whig policies were highly illiberal: the increased power of landlords resulted in much greater poverty and oppression of the peasantry.

Nevertheless, the advocacy of limited government, fixed laws and private property rights did advance a strand of liberalism in India (Stokes 1959:6).

In the 19th century, India became a testing ground for utilitarian doctrines and projects of reform in law and education (Metcalf 1994, Mehta 1999). Several scholar-statesmen of the Raj authored programmes for Indian improvement. Utilitarian scholar and head of the India Office James Mill wrote the *History of British India*, which became a training manual for officials of the Raj, and offered a Benthamite diagnosis and remedy for India's ills (Mehta 1999:89, Majeed 1992). English utilitarians and liberals were often authoritarian in relation to India, a useful reminder of the distance that can separate liberalism from democracy. James Mill favoured good government by experts, noting that so long as India's government was 'well and cheaply performed', it was 'of little or no consequence who are the people that perform it' (Metcalf 1994:31). While John Stuart Mill favoured the extension of representative institutions to colonies such as America and Australia 'composed of people of similar civilization to the ruling country', as Uday Mehta has shown, on India he largely agreed with his father. India was 'at a great distance' from being capable of self government (Mill 1972: 376-77, Metcalf 1994: 32-3, Mehta 1999:70-71). While detailing the dangers to good government in a colonial situation (the despotism of foreigners who do not 'know anything about their subjects, has many chances of being worse than that of those that do': Mill 1972: 383), he saw the rule of India by the East India Company as justified, for suggesting 'the true theory of the government of a semi-barbarous dependency by a civilized country', bringing 'constant if not very rapid, improvement in prosperity and good administration.' (Mill 1972: 393, 390).

However not all followers of Bentham in India opposed self-government. For Thomas Macaulay, author of the two most influential liberal reforms of the British era, the Penal code and English based education, utilitarian and liberal commitments meant accepting the possibility of Indian government. In his famed speech supporting the liberal Charter Act of 1833 that ended the East India Company's monopoly over trade, Macaulay held

It would be... far better for us that the people of India were...ruled by their own kings, but wearing our broadcloth, and working with our cutlery...To trade with civilized men is infinitely more profitable than to govern savages ...(cited in Stokes 1959: 43-4)

Macaulay's design for a common criminal law for all of India, enacted eventually in the 1860s, was as Eric Stokes has shown, unmistakably Benthamite in its emphasis on achieving uniformity as far as practicable, minimizing suffering at the same time as cost, and above all, in its attempt to eschew existing practice and fashion a code of law '*ex nihilo* by...distinterested philosophic intelligence' (Stokes 1959: 191, 219-20, 222, 225). Macaulay's other influential initiative of liberal reform was his famous minute on education of 1835 that introduced English language as the medium of instruction and English literature as the main subject in the curriculum. A humanities based, liberal arts-oriented educational curriculum, in which English literature - dominated, was to be the instrument for the liberal transformation of Indian character (Stokes 1959: 222, Metcalf 1994: 40, Mehta 1999:9).

While colonial liberalism in India reached its apogee in the first half of the nineteenth century, liberal ideas of limited government and the rule of law, equality before the law and education as a means of improvement, remained influential. These were articulated by statesmen such as Ripon (1827-1909) and Montagu (1879-1924) (see Metcalf 1994: 201), in policies of constitutional reform and moderate self-government for Indians, as well as in professions such as law and civil services

(Panikkar 8-9, Robb 2007, Mantena 2010). To be sure, liberal ideas had to contend with more 'conservative visions of empire', as well as the 'exigencies of colonial rule', and were rarely fully reflected in policy, let alone practice (Metcalf 1994:35). The instinct for legal uniformity was held in check—both Cornwallis's reforms and Macaulay's Penal Code steered clear of areas of law regarded as governed by religious authority. Furthermore, although self-government expanded, the franchise remained restricted by educational and property qualifications. The growth of representative institutions took place alongside the expansion of communal electorates, with representation organized along communities of identity and interest, as, to an extent, was the case in nineteenth century Britain. As such, colonial liberalism provided an uncertain basis for a liberal democratic public sphere of common and equal citizenship. Nonetheless, it represented a distinct variant of liberalism, shaped by British imperial practices and the constraints and possibilities of Indian conditions. Colonial liberalism's most enduring influence was perhaps in the institutions of education, law and representation it created, which served as powerful schools for other Indian liberalisms.

