

Hindu Traditionalism and K.M. Munshi's Understanding of the Indian Past

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Abstract: It has been suggested by scholars that there were two different strands in the Hindu opinion in the country from 1920s onwards. One of these was Hindu traditionalism which combined an advocacy of Hindu cultural causes with a belief in political nationalism. Hindu nationalism was the other such strand which sought to achieve the organisation of Hindus around a Hindu nation. Moreover, Hindu traditionalists sought to preserve Hindu social order while Hindu nationalists attempted to transform this social order with a view to promote the organisation of the Hindus. This article argues that K. M. Munshi was a Hindu traditionalist with occasional lapses into Hindu nationalist concerns. While he supported the Hindu social and cultural causes, was associated with the political nationalism of the Congress during the struggle for independence, and stood for a secular India in the Constituent Assembly, he also lapsed occasionally into Hindu nationalist concerns such as the need to achieve the organisation of the Hindus and to homogenize the cultural and religious traditions of India. This was also reflected in his understanding and reconstruction of the Indian past.

Keywords: Aryan Culture, Hindu Nationalism, Hindu Traditionalism, Sanskrit, Somanatha

I. INTRODUCTION

B. D. Graham argues for the existence of two philosophical tendencies within the Hindu opinion in India from 1920s onwards. With the passage of time these tendencies became more crystallized. Graham terms the more moderate of these tendencies "Hindu traditionalism which stressed the need to preserve Hindu religious beliefs and social practices and to foster the study of Hindi and Sanskrit languages and their literatures." [1] Further, "while a Hindu traditionalist might devote much of his public life to cultural associations and institutions dedicated to the promotion of Hinduism, he might well support the Congress as the expression of a purely political nationalism with clearly defined representative and constitutional objectives." [2] On the other hand, Hindu nationalism sought "not only to conserve Hinduism but to develop the latent power of the Hindu community and thus to promote the Hindu *sangathan*, the organization of the Hindus..." [3] Graham mentions the approach advocated by V.D. Savarkar in his book *Essentials of Hindutva*, published in 1924, as a case of Hindu nationalist ideology. Graham suggests another difference between Hindu traditionalism and Hindu nationalism. While Hindu traditionalists were concerned with preserving the Hindu social order, Hindu nationalists sought to transform this social order with a view to promote the Hindu *sangathan*, the organization of Hindus.

Christophe Jaffrelot too has distinguished between Hindu nationalism and Hindu traditionalism. He has argued that Hindu traditionalists were noted for their attachment to Hindu culture and became involved with associations to defend the cow and promote Hindu and Ayurvedic medicine. Hindu traditionalists differed from Hindu nationalists "in that the former rarely have the ideological commitment of the latter, who are more xenophobic in outlook." [4] Jaffrelot regards Madan Mohan Malaviya and Lajpat Rai as the initiators of the Hindu traditionalist current of thought who believed in the idea of the Indian nation but thought that the construction of such a nation required the strengthening of the majority community. He has assigned Kanaialal Maneklal Munshi's writings and thought to the category of Hindu traditionalism.

Another scholar, Manu Bhagavan has accepted Jaffrelot's basis for differentiating Hindu nationalism and Hindu traditionalism. However, Bhagavan, unlike Jaffrelot, considers Munshi to be a Hindu nationalist on the ground that his promotion of culture was built around an opposition to the other, a Muslim other. Basing his conclusions on a study of Munshi's activities in Hyderabad during 1948, as an agent general of the government of India, and on an analysis of his association with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and the reconstruction of the Somanatha temple, Bhagavan argues that Munshi 'represents a clear and purposeful form of Hindu nationalism'. [5] He suggests that Munshi's 'long-running anti-Muslim bias' is at the heart of all three cases i.e., his activities in Hyderabad during 1948, and his association with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and the Somanatha temple. Bhagavan writes: "Munshi's efforts "to promote culture" as Kulapati of the Bhavan and through the rebuilding of Somnath clearly equated the modern Indian nation with resurgent, revivalist Hinduism and with a history in which "non-Hindus", a group defined apparently under the conditions laid forth by Veer

