
“A GOD WHO CAN LAUGH”: ASPECTS OF HINDUISM IN THE WORKS OF E.M. FORSTER AND EDWARD THOMPSON

MEENAKSHI MALHOTRA
meenakshi.chat@gmail.com
Hansraj College, University of Delhi

Received: 09-01-2022

Accepted: 14-03-2022



ABSTRACT

The article explores aspects of Hinduism in some writings by British writers E.M. Forster and Edward Thompson in the early twentieth century, and tries to read nuance into the Orientalist project of mapping India. Unlike some writers like Kipling who wrote in the period of high imperialism and created colonial and racial stereotypes, Forster and Thompson seem to be aware of the complexities of Hinduism, of a God who can laugh and play. This article discusses Forster and Thompson's understanding of and views on Hinduism.

KEYWORDS: Hinduism; Carnavalesque; Temple; playful divinities; cosmic play; East; Imperialism; masculinity.

RESUMEN *"Un dios que puede reír" Aspectos del hinduismo en las obras de E.M. Forster y Edward Thompson*

El artículo explora aspectos del hinduismo en algunas obras de los escritores británicos E.M. Forster y Edward Thompson a principios del siglo XX y trata de interpretar los matices en el proyecto orientalista del trabajo cartográfico sobre la India. A diferencia de algunos autores como Kipling que escribió en el período del imperialismo moderno y creó estereotipos coloniales y raciales, Forster y Thompson parecen ser conscientes de las complejidades del hinduismo, de un Dios que puede reír y jugar. Este artículo aborda la forma de entender el hinduismo de Forster y Thompson con el objetivo de problematizar la versión monolítica que se ofrece desde una perspectiva orientalista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: hinduismo; carnavalesco; templo; divinidades juguetonas; juego cósmico; Oriente; imperialismo; masculinidad

This essay focuses on one stage of the British response to India and specifically to Hinduism, especially in the writings of two British authors, both of whom visited and wrote about India in the 1920s. The twentieth-century British writer had moved beyond glorification of the exotic east, or indictment of the reprobate heathen, to study in a more complex manner some central facts and theoretical puzzles in the Hindu religious tradition. In writing about Hinduism, a British writer in the early part of the twentieth century was aware of its distance from Christianity, as Edward Morgan Forster and Edward John Thompson seem to be. The writings examined in this essay are Forster's India novel, *A Passage to India* (1924, hereafter referred to as PI) with occasional references to *The Hill of Devi* (HD) and *An Indian Day* (1927) by Edward Thompson (referred to as ID). Written in the 1920s, after the heyday of imperialism, the works often express a sense of crisis, or interrogate the claims of salvation held out by different religions, including Christianity and Hinduism, in the light of the increasing sense of the crisis of modernity as well as a process of secularization of thinking that had set in by the turn of the century. As Toynbee puts it: "the cultural gulf between the Hindu society and the Modern West...was also outright contradiction, for the Modern West had fabricated a secular version of its cultural heritage from which religion was eliminated, whereas the Hindu society was and remained religious to the core." (Toynbee, 1957: 183). Yet, even as Matthew Arnold suggested that the study of poetry and literature could anchor civilization (Arnold 1880) and others were participating in this construction of a secular fabric, many modernist writers, particularly in the 20th century, were expressing a sense of fragmentation and crisis and articulating a longing for a lost sense of spiritual and cultural wholeness. This essay suggests that 20th century British Literature on India, while occupying the generic space of travel literature and ethnography, is also permeated by a sense of civilizational crisis and a desire to explore alternate ways of meaning making. Simultaneously, the essay is informed by Said's discussion of *Orientalism* (1978) as a discourse which draws on Foucault's understanding of the close linkages between power and knowledge, and thus the quest to understand and know India, on the part of the British writer, is obviously a political act and a mode of epistemological appropriation. This overarching idea of appropriation is, however, interrupted and qualified by a measure of self-conscious reflexivity on the part of British writers like Forster and Thompson. While Forster and Thompson are still working within the discursive framework of Orientalism, they seem to do so in a more self-conscious and reflexive vein that does not simply replicate the

epistemological blindness discussed by Said. As many scholars have demonstrated in the wake of Said's work, there are many different "Orientalisms" and it's not as monolithic a discourse as Said perhaps suggests. It is within this nuanced, calibrated, heterogeneously conceived idea of Orientalism that this essay is located.