Nationalist Liberalism

The second strand of liberalism in India, nationalist liberalism, was a product of the emerging middle class formed by Western education. Its principal bearers were the professional classes created by the Raj - lawyers, civil servants, and educationalists - and the organizations that they spawned. These were nationalist to differing extents: full independence from Britain was not desired in all cases, and was not a common aspiration until the second decade of the twentieth century. Key liberal concerns shaped nationalist endeavour in relation to both Indian society and the colonial state:

the assertion of individual reason against the authority of tradition, of the need for limits on executive power, of freedom of the press, of equality before the law and equality of opportunity in employment. Nationalist liberals were largely drawn from elite strata of Indian society.

In India, as elsewhere, the emergence of an indigenous modern liberalism was related to a crisis of religious authority. The encounter with the colonial state, Western education, and Christian missionaries produced intense self-questioning and criticism of orthodox religious and social practices. While proto-liberal concerns can be discerned in several impulses for Hindu reform, the accuracy of the label ‘liberal’ that is sometimes applied is debatable, given a relative lack of interest in political institutions as a route to achieving desired change. Although individual freedom was a central concern for religious reformers such as Vivekananda (1863-1902), the domain wherein its realization was pursued was spiritual and religious – politics was considered too shallow a pool for the contemplation of freedom. He is more accurately described by Dalton (1986) as a progenitor of the modern anarchist tradition of thinking in India.

The exemplary figure for the elaboration of an identifiably liberal program within the Hindu social reform tradition is Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), described as ‘the father of liberalism’ in India (Panikkar 1962). In pursuing the typical causes of Hindu social reform such as campaigns against widow burning, idol worship, rituals of purity and pollution, and the monopoly of the priestly class over education, Rammohan was, as Thomas Pantham notes, a ‘religious Benthamite’ (1986:40). Religious tenets and practices were to be subjected to the test of individual reason and social utility, and to be discarded if found wanting. Like British liberals of his time, Rammohan Roy supported the cause of free trade against the monopoly of

the British East India Company and defended property rights, seeing capitalism and industrialization as forces that promised emancipation from the servitude of the feudal economy. Rammohan's elaboration of an indigenous liberalism is perhaps most clearly evident in the political causes that he championed in trans-national networks stretching across Britain, Iberia and Latin America in the early nineteenth century as Chris Bayly has shown (2011). He argued passionately against restrictions on the press and for a legislative check on executive power on characteristically liberal grounds. Newspapers 'by introducing free discussion among the Natives and inducing them to reflect and inquire after knowledge' had 'served greatly to improve their minds and ameliorate their condition'. Restrictions on the press prevented 'the Natives from making the Government readily acquainted with the errors and injustice that may be committed by its executive officers' (Roy in Robertson 1999: 234, 236). He advocated the reform of the Westminster Parliament, with representation for Indians and other colonials to exercise a legislative check on the East India Company as well as a mixed constitution and jury rights for Indians (Bayly 2011).

Rammohan's constitutional liberal vision of checks to prevent an abuse of executive power, like other early 19th century liberalisms, was democratic and nationalist only to a limited extent. Emphasizing the need for rule of law, he was more equivocal about equality before the law. The British Parliament was to make laws for Indians through consultation with 'gentlemen of intelligence and respectability' (Robertson 1999: 256). Campaigning against restrictions on the Indian press, he appealed to 'sympathy which forms a paternal tie' (in Robertson 1999: 259) between the rulers and the ruled, and was at pains to emphasize that liberties were sought for Indians as loyal British subjects, grateful for the blessings of British rule.