Savarkar, were seen as the antagonists of the great motherland and “her people”. His writing on various historical, political, cultural subjects themselves represented a serious advancement of the Hindu nationalist agenda, as it gave the movement intellectual rationale and heft, and presented a “serious” challenge to countervailing secular philosophies and interpretations.”[6] Romila Thapar writes that anti-colonial nationalism in India was 'the inclusive, mainstream nationalism' which as a movement began in the late nineteenth century. It sought to achieve the termination of colonial rule and the establishment of India as an independent nation-state. Parallel to this mainstream nation-state arose, in the early twentieth century, religious nation-state, in the form of Muslim and Hindu communalisms, whose central concern was “less tied to anti-colonialism and more to the creating, if need be, of two nations, each dominated by a majority religious community- Muslim in one case and Hindu in the other...”[7] Both types of religious nationalism were rooted in the colonial construction of the Indian past.

Prof. Thapar suggests that although mainstream nationalism was largely not sympathetic to religious nationalism, there was nevertheless 'some degree of ideological overlap' between the two. Many mainstream nationalists sought to “homogenize identities and cultures in a manner that eroded the demarcation between mainstream and religious nationalism. A manifestation of this becomes visible in the rebuilding of the Somanatha temple and the controversy that resulted.”[8] She regards Munshi as a mainstream nationalist whose work tended to homogenize identities and cultures in a way that eroded the distinction between mainstream and religious nationalism. Munshi remained in the Indian National Congress for a larger part of his political career. In pre-independence India, he remained outside of the Congress only during the years 1941-46 because of his differences with the Congress leadership especially Gandhiji over the use of violence in self-defence and on the issue of his association with the akhada movement. In 1959 he again went out of the Congress and in the years that followed he came closer to the Hindu nationalist forces. But while he remained in the Congress, he accepted the same as the expression of a non-sectarian political nationalism. He saw the former as “a gigantic attempt to consolidate Hindus, Muslims and other minorities into a non-communal nation, regardless of religious loyalties.”[9] In the Constituent Assembly Munshi stood for a secular state, in the sense of prohibition of discrimination against any religious community, and for the protection of minority rights.

At the same time, Munshi was also dedicated to the promotion of cultural causes of the Hindus. Be it his establishment of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, or his association with the reconstruction of the Somanatha temple, or the promotion of Sanskrit and Hindi, he always advocated the cultural concerns of the Hindus. He also sought to conserve the traditional social institutions of Hinduism such as the *Varnashramadharma* i.e., the four-fold order of society. Further, he saw no incompatibility between being a nationalist and being a devout Hindu or Muslim. Thus, if we go by B.D. Graham's criterion for distinguishing between a Hindu nationalist and a Hindu traditionalist, then Munshi would appear to be a Hindu traditionalist. However, there are certain strands in his writings which bring him closer to Hindu nationalism. One of these strands is his concern, though infrequent and more prevalent during his movement for Akhand Hindustan, with the disorganized nature of the Hindu community and the consequent need to organize and physically redeem it through the akhada movement. Another such strand is his depiction of a contrast between the Hindu timidity and the Muslim aggressiveness. Moreover, his insistence that the Hindus need to be assertive and stand up to the aggressive and domineering Muslims and his idea of the master-racism of the Muslims tend to imbue his nationalism with an opposition to 'a Muslim Other'. But these Hindu nationalist strands in his writing and thought remain, on the whole, subdued. What is more pronounced is his support for the Congress as an expression of a non-sectarian, political nationalism and his engagement with the promotion of the cultural causes of the Hindus. Thus, it is safe to conclude that Munshi was a Hindu traditionalist with occasional lapses into Hindu nationalist concerns.