Along with E.M Forster(1879-1970), was the academic-writer, Edward Thompson (1886-1946), whose engagement with India and Hinduism also demonstrates an awareness of its complexities. Eschewing stereotypical representations, their representation of India and Indians seem to be more nuanced and complex and do not replicate the epistemological blindness discussed by Said in *Orientalism* (Said 1978). Author of two biographies of the renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore, Thompson lived in India for several years and wrote extensively on India. While his novel *An Indian Day* is often seen as different from Forster's views on India, this article attempts to trace certain comparable features in both their approaches to India, focusing particularly on Hinduism and the challenges it offered to the British writer in early 20th century.

The intense religiosity of the Hindu people made religion an essential prerequisite to any understanding of Hindu modes of thought or the prescribed ways of life in Hinduism. Any significant inroad or "passage" to India, or conversely, an estimation of its differences had ultimately to be made by way of religion. This seems to be the belief underlying the focus on religion in Forster's *A Passage to India* as well of Thompson's *An Indian Day*.

There were several stages in western scholarship on Hinduism and India's Pre-Muslim Hindu past from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century. The attitudes of most such western scholars from William Jones to H.T. Colebrooke was "an outgrowth of British cultural policy in India, and as such, characteristically functional, pragmatic and reformist in purpose." (Kopf, 1985: 143-44). For instance, a dominant tendency within this scholarship was to view India's past in the ancient Aryan period as a golden age, "classical, Brahminical, elitist" and contrast it to the subsequent medieval period which was characterized as dark, "popular or tribal, orgiastic and corrupt." (Ibid: 144). Thus, the British could take on themselves the role of purveyors of morality and virtue and missionaries could justify conversions; in each case, this could help them to push their ideology slightly further. Moreover, this scholarship was connected to the puritanical reformism of certain socio-religious Hindu movements such as the Brahmo Samaj. A gradual change set in with the

increasing prominence of western-trained Indians (and especially Bengali) scholars who helped in the re-evaluation of Medieval Hinduism.

What constituted a cultural and psychological block to the western mind was the freely erotic aspect of Hindu mythology, particularly reflected in the history and mythology of Shiva (O'Flaherty, 1981). Further, in a colonial society which was traditionally largely patriarchal, it is interesting to note the presence of certain cults within Hinduism which were devoted to the veneration of female goddesses, often of doubtful origin and repute, like Kali. This could be potentially problematic to one schooled in the Christian tradition, as many shades of Christian doctrine privileged Christ over the cults of Mary. The equal, sometimes even higher, status granted to dubious female goddesses in Hinduism was a difficult position to accept. Moreover, in Christianity evil is ascribed to Satan unlike in Hinduism where forces of evil are often represented by divinities.

A third problem could be broadly classified as the euhemerist position, which refuses to view the human dimension of gods and goddesses as ultimately inconsistent with their divinity. Thus, euhemerist interpretations of Krishna, in which he is supposed to be merely a human hero, invariably overlook his frequent superhuman feats in the *Mahabharata*. While both the authors - Forster and Thompson grapple with the many aspects of Hinduism- the accent or stress tends to fall differently in both. So while Forster dwells on the notion that gods in Hinduism could be both divine and human, an idea that seems to be voiced by Cyril Fielding at the end of *A Passage to India* when he asks Aziz about "this Krishna business," adding that he wants to discover is its spiritual side, "if it has one." (PI:296), we find Findlay in *An Indian Day* trying to understand the co-existence of militancy and spiritual asceticism in the figure of Jayananda.

The muddled, playful, carnivalesque atmosphere during the festival of the birth of Krishna in PI leads Forster to state his indifference to Hindu rituals as he refers to the idol as "Dolly" in HD. This apparent ridicule of the external forms of Hinduism is however accompanied by a genuine respect for the central religious and philosophical ideas of Hinduism. Further, the idea of the "carnivalesque" and the "dialogic" popularized by the literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) could be used here to understand Forster's and Thompson's complex responses to Hinduism. As a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style through

humour and chaos, the carnivalesque in Forster's work could be seen as a method of registering a complex response to a religion which simultaneously accommodates serious philosophical doctrine and a playful, disruptive divine form. The novel *A Passage to India* shows Forster's personal outlook on Hinduism only in a tentative form; but there is evidence that the novel registers "the process of his recognition of a higher value in Hinduism." (Das 1977) In Thompson's novel *ID*, the figure of the sage Jayananda Saraswati represents a mystery and therefore a challenge to Findlay, who finds it difficult to believe that a spiritually inclined ascetic could also be a militant revolutionary.