Nevertheless, nationalist cultural concerns appear in Rammohan's attempt to ground the notion of a mixed constitution in a lost Indian Hindu tradition of an ancient constitution with a separation of powers between Brahmin legislators and Rajput warriors. He argued that liberal institutions had, contrary to British misrepresentations, substantial Indian precedents in ancient judicial institutions such as the *Panchayat* as well as more recent Mughal India's *akhbarat* and *akhbar navis* (news writers), as Chris Bayly has shown (2011). Rammohan's championing of liberal institutions such as a free press and juries largely denied to Indians laid the foundations for a nationalist critique of British rule that was both liberal and resolutely cosmopolitan in its sensibilities.

In the late 19th early 20th century, a form of nationalist liberalism was articulated by the early Congress party leaders known as Moderates, including such figures as Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917), Pherozeshah Mehta (1845-1915), Surendranath Banerjea (1848-1925), and G.K. Gokhale (1866-1915). This remains the clearest political referent of liberalism in India. Early Congress nationalists were liberal in their political demands as well as methods, as Sanjay Seth notes; they emphasized constitutionalism, gradual reform, and an appeal to English traditions, while typically rebuking British rule in India for 'failing to live up to its own...historic mission as the bearer of liberal institutions' in India (1999: 103-04, 100-01). Many early Congress nationalists, like 19th century British liberals, were comfortable with the educational and property restrictions on the franchise, and demanded greater political rights mainly for educated Indians, seeing themselves as the spokesmen of the poor, illiterate masses (Seth 1999: 107). With respect to economic liberalism, however, early Indian nationalists were more equivocal, and developed a critique of prevalent doctrines of *laissez faire* in advance of British

liberalism of the time (Panikkar 1962, Bayly 2011, chapters 6-7). Rejecting cultural and Malthusian explanations for Indian poverty and famine, they argued that these could be tackled through better state policies in areas such as irrigation, food storage, and reduced taxation burden on poor peasants.

The most systematic elaboration of an Indian liberal critique of economic liberalism is perhaps to be found in the writings of the Maharashtrian jurist and social reformer M.G. Ranade (1842-1901). Ranade's *Essays on Indian Economics* (1898) advocated the extension of private property rights in agricultural land to both landlords and peasants: freedom of contract and competition were necessary to counter the immobility of Indian capital and labour (Ranade 1906: 284, 299, Vora 1986: 94). Crucially, however, these were *not* sufficient for achieving economic development, which required state intervention. The key assumptions of classical political economy, Ranade argued, did not obtain in India and were not 'literally true' of any 'existing Community' (Ranade 1906: 10). German scholars among others had demonstrated that the textbook interpretation of Adam Smith's doctrines was 'essentially English and Insular' (Ranade 1906: 16, 19):

...the Individual and his Interests are not the centre round which the Theory should revolve...the true centre is the Body Politic of which that Individual is a Member...The State is now more and more recognized as the National Organ for taking care of National needs in all matters in which individual and cooperative efforts are not likely to be so effective and economic as National effort..... (Ranade 1906: 21,34).

State-supported capitalist industrialization along the lines found in Europe was sorely needed in India. The efforts the colonial state in this regard were meagre 'as compared with its resources and the needs of the Country', or as relative to the efforts of European states in areas such as the building up of national credit through the banking system, the protection of local industry from foreign competition (Ranade 1906: 35; Vora 1986: 95-6). Ranade also pressed for state action on behalf of the poor

on paternalist liberal grounds: the fixing of rents, tenures, and rates of interest for tenants were all 'legitimate forms of protection of the weak against the strong', necessary to 'check the abuse of Competition'. For 'where the parties' were not 'equally matched in intelligence and resources', 'all talk of equality and freedom adds insult to injury' (Ranade 1906:31).

Ranade's thought and practice reflected characteristic themes of Hindu social reform, including a critique of the oppression of lower castes and of women (with a focus on education and marriage reform to improve the status of high caste women), a narrative of decline from an ancient, more liberal past, with proposals for reform supported by appeal to Vedic and Bhakti traditions (see Vora 1986: 98-99). Influenced by Herbert Spencer's organicism and evolutionary doctrines, Ranade argued that in order to achieve real, lasting change, reform had to be slow and gradual, without a violent break with the past (Vora 1986: 102; Ranade 1915: 117-8, 230-31). A belief in gradualism and in interdependence ('what applies to the human body holds good of the collective humanity'- Ranade 1915: 232) meant that reform in society, politics and the economy was interconnected.