II. MUNSHI'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE INDIAN PAST

That Munshi was a Hindu traditionalist is also borne out by an analysis of his understanding of the Indian past. In turn, his Hindu traditionalist concerns inform his reconstruction of the Indian past. Munshi had 'long felt the inadequacy of our so-called Indian histories.' He had been planning for many years “an elaborate history of India in order not only that India's past might be described by hers ons, but also that the world might catch a glimpse of her soul as Indians see it.”[10] He founded the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan to pursue, among other things, the task of producing such a history. With the support and cooperation of the industrialist G.D. Birla, Munshi also established the Bharatiya Itihasa Samiti, the Academy of Indian history, for writing an elaborate history of India which was titled *The History and Culture of the Indian People*. The Bharatiya Itihasa Samiti enlisted the services of the historian R.C. Majumdar as the editor of the eleven-volume series, *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, the first nine volumes of which were published between 1951 and 1969. Munshi wrote many historical romances including *Jaya Somanatha*(1937) . His historical romances were influenced by a reading of Walter Scott and Alexander Dumas who were the most popular historical novelists among the Indian readers during the early part of Munshi's life. The latter also seems to have been influenced by

the historical fiction of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Munshi observed in his foreword to the first volume of *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, published in 1951, that his own work over the past thirty-five years, rather than being that of a scientific historian, belonged to the sphere of 'weaving historical romances' and literary and cultural studies out of materials so heroically salvaged by Indian and European scholars.' Despite this assertion, it is true that Munshi wrote many purely historical works both before and after 1951. This study seeks to understand his reconstruction of Indian past mainly through an analysis of his historical works but also makes a few references to some other works of political and cultural nature, wherever they provide some additional insights into Munshi's view of the Indian history. This study, however, does not engage with his numerous historical novels.

Munshi considered the materialistic interpretation of history to be a great error. It was so because material well-being was not the sole motive or even the principal determinant of the flow of history. History, in fact, was "...a record of the progress or regression of man in terms of his self-fulfilment. The moving force behind it is the unfolding of the spirit through myriads of lives in their ceaseless struggle against evil and error, fear and violence." [11] Further, as a study of past, the central purpose of history must be "to investigate and unfold the values which age after age have inspired the inhabitants of a country to develop their collective will and to express it through the manifold activities of their life." [12]

Munshi pointed to the difficulties besetting the task of writing such a history of India. He also alluded to the numerous inadequacies of the existing histories of India. Such inadequacies arose, to a great deal, from the distortions introduced by the British scholars in the study of the Indian past. For instance, British scholars such as Sir H. M. Elliot used Persian and Arabic 'histories' with a political objective that is to make "the native subjects of British India more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of the present rule..." [13]

According to Munshi, the existing histories of India had taught the Indians to look down upon the Hindu social system. But they told us little about how the Hindu social system developed in the people the tenacity to survive catastrophic changes for millennia; how it protected life and culture in times of difficulty by its conservative strength and in favourable times developed an elasticity which made ordered progress possible..." [14] Further, such existing histories widely advertised the multiplicity of languages and communities in India but put little emphasis on '*certain facts which make India what it is*' (italics mine). Such histories also argued that 'imperialism of the militaristic political type was unfamiliar to this "mystic land"'. Giving the examples of the Mauryas, the Guptas, the Mughals among many others, Munshi averred that to claim India was always lost in contemplation 'would be to ignore the salient facts of history'. The existing histories also exaggerated the role of 'alien incursions' which 'deserved to be reduced to its appropriate proportions'.

III. 'CERTAIN FACTS WHICH MAKE INDIA WHAT IT IS'

It was the above-mentioned deficiencies of the existing histories which had led Munshi to establish not only the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan but also the Academy of Indian History. It also led him to involve himself with the eleven-volume series *The History and Culture of the Indian People*. In his lengthy introductions to various volumes of this series and also in his other historical works, Munshi reveals his own conception of 'certain facts which make India what it is' and dwells upon in some detail the integrating factors which he thought made India a unit of homogeneous life and culture and which underlay the rise of nationalism in 19th century.