Forster's treatment of, and attitude to Hinduism, is indicative of his larger response to India, not as a country or space denying meaning, but as one which make its transmission or communication difficult because of its muddledom. His discussion of Hinduism does not read like a colonial appropriation, unlike Aziz's feeling that Miss Quested's "pose of seeing India was only a form of ruling" it, "no sympathy lay behind it" (PI, p.301). Forster is aware of the capacity of Hinduism to include and contain diversities in its fold. Spurred on by a sense of impending crisis in the west, his views on India represent a dilution of imperial beliefs. His interest is primarily meditative, metaphysical and philosophic, and though he does not ignore the historical-socio-political situation, his exploration of Hinduism seems to be at a distance from it, unlike Edward Thompson's.

Forster's account of the festival of Gokul Ashtami in *A Passage to India* is based largely on his first-hand experience of it in Dewas, reported in *HD*. Both accounts describe the festival as a muddle; it is a frustration of reason and form and betrays a total lack of aesthetic sense. However, at the same time, Forster is made aware of a gap in Christianity, which does not include a God who can laugh or dally or participate in games. Hinduism permits "inclusion of merriment" (PI, p.284), unlike Christianity. Krishna's playfulness, a translation of "Lila" or cosmic play becomes a significant fact to Forster, as it is quite antithetical to the Christian conception of God. The Hindu conception of God is inclusive and embraces chaos as well.

In describing the birth of the child Krishna, Forster and presumably the worshippers are aware of the paradox which is inbuilt in anthropomorphism. "He has also been born centuries ago, nor can he ever be born, because He is the Lord of the Universe, who transcends human processes."

Moreover, Forster states later, if a trifle facetiously: “Infinite love took up itself the form of Shri Krishna, and saved the world” (PI, p.279-80). The embodiment or manifestation of an abstract conception of divinity in a human form is a central and vital fact in Hinduism, as highlighted at a crucial point in Indian scripture. In Chapter Eleven of *The Bhagavadgita*, a book sacred to Hindus, Arjuna wishes to see Krishna’s divinity made manifest in the Universal Form, the visible embodiment of the Unseen Divine, since it is one “thing to know the Eternal Spirit dwells in all things and another to have a vision of it.” (*Bhagavadgita*, pp 84-95)

Forster’s focus on Krishna as the divine child is paralleled by the [Hindu and] Bhakti tradition, which has shown quite clearly its preference for particular aspects of [Lord] Krishna’s revelation. As Kingsley writes: “Krishna is the eternal child, the eternal adolescent and youth, whose pranks, uninhibited and sporting, and wild gambols bear testimony, according to the Hindu tradition, to something essential in that realm of the divine; its freedom and spontaneity.... The theophany of the child Krishna expresses the nature of the divine as uncontained,” (Kinsley, quoted in Das, 1977: 93) untrammelled by social conventions and norms. *A Passage to India* suggests the child God’s freedom from restraint and its celebration by the devotees, who worship God both with and without attributes.

Structurally speaking, the description of the festival of Gokul or Janmashtami occurs at an important point. After the experience of the void in the previous section, the “Caves,” which effects destruction and chaos in the minds of the English visitors, the “Temple” section seems to express yet another facet of, and perspective on the protean Indian reality which, from the Western perspective, eludes and defies any systematization and definite conclusions. “Nothing, but nothing, embraces all of India” (PI, p.144). The protean and multifaceted Indian reality seems to offer a counterpoint to any unified or monolithic concept of religion. To Forster’s liberal cast of mind, the dangers of viewing or understanding the world through a single or singular lens is evident, though such an understanding is not available to many British visitors and missionaries.