For Ranade, as Rajendra Vora notes, the cause of social reform took precedence over that of political freedom. Indians were not yet ready for self-rule and needed to serve 'a period of political apprenticeship' (1986: 104). In a backward country, it was the elites who were the agents of liberal reform, with the educated minority in particular 'the soul of Indian liberalism', whereas the masses were incapable on their own of understanding the value of liberalism (cited in Vora 1986:105). Holding that 'power must gravitate where there is intelligence and wealth', Ranade sought weighted representation in local and provincial government for the educated and property owners through indirect election. He acknowledged that

these bodies would be 'far from democratic' but held that the masses were not yet ready for democracy and needed a long period of tutelage (Ranade cited in Vora 1986: 105).

The middle classes needed assistance from the state in order to fulfill their pedagogical role, in the form of state support for higher education, which Ranade favoured over mass education. There was little demand for education among the masses, whereas the middle classes in particular, the Brahmins that were seeking higher education, were not wealthy (Ranade 1915: 274, 292, 314). In Indian nationalist narratives, this limited, elitist liberalism is transcended first through Gandhi's alchemy into a mass movement, then through Nehru's socialism, into a developmental state. Nevertheless, elite liberalism has been influential in post-Independence India, in state policies and discourses informed by paternalistic concern for the masses and 'weaker sections', as well as in civic associations dedicated to the education and betterment of the poor.

Elite liberal concerns are also to be found among Muslim nationalists in 19th and 20th century India. Modernist leaders such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98), Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) and Mohammed Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) were mostly hostile to Indian nationalism in their politics. Muslim nationalists rejected the Congress's claim that it represented all Indians: a core assertion was that Muslims in India were not just a minority, but a distinct nation, and deserved political recognition commensurate with this status. Muslim nationalism also differed from Indian nationalism in that liberal concerns were often articulated within the frames of Islamic history and theology; this deserves fuller treatment than is possible within the scope of this essay (see Shaikh 1989, Devji 2007, Bayly 2011). Worried about the numerical weakness of Muslims in a democratic framework, leading Muslim liberals remained

skeptical of democratic institutions throughout, seeking to limit the scope of majority opinion through mechanisms such as separate electorates and the minority veto, demonstrating a greater awareness of the tension between democratic and liberal principles than mid 20c Indian nationalists (Khilnani 2009: 267).

Nevertheless, the thought and practice of leading Muslim nationalists also reflected several preoccupations of Indian nationalist liberalism. This included a rationalist and historicist critique of socio-religious customs such as women's seclusion (*pardah*) and polygamy as subsequent, non-essential accretions, together with the attempt to establish the truth and relevance of the fundamentals of religion (notably the Qur'an – see Troll 1978: xvii, 229) A belief in Western education as the means to progress, and an emphasis on the role of elites as agents of liberalism and the proper spokesmen of the people was also common (Jalal 2000: 92-3). Muslim nationalists continued to share significant liberal ground with Indian nationalists even after their political divorce. Mohammed Ali Jinnah's famous speech to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly in August 1947 proclaimed liberal values of religious freedom and equal citizenship that he shared with the Indian nationalism of the time, and to which he remained poignantly attached:

....You are...free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State.

Turning briefly to look at key figures of Indian nationalism, although liberalism is not the best frame to capture the distinctive cast of the thought of Gandhi and Nehru, features similar to liberalism, and in some cases adapted from liberal themes, are undoubtedly discernable in their ideas. These included an emphasis on the individual as the basic unit of the political community; a belief in progress through individual self-development; as well as in a state that respected the civil and political

liberties of citizens. Gandhi's notion of freedom as *swaraj* or self-rule was centred ultimately on the individual ('Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself'), as Antony Parel argues (2009: 71). Nationalism required a commitment to liberal principles such as religious freedom (Gandhi in Parel 2009:50). Both Gandhi and Nehru were, in different ways, strongly committed to civic nationalism, and as a result to secularism. Indeed, the project of creating a single Indian nation out of diverse and conflicting religions, languages, castes and tribes could not but be liberal in key respects, given that liberalism provided the language and mechanisms of promoting unity amidst diversity (see Bajpai 2011 for details).