A look at his list of integrating factors reveals that all the integrating factors originated in the ancient India generally and in the Vedic period especially. One such factor was Aryan culture. The proponents of Hindu nationalism have sought to present the Aryans as the indigenous inhabitants of India. They have argued that there was no Aryan migration into India. Historian Romila Thapar while regarding Munshi as a mainstream nationalist rather than a religious nationalist has ascribed to him the view that the Aryans were the indigenous inhabitants of this land rather than having migrated here from some other land. [15] This, however, applies only to Munshi's early writings and his views regarding the Aryan migration into India changed overtime. In his later works, he came to accept the theory of Aryan migration into India. In his *The Early Aryans in Gujarat* (published in 1941), Munshi regarded the Aryans to be the progenitors of the Hindus. He held the Aryans to be the indigenous inhabitants of India and said that there was no Aryan migration into India. In his later writings, however, he changed his view. For instance, he observed in his *Foundations of Indian Culture* (published in 1963) that sometime before 1,500 B.C. The Vedic Aryans entered India with their nature gods, their sacrificial rituals, their cows and horses and their conquering zeal.

The Aryan culture is regarded by Munshi to be one of the two forces which have defined the process of synthesis or integration throughout the Indian history. However, the Aryan culture provides the basis for such synthesis or integration and has been 'carried forward by the momentum of its own worth.' The second force of synthesis or integration, derived from sources other than the Aryan culture, merely modified the first force of integration i.e., the Aryan culture. For Munshi the Indian culture is the product of the synthesis brought about by

the above-mentioned two forces of integration. As pointed out by Romila Thapar, Munshi's writings on the Aryan culture, however, reveal his conflation of race, language and culture which "would be unacceptable to social historians today, although it is common to ideologies of religious nationalism." [16]

Dharma, the central idea of Indian history for Munshi, arose in the Vedic period and has defined the process of integration throughout Indian history. Dharma meant, for him, 'absolute integration of human personality freed from the limitations of attachment and fear.' Dharma regulated not only the religious and spiritual life of the people but also determined the social relations. Even political life moved within the framework of Dharma.

Munshi considered *Aryavarta* consciousness to be a crucial factor in the cultural unity in ancient India. He states that during the Gupta period, the idea of the *Aryavarta* consciousness as embodied in the Smritis had two aspects: "the external, that no *mlechchhas* could abide in *Aryavarta*; the internal, that *chaturvarnya* was the eternal law of *Bharatavarsha*, the sacred land of heroic deeds. [17] This collective consciousness has had a chequered history. From the beginning of the second Millennium A.D. onwards, the *Aryavarta* consciousness declined and came to be replaced by regional consciousness. Munshi links the concept of *chakravarti* to the *Aryavarta* consciousness. The ideal of a *chakravarti* king inspired the monarchs of ancient India to establish empires which often covered a substantial part of India. Changes in the *Varnasramadharmas* and the establishment of the Muslim rule in India are regarded as being some of the important factors behind the decline of the *Aryavarta* consciousness.

Munshi emphasised the role of the Brahmanical religious and law texts as an integrating force in the Indian history especially in the post-Gupta period. Among the *Dharmasashtra* he particularly mentions the integrating function of the *Manusmriti* which he regarded as the *Dharmasashtra* of divine origin. Values contained in the *Dharmasastras* and the epics imparted continuity to the way of life of even those sections which rejected the divine origin of the Vedas and the *chaturvarnya* system. They provided 'homogeneity to widely differing communities and religious cults and forms.' They also provided the urge to go on a pilgrimage to the different places scattered across 'the Land of Dharma.' This helped to keep alive 'an emotional awareness of unity and sanctity.'

The Brahmins and Sanskrit are deemed to be among other integrating agencies of India. Munshi argues that the Indian society has been built around the Brahmins. The Brahmins have provided a disciplined leadership of the society in its pursuit of the highest good. During the Vedic period, they helped in the cultural integration of India by establishing their *ashramas* or hermitages all over the north India and also in the trans-Vindhyan south. Similarly, Sanskrit is regarded as the most powerful force working for the cultural integration of India. He held that "Sanskritic culture provides the only basic unity in this country and is necessary for our national progress" and that "Sanskrit is the source of our inspiration-religious, moral and cultural." [18] This is so because Sanskrit remained, for a considerable stretch of the Indian past, the language of religion and ritual, of statecraft, learning and science as also the language of the *smritis* which regulated social conduct and of literature, thought, poetry and drama. Moreover, during the colonial period, India regained her lost prestige through scholars whose vision had been largely enriched by the Sanskritic studies. He stated that "Sanskrit is not a classical language which merely serves to add to the accomplishments of an educated man; it is a vital link in the nation's evolution." [19]