The experience of the Caves and the birth of Krishna in the final section together constitute a symbol of Forster’s response to the complex Indian reality, which with its mystery, muddledom and occasional incomprehensibility is also reflected and expressed in the Hindu religious tradition. Thus on the way to the caves, a snake can suddenly turn into a dead branch. In any case, it is not

to be stepped on because of its possible divinity. Forster also speculates that the mountains are the breasts of Parvati (PI, p.139-40), a piece of speculation which reflects the belief in the sacrality of the land and in the conception of the land as earth-mother.

Forster seems moreover to be aware of certain Dionysiac aspects in the festival which is reflected in the carnivalesque atmosphere of the anarchical celebration where ordinary everyday laws, moral as well as civil, are suspended. In the state of religious ecstasy generated by the festival, the Maharaja of Dewas in *The Hill of Devi* and the Minister of Education, Professor Godbole in PI can dance without any perceptible loss of dignity. The ritual release effected through religious frenzy is a facet of Hinduism (and not novel or peculiar to it) the writer seems to be aware of. If the experience in the caves expresses a sense of the chaos, destruction and lack of meaning haunting any endeavour in India, the “temple” signifies a possible resurgence of imaginative and creative activity, though expressed in erratic bursts. Even the “final message” “God is love,” is garbled to “God si love” (PI, p.280-81), a distortion which does not affect its expression of the effect of cosmic transcendence.

Moreover, the presiding muddledom creates its own transcendental effects, whether it is in the frenzied chanting of “Esmiss Esmoor” or the mingling in the water of the occupants of the various boats in the “Temple” section, which in a strange way, is reminiscent of the mock-fights and water sports in the story of Krishna.

In Forster’s case, it seems to be his perception of the difference between Christianity and Hinduism, which is intrinsic to his depiction of Hindu gods and their rituals. It is also largely divorced from politics and one gets the feeling in *HD* that the religious and ritual-oriented pre-occupations of the rulers connote a neglect of the political welfare of the state. There is, in Forster, also a tendency to trivialize these rituals as a pastime, or, perhaps it is his perception that the inclusive nature of Hinduism can embrace both the trivial and the profound.

These points mentioned above are strengthened when one considers Forster’s neglect of some of the important facets of Hinduism like the fact of Shakti worship. Although Dewas lies in the shadow of, and takes its name from, the sacred acropolis, Devivasini, (the Goddess’s residence) he does not delve into the history of Devi. She is described as “a barbaric vermillion object,” and though Forster claims that he never discovered who Chamunda was, he reports that it was “agreed

that she had been around longer than anybody else” (HD, p.47) thus testifying to her ancient and primitive presence. Chamunda, often identified with Kali, might well have evolved out of primitive myth and ritual, and then got assimilated into a distinct goddess of Hinduism, like the merging and transference of the wood-goddess Padalsini into the conception of Kali in *ID*. Chamunda, associated with death and destruction, demanding sacrifice and haunting cremation grounds, seems alien to Forster’s basic metaphors in his approach to, and discussion of Hinduism. The conception of the universe as an expression of cosmic play and collective gaiety in Forster’s account of the birth of Krishna would hardly have accommodated the dark, threatening, violent aspects of the myth of Devi.

At the same time, however, Forster’s succinct and almost marginal description of the hill of Devi could be viewed in terms of sacred geography. The idol, says the author, is located in a cave on top of a hill. These facts about the geographical site can be seen as significant. While in many cases sacred sites are associated with “deities who are well known in the Hindu tradition and who have an elaborate mythology and cult independent of the sacred site in question; in other cases it seems that “the object of sacrality,” that which lends the site power, is the place itself and not so much the deity who is associated with the place. (Radhakrishnan, 1963: 269-70).

It is tempting to speculate that while the cave in *The Hill of Devi* contains a Goddess who represents violence both actually and symbolically and revels in chaos and destruction, the caves in *A Passage to India*, are emptied of any definite presence or entity. This emptying of definite religious and ritualistic meaning, to make available larger and more comprehensive (though indefinite) philosophic connotations indicate Forster’s exploratory intent. It also marks his transition from, and modification of, a non-fictional account for a fictional purpose.