Nehru's thought fits the descriptor 'liberal' better than Gandhi's, although here too liberal ideas were embedded within other ethical frames, notably social democracy. Writing in *Glimpses of World History* of the great declarations of the rights of man of the American and French revolutions, Nehru saw these as the achievements of democracy, which made 'everybody a free and equal citizen' (Nehru: 614). The expansion of democracy would help to safeguard basic rights of individuals and minorities, as Sunil Khilnani notes (2009: 268). For Nehru, as for Gandhi, although for different reasons, independence from British rule was not sufficient for freedom (Nehru: 10). While he was critical of the massive material inequalities that persisted under 'formal democracy' and remained an admirer of the Russian revolution, he saw the exercise of state power in the communist and fascist dictatorships of the time through repression and censorship as unacceptable (Nehru: 955-59).

When we turn from the ideas of individuals to nationalist practice more broadly, even a cursory examination suggests that opposition to colonial rule in India focused substantially on liberal causes (Panikkar 1962, Bhargava 2000) In the 19th

century, these included demands for a free press, separation of judicial from executive power, equality before the law for Indians and Europeans, and, later, equal rights for Indians in judicial, civil service, and legislative arenas. In the 20th century, key episodes of nationalist mobilization sought freedom from arbitrary arrest, freedom of expression, and freedom to vote for Indians; and nationalist declarations affirmed standard liberal rights. In terms of its ideology at least, Indian nationalism was more liberal than the colonial state that it opposed, and of course, used this very effectively to undermine British claims to rule. Through nationalist mobilizations, iterated over the first half of the twentieth century, a commitment to liberal freedoms in the form professed ideals at least, came to be shared by a widening section of elites. As their expressive document, the Indian constitution could not but be liberal, although it was also influenced by more radical liberalisms.

Radical Liberalism

A third variant of liberalism in 19th and 20th century India might be termed radical liberalism. Most thinkers and movements on the left of the political spectrum in India have defended liberal values: as Chris Bayly notes, even ‘in theory, it was difficult to envisage an Indian ‘socialist’ man, similar to his Soviet or Chinese counterparts’ (2008: 28). Heterodox Marxists such as M.N. Roy who advocated radical democratic proposals such as government by people’s committees, affirmed a humanist approach to freedom (Bayly 2008: 24-6, Kaviraj 2009). Perhaps the most politically influential of radical liberalisms in India are to be found among lower caste thinkers and movements. Although liberalism is not the only frame for their analysis, a sufficient number of liberal themes appear in lower caste excoriations of Hinduism, and Indian nationalism, to identify a distinct type of liberalism here. These include an emphasis

on the equal dignity of all humans, inalienable human rights, mass education and constitutional protections for rights (Panikkar 1962:12) Historically, anti-upper caste liberalism also emerged from the institutions of colonial liberalism, such as Western education and employment, and was nationalist in its own way. Fired by anger against Brahmins, it championed autonomy for lower castes, asserting that the oppressed castes were the original inhabitants of the nation (Omvedt 1994:16). With its strongly egalitarian thrust directed primarily against inequalities *within* Indian society, radical lower caste nationalism nevertheless represented a distinct strand from nationalist liberalism in ideological terms. In political terms, too, it differed in its critique of upper caste domination of the Indian national movement ('Brahmin-bourgeois' in one formulation), and its insistence on the need for the separate political organization of the lower castes. Two exemplary figures considered here are Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827-90) and Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956).