IV. HETERODOX RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Munshi's treatment of the religious movements such as Buddhism and Jainism tends to undermine their heterodoxy and to co-opt them as part of a larger Hindu tradition. For instance, he regarded Buddhism and Jainism as the product of the Aryan culture and as an integral part of Dharma. He saw Buddhism as a protestant movement within the fold of Dharma. The large majority of people continued to follow their ancestral, Brahmanical creed and culture and was not influenced by these religious movements. Munshi saw these religious movements as being responsible for fostering regional consciousness and disrupting *Aryavarta* consciousness. Also the rulers with an allegiance to the heterodox faiths, Buddhism and Jainism, failed to mobilize the support of the masses and therefore did not succeed in founding kingdoms and empires which could last for a substantial period of time. For instance, Munshi attributes the sudden collapse of Harsha's empire after his death to the fact that he "...was practically a Buddhist and so could not revive the old *chakravarti* tradition nor could he extract vitality from the tradition." [20]

V. RECONVERSION AND SOME OTHER ISSUES

Munshi considers reconversion as an important aspect of the Aryan culture as a dynamic creed. On the basis of a text, *The Devala Smriti*, he cites the example of the reconversion movement in Sindh in the wake of the expansion of the Muslim rule there in early 8th century. He discerns a change from the more rigid, older view regarding reconversion as contained in the earlier law-texts to the more flexible new one as propounded in the *Devala Smriti*. Munshi suggests that the *Devala Smriti* "deals with these difficult problems with a self-confident and bold outlook at a time when the Aryan culture was a living dynamic creed." [21]

Sultam Mahmud's invasions in India were seen by Munshi to be a watershed event which separated the eras of expansion and disintegration in Indian history. Munshi ascribed the destruction wrought by Mahmud's invasions not only to his avaricious temperament but also to the latter's faith and to the vandalism of the Central Asian conquerors. While he was critical of the colonial historiography, Munshi's own assertions about a memory of Hindu trauma over the destruction of the temple at Somanatha (which he describes at one place as 'an unforgettable national disaster') is not corroborated by the contemporary Sanskrit sources and is more reflective of the writings of the British historians such as Ellenborough.[22]

Munshi's writings on Indian history are marked by a portrayal of a contrast between the religious broadmindedness of the Hindu kings and the bigotry of the Turk rulers in India. The religious and cultural generosity of the Kshatriyas of India is held to be responsible for their defeat against the Turks who had no laws, no code of morals to circumscribe their activities.

VI. CONCLUSION

Munshi's critique of the existing histories of India, especially those written by the British historians, had many points in common with the arguments of his contemporary nationalist historians of India. For instance, Munshi was not alone in his criticism of the British historians who saw India as more of a geographical expression and did not acknowledge its cultural unity. Nationalist historians had offered the same criticism. Further, Munshi had the company of nationalist historians in his another criticism of the British histories of India namely that India had never been a witness to large empires of militaristic political type.

Munshi, however, was more insistent in his criticism of the existing histories on the question of the role of *Varnasramadharma* and Sanskrit in Indian history. He argued for a more positive appreciation of the role played by *Varnashramadharma* and Sanskrit in Indian history. This, along with his stress on the integrating role of the Brahmins and the Brahmanical religious and legal texts, reflected his Hindu traditionalist concern with preserving the Hindu social order and tended to imbue the cultural integration of India with a primarily Hindu, upper-caste and Sanskritic flavour.

His reconstruction of the Indian past, however, tended to homogenize the cultural and religious traditions of India by co-opting the heterodox religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism within the larger Hindu religious fold. This, along with his role in the reconstruction of the Somanatha temple, represented his occasional lapses into Hindu nationalist concerns. On the whole, however, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that it was his Hindu traditionalist concerns which dominated his reconstruction of the Indian Past.

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