Edward Thompson’s novel, while registering the theological complexity and palimpsestic nature of the forms, divinities and informing ideas of Hinduism in *An Indian Day*, is imbued with a consciousness of the historical and political developments of that time. It deals with contemporary politics and this is reflected in Thompson’s development of the figure of Jayananda in the novel, who as mentioned earlier, is based on the figure of Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), whose career was marked by revolutionary nationalism and renunciatory spiritualism. Ghosh was among the nationalists who were inspired by the novel *Ananda Math* (1882) or *The Abode of Bliss* which

showed monks waging a rebellion against unjust rule. *An Indian Day* is anchored in a similar historical moment and refers to the activities of the Swarajists as well as the “Revolutionary Party.” It is set in Bengal in the revolutionary 1920s and the period preceding it, which saw the rise of a militant nationalism that expressed itself in frequent bursts of terrorist activity. In the novel, we have the discovery of a huge store of fire-arms by Hamar and Nivon in the precincts of a deserted temple around the hill of Trisunia. Though this seems initially like a strategy for novelistic suspense, this episode, in fact, reflects two historical events/elements outside the novel.

The first is that the Vishnugram Conspiracy case is remarkably similar to other conspiracy cases like the Chittagong conspiracy case (1930), where the Chittagong armoury was routed, though the Chittagong conspiracy case was after the publication of the novel, *An Indian Day* (1927).

Secondly, it is significant that the arsenal is located in the precincts of a temple, a convenient site for the seditionists to pursue their secret, illegal activities. Both extremism and militant nationalism purposely revived cult worship as well as certain related festivals, for political and ideological purposes. Thus, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), the Indian nationalist, helped to revive the Ganesh festivals in Maharashtra, while the Goddess Kali was often invoked by the militant nationalists in Bengal.

The fundamental point underlying this was the idea of strengthening an ideology by glorifying an indigenous religious tradition and thus gaining popular support to broaden the base of the nationalist movement. Religion, it was realized, could be a way of expression adopted by the subordinate or colonized to reveal their experience and situation as well as express their urge to appropriate power for themselves and pose a threat of transgression to the society in power.

The cults of Kali, as well as other cults of Shakto-Tantrism lent themselves particularly to this purpose as ritualized violence was part of the practices of these cults; and as such, its use was sanctioned to fulfil the purposes of its worshippers. As Kinsley sums up succinctly:

It is certainly nothing new to see religion serving political ends, and it is not surprising at all that Kali, whose appearance and reputation are terrifying, was used by some Bengalis as a symbol of Bengal or of Bengali resistance during periods of political strife (Kinsley, 1975: 12, 18).

Thompson, at several points in the text, expresses a profound distaste for the “blood stained cults of Hinduism” and its corrupt religious practices. In and through the character and opinions of

Findlay, he voices his preference for the simpler nature worship, like that of the Harvest festivals of the Santhals (ID, p.153-54). This is seen as a purer form of worship than the bloody sacrificial rites of Shaktic Hinduism, prevalent especially in Bengal.

It is possible to see in Thompson's criticism an animosity towards militant Hinduism as it threatened the British empire, and was an expression of the "growth of an unholy alliance between religious and extreme nationalism"(Kinsley, 1986: 184). This seems to be the central point in Rushdie's account of the shrine of Kali in *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie, 1980: 438-39). However, the truth is that this indictment of animal and even human sacrifice is not confined to the British writer on India but is reflected in *Bisarjan* written in 1890 (literally meaning immersion) and *Rajarshi* by Rabindranath Tagore (Kinsley, 1975 :128).

Implicit in Thompson's novel is an endorsement of the natural, (animism, nature worship) which provides him with a connecting link between two diverse civilizations as he traces the similarity between the wood-worshippers of India and his own ancestors. This attempt to link the two civilizations is also expressed in his attempt to mythify Hilda, as a wood-goddess or a "noumen". Insofar as he suggests that certain truths about the land and its people are accessible to the sympathetic seeker, the text is credible. But his attempt to adumbrate her mythic and legendary status lacks the effect and credibility of Mrs. Moore's deification in *A Passage to India*.