Phule argued that all men, and, significantly, women, were in nature and by birth free and equal, possessing inalienable rights bestowed on them by the Creator that were morally beyond the reach of any human authority (Vora 1986: 107, O'Hanlon 1985: 195). In the context of centuries of caste oppression, underpinned by Hindu theology that had little place for a 'strong concept of an original human equality' (O'Hanlon 1985: 193), this was a radical claim. Influenced by Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*, Phule's thought reflected themes such as an emphasis on the equal natural rights of all individuals that were given by God, attacks on priestcraft and religious texts, and a narrative of an ancient dispossession of original inhabitants by outside invaders (O'Hanlon 1985:197) As Gail Omvedt observes, Phule reversed the Aryan theory of race, arguing, in a historicist vein, that Brahmans were the Aryan invaders (*Irani Aryabhats*) who, through violence and cunning, had destroyed an

‘originally prosperous and egalitarian society’ and used a religious ideology based on inequality to legitimize their rule (*bhatshahi*) (1995: 19, 21). He welcomed British rule as ‘meant by the Creator to rescue the Sudras from slavery’ as Rajendra Vora notes (1986: 108).

While nationalist liberals such as Rammohan and Ranade had sought to recuperate an unsullied Hinduism of the Vedic past, for Phule, Hinduism was beyond redemption because of its denial throughout history of the basic human rights of the downtrodden castes (*sudras atisudras* in Phule’s influential formulation), and had to be destroyed. Nationalist organizations were ‘monopolized’ by Brahmins; the Sudras should not be duped again by Brahmin cunning. Instead, they should embrace Western education and scientific knowledge (*vidya*), as ‘a weapon’ of change and ‘cultural revolution’ (Omvedt 1994:99). In contrast to nationalist liberals’ preoccupation with higher education, Phule wanted the British government to focus resources on mass education. This would instill ‘mental independence’ and consciousness of rights (Vora 1986: 108, O’ Hanlon 1985: 197). And in contrast to nationalist liberals’ emphasis on industrialization, Phule wanted agriculture and the peasants to be the focus for achieving economic development (Vora 1986). Peasants were the ‘primary producers looted by the state’, both during the rule of the ‘Arya Brahmins’ and the British, through their Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy (Omvedt 1994: 98-99). It is in Phule’s and his successors’ critique of upper-caste domination that egalitarian liberal ideals have been most powerfully elaborated in India. Social justice arguably became a central creed of the Indian Constitution because the Indian nationalists were forced, often against their will, to accommodate the demands of downtrodden castes in order to forge a broad front against British rule.

If Phule demonstrated the possibilities of radical liberalism as a movement of protest, it is in the work of the brilliant Dalit leader and the architect the Indian Constitution, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, that the institutional potential of radical liberalism is best discerned. Although Ambedkar disavowed the term liberal, like Phule, his condemnation of Brahmanism drew upon liberal values, such as the importance of individual merit, effort, and choice. The Hindu social order, Dr Ambedkar argued, ‘does not recognize the individual as a centre of social purpose ...there is no room for individual merit and consideration of individual justice...’ (cited in Gore 1993: 262). ‘...The division of labor brought about by the Caste System is not a division based on choice...It is based on the dogma of predestination (Ambedkar AOC: 47-8).

Ambedkar’s thought also reflected themes from early twentieth century liberalism, such as eugenics. A division of labour based on caste ‘had no basis in race and by enjoining endogamy caste did not secure any advantage from a eugenic point of view’ (cited in Gore 1993: 278). Like Phule, Ambedkar offered a historicist account of the oppression of Sudras and Untouchables in terms of ancient defeats, seeking to establish that these groups were not inherently inferior, just on the wrong side of history as Chris Bayly has argued (2008: 17). Like liberals elsewhere, he saw entrenched social problems as amenable to human endeavour, and believed that progress could be achieved through better political arrangements. He was an early advocate of universal franchise, arguing in the Franchise Sub-Committee in 1930 against prevailing restrictions on suffrage that excluded most Untouchables on individualist liberal grounds that the franchise was ‘the inherent right of every individual in the State’ that ought not to depend upon the ‘convenience’ of the administration: each individual who was subject to a legislation that was likely to

‘invade his liberty...his life and his property’ ‘ought to have the power to defend himself’ against it (Ambedkar in Moon ed. 1976: 559).

While his proposals for guaranteed places for Untouchables in the government and public services pushed at the bounds of liberalism, Dr Ambedkar offered liberal and democratic arguments in support of his case. Adapting constitutional liberal arguments, he suggested that quotas were essentially forms of checks and balances, similar to fundamental rights and separation of powers found in liberal constitutions. These were required to save Untouchables from betrayal by the caste Hindus after independence, the fate of the ‘Negroes in the United States after the Civil War’ (Ambedkar in Moon ed. 1991: 232, 173). In the absence of constitutional safeguards for minorities such as the Untouchables, a parliamentary system would not be a form of democracy, but of imperialism.

Just as Indian nationalists had invoked British liberalism against colonial rule, Ambedkar turned liberal and democratic arguments against Indian nationalists. Democracy for Ambedkar was fundamentally about equality, not just in material terms, but also that of status. He contrasted equality with liberty that he identified with the freedom of contract and resulting ‘economic wrongs’ (Ambedkar in Moon ed 1991: 446-7). Like other radical thinkers, he held that formal institutions were inadequate for the realization of democracy. Freedom from British rule, constitutional government and universal franchise were not sufficient for democracy, for these were ‘no bar against governing class reaching places of power and authority....self-government and democracy become real...when the governing class loses its power to capture the power to govern’ (Ambedkar in Moon ed. 1991: 444, 448-9). For a truly democratic order, the presence of the ‘servile classes’ in the bodies of government was essential.

Unlike many radical thinkers, Ambedkar accorded political institutions a central role in social transformation. Far more than nationalist leaders like Gandhi or Nehru, Ambedkar was able to see the potential of political institutions for achieving desired social change. Quotas for Untouchables, together with their enfranchisement and education, would lessen the sense of inferiority and promote social mobility or social endosmosis, a concept that Ambedkar adapted from Dewey as Arun Mukherjee has shown, to refer to the ability of individuals to move within the social order, blocked in India by the caste system (2009, see also Bayly 2008: 18,20). Most of Ambedkar's colleagues in the Indian Constituent Assembly did not share his vision that the 'principal aim' of a democratic constitution was 'to dislodge the governing class' from power (Ambedkar 1991: 448). Nevertheless, nationalist liberals' avowal of the cause of betterment of the downtrodden, as well as the willingness of all sides to compromise for reaching agreement, meant that legislative and employment quotas for Dalits and Adivasis were eventually accepted by the Constitution-makers, despite the strong misgivings of Jawaharlal Nehru and others (for more details, see Bajpai 2011). The Indian Constitution is thus a legatee of all three liberal traditions: colonial, nationalist and radical.

Comparisons and conclusions

In politics, colonial, nationalist, and radical variants of liberalism in India were opponents. One reading of modern Indian history is to see it as the triumph first of nationalist over colonial liberalism, and then, to an extent, of radical liberalism over nationalist liberalism. In terms of ideology, however, two important convergences can be discerned across the opposed liberalisms in India described in this essay. The first is a strong belief in state action for achieving liberal ends. Most variants of liberalism in India have been welfarist in orientation, seeing the state as 'the agent of individual

well-being and flourishing through social reform' (Freeden 2008: 23). The utilitarian-Whig Macaulay, the Brahmin reformer Ranade, and the anti-Brahmin Dalit leader Ambedkar all argued that the initiative, direction and resources of the state were essential for progress. Macaulay championed intervention by the British Parliament in Indian affairs in support of liberal projects in trade, education, and law. Ranade criticized *laissez faire* as unsuited to the needs of a backward economy, and argued for greater state intervention for economic and social advancement. Ambedkar was a staunch advocate of a strong centralized state for safeguarding the interests of the downtrodden castes, and in his later career, went further than even Nehru and other socialists in advocating state ownership of agriculture and key industries (Bayly 2008:23). In the diverse liberalisms outlined above, apart from criticisms of communism, it is hard to find elaborations of the classical liberal concern that the expansion of state power posed a threat to the individual. The main concern appears to have been the opposite, namely that unless the state was roused to and empowered to intervene, liberal ends would not be achieved, and individuals would remain trapped in oppressive traditions and exploitative relations. To use Isaiah Berlin's influential distinction, Indian liberalisms of different hues have mostly articulated variants of positive freedom. On the significance of negative freedom from the standpoint of the individual rather than societal benefit, these have remained largely silent.