Thompson's novel, imbued with a sense of nostalgia for a lost empire, combines a historical awareness of Indo-British politics and its implications in addition to a deep understanding of Bengali thought, religious belief and popular culture. In *A Letter from India*, Thompson recounts his conversation with Miraben, who refers to the villages as the "real India." In response to Miraben's statement, Thompson writes, "I am not as ignorant of the villages, perhaps as she supposed, for I have worked through months of famine or flood (as his fictional characters do) in the poorest district of Bengal." (Thompson, p24)

In an appendix to the same, Thompson gives an account of the vernacular literature of North India. Given these areas of interest, it is probable that Thompson would have come across Bankim Chandra's *Ananda Math*, written in the late nineteenth century when the Indian independence movement was beginning to become powerful. In the novel, Kali's appearance becomes a symbol

of the present condition of Bengal, the motherland: a place of sickness, death, poverty and exploitation.

Kali here expresses more than political oppression; she symbolizes the constant presence of poverty and famine that haunted the life of the poor peasant. Having stayed in the poorest district of Bengal, Thompson discusses the poverty of the peasant in the novel. Moreover through his fictional characters, he expresses his admiration for the peasant's capacity to endure hardships.

Natural calamities like uncertain harvests, famines, diseases, sudden accidents like snakebite were all part of the peasant's life. In their patterns of worship, especially of goddesses like Manasa and Sitala, can be seen an attempt to rationalize and systematize certain natural phenomena, deify and propitiate them, finally to circumscribe their power, and to create a sense of control. As Thompson wrote in *"A Letter from India"*:

The life of the ordinary Bengal peasant must have been a hopeless and helpless one, and it is not difficult to understand his seeking refuge in a conception of the divine as destruction, in a deity unreliable, irresponsible almost, dancing a mad dance of death and propitiated only by cruel rites and degrading practices (Thompson, 1929: 17).

In his interest in the seasonal recurrence and the rhythms of the land and in his tendency to mythify the landscape, Thompson expresses an important aspect of Hindu divinity. This is an awe for the sacrality of the land itself and for the Indian subcontinent as a whole; the idea of the earth as a personified goddess and the idea that the cosmos as a whole is a living being, persist in later Hindu mythology (Kinsley, 1986:181).

In *An Indian Day* the life of the British community is initially foregrounded against an underpinning of the rural religious belief. Political action is combined with religious renunciation in the figure of the Sannyasi Jayananda (Bliss of Victory) Saraswati. Through this interesting and intelligent Sadhu, the novel explores the paradox of political action and religious renunciation, a paradox personified by Aurobindo Ghosh or Sri Aurobindo (as he came to be called).

Active in politics since the 1890s, Aurobindo wrote a series of seminal articles, "New Lamps for Old," in the Bombay newspaper, *Indu Prakash*, in 1893-94, where he argued for an extremist approach to the question of India's freedom. Later, in reaction to Curzon's partition of Bengal (19th July, 1905), Aurobindo, along with his younger brother, B.K. Ghosh, formed the revolutionary organisation 'Anusilan Samiti', literally translatable as "Body-building society" spearheaded by

the latter. The Samiti had public and relatively innocuous branches but it also had secret cells, which preached sedition, published pamphlets and tracts and organized terrorist activities, raids and assassinations. The authorities clamped down hard on the branches, prosecuted and in some cases executed those involved. Aurobindo was arrested in 1907, released and then in 1910 with a warrant pending against him fled from British India to French-owned Pondicherry, where he set up an ashram which marked his retreat from politics into mysticism and religion (Kinsley, 1986: 178-81).

Thompson's stay in India extended from 1910 to 1922 when the hue and cry in response to this supposed volte-face had not died down. In the novel, there are frequent doubts raised about Jayananda's total withdrawal from the world of active politics, by Headley and other characters. It is generally felt that Jayananda poses more of a threat as an ascetic than as a government servant of British India. He seems to have a close knowledge of the events taking place around him, as well as of the Englishmen who are involved, officially and unofficially, with these events.