A second feature shared across the different liberalisms discussed in this essay has been the recognition of group difference, along with a willingness to cohabit with group-differentiated rights. Indian liberals have on the whole been good social theorists, mindful in their prescriptions for desired reform, of prevailing social conditions, attentive to the ways in which individual agency is shaped and limited by

the wider social context. This has not always resulted in egalitarian policies. In colonial liberalism, the recognition of group difference often indicated the political and/or intellectual limits of liberalism. Liberal reformers had to yield large areas of law and policy to religious authority and conservative opponents, and notions of racial hierarchy served to limit the universal application of liberal principles (Metcalf 1994). In 19th century nationalist liberalism, the recognition of group-difference often indicated an acceptance of social hierarchy, as for instance in Rammohan's and Ranade's proposals for greater political rights for the educated and propertied. That a later generation of nationalists such as Nehru saw group differentiated rights as inconsistent with liberal principles, like mid 20th century liberals elsewhere, is not surprising in the light of their association with notions of racial and class superiority, although worries about national unity were as important (Bajpai 2011). Radical liberals like Ambedkar, however, advocated group-differentiated rights on egalitarian grounds. The Indian Constitution of 1950 recognizes group- differentiated rights to a much greater extent than liberalisms of its time did elsewhere in the world, instituting legislative quotas and preferential treatment in government employment for downtrodden castes and tribes. In one sense, the recognition of group differentiated rights can be seen as an instance of Indian Constitution-makers being ahead of the theory and practice of liberalism of their time, adopting an expansive commitment to justice, elaborating a liberal egalitarian framework for addressing group-based inequalities (Panikkar 1962:16). However, to the extent that Indian Constitution-makers and their successors have failed to elaborate liberal justifications for group-differentiated rights, that strengthen a common citizenship centered on individuals (see eg. Mehta 2006, Jayal) and constrain the abuses of state power, these also indicate weaknesses of liberalism in India.

The main exception to the common ground of liberalisms in India discussed in this essay appears to be free-market neo-liberalism, prominent in Indian politics since the 1990s, and often identified with liberalism by those on the left. Advocates of economic growth through private accumulation and consumption criticize state intervention in the economy and group-differentiated rights as detracting from efficiency, but also freedom. While neo-liberalism in India does articulate proto-liberal concerns, whether it can be characterized as liberal is debatable, as it has not offered a sustained account of the political conditions within which personal freedoms can flourish. In theory, it offers at best what Michael Freedman terms in the context of Eastern Europe, an ‘emaciated liberalism’, a ‘reactive legacy’ of state control of the economy (Freedman 2008: 17). In practice, group differentiated rights as well as state action on behalf of the poor have continued and in some cases expanded under governments pursuing economic liberalization.

This essay has sought to explore the main different variants of liberalism in 19th-20th century Indian political theory and practice. It has argued that liberal ideas have been more prevalent and influential in India than is commonly believed, with thought conventionally characterized as imperialist, nationalist, socialist, and anti-caste exhibiting many liberal features. However, I have also suggested that historically, advocates of liberal values have rarely expanded on the need for constraints on state power in order to preserve personal freedoms. Furthermore, many sophisticated theorists of freedom in India, Gandhi notably, are not appropriately described as liberal, even though they share important concerns with liberalism. These tentative conclusions indicate, on the one hand, a worrying lacuna in Indian liberalisms: with personal freedoms left under-protected from attacks from state and social forces, dissenters and minorities, whether religious, political or sexual, remain

vulnerable. On the other hand, an inquiry into liberalism in India also serves as a useful reminder of the limits of liberalism as a category for comparative inquiry, and of the need also for other frames – religious, anarchist, socialist, and republican – for capturing and comparing ideas of individual freedom across the globe.

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