In the Hindu tradition, this process of political action leading to religious renunciation is not a new one, but a product of the Hindu view of reality as essentially dualistic in nature. In the Hindu tradition, phenomenal reality as grasped by the senses is an illusion, akin to '*maya*.' "Maya" is essentially what prevents man from seeing the world as it really is. "Man, in his ignorance, superimposes various structures and images upon things as they really are, thus preventing true vision." In his ignorance, man views the world as permanent and worthy of his attachment. In this, he is mistaken, as Jayananda elaborates (ID, p.141), for the world that he views as permanent, is temporal, transient, ephemeral and contingent in nature. The lesson of "Maya" is that the spiritually adept must be able to see beyond or through the things as they appear to perceive things as they really are. Moreover, he must be able to tear the veil of maya before confronting fully and completely his true self or the divine in its fullness, a vision granted to the spiritually adept and the mystic.¹

Sadhu Jayananda relates a spiritual saga from a stage where he is haunted by a "devil of restlessness" to one where he is in total control of himself and has achieved spiritual peace. Enmeshed in the political processes of the government as a magistrate, a highly articulate western-

¹ See Mulk Raj Anand's Introduction to *An Indian Day* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1986).

educated official, he had experienced a sense of fragmentation, in which the inner and the outer were divorced from each other. Possessing material goods and exercising political power, he had little power over his self; but through meditation, he has gained this power. In his own words, he has “gained power afresh in other ways, and greater power than before” (ID, p.147). Like all mystics, he lives by the light of revelations he has gained after an intense spiritual struggle. He has, in a sense, found the center, the core from which all power, spiritual and intellectual, emanates, and which constitutes a link between the sacred and secular world.

Thompson’s exploration of this apparent paradox is conducted through Findlay’s persistent questioning of Jayananda. To Findlay, the Sadhu’s withdrawal seems to be an attempt to evade and escape from social responsibility. He asks Jayananda, “Vairagi (translated as “renounce”) , how can you find peace in yourself, while your people are weak and ignorant and wretched?” (ID, p.146)

This question of social responsibility and commitment to action is discussed by Jayananda at the level of the ego. The Sannyasi describes his former state in the following words:

I was blinded by ignorance. I thought of myself as I; and these aliens in my land were pressing, it seemed, upon that self which I thought the most precious thing in three worlds. I did not consider that this life was but a wave flung up from the quiescent life, and that the English were but other waves...At last my eyes were opened and I saw that all was passing, and that the English would be gone from the face of the land, and forgotten as Akbar and Allah-ud-din are forgotten, who also were great names in their day.... (ID, p.146)

Jayananda is able to view temporal existence from the perspective of eternity; he has been able to glimpse “the idea of transcendental unity, oneness, and stability behind all the flux and variety of phenomenal life”² which is the basic idea of the *Upanishads* and pivot of all Indian metaphysics.

The Sannyasi also recognizes and acknowledges the mystic trance experienced by Findlay for what it is — a genuine experience of universal love and transcendental cosmic unity. He realizes that Findlay has found the “bliss of victory,” the mind’s inner “glow” (ID, p.273), after a period of intense pain and struggle akin to the dark night of soul, which is central to mystic experience. The conception of time in *An Indian Day* has its basis in Hindu belief which views time as a recurring

² See Jim Masselos, *Indian Nationalism: An History* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Ltd., 1985), p.113-14.

cycle of four ages (Kinsley, 1975: 134. Aurobindo, 1972). It is thus continuous as the end of one age presages and presupposes the beginning of the next, unlike Christianity.

The writers discussed above, unlike the Abbe Dubois and William Ward in the nineteenth century, and to an extent, Kipling and Farrell in the twentieth, attempt to impose no myths of imperialism like that of the white man's burden or the myth of enlightenment and progress. At a more subtle level, however, there is in Forster, Edward Thompson and other contemporary writers³ the image of a spiritually oriented and metaphysically rich East, a perception that finds expression in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). This was perhaps an inevitable condition of colonial literature. On the positive side, the explorations into Hindu religion, myth and culture served an educational purpose, even for many Indians. Moreover, the writers discussed here have each made a deeply personal and sincere quest so that ultimately, it is not the quest for power but the search for self that constitutes both the teleology and informing mode of their fiction. However, the search for self cannot be totally depoliticized or studied outside the context of power relationships, and there is some awareness on the part of the authors discussed above that while, as British citizens, they are complicit in imperialism, their exploration of India also helps them stand outside the imperial enterprise in some ways. It is this critical stance and ideological questioning that probably redeems these writers and shows that their epistemic enterprise of knowing India has both sensitivity and self-reflexivity built into it.

WORKS CITED

- ARNOLD, MATTHEW (1888) *The Study of Poetry. Essays in Criticism*, Second Series London, New York: Macmillan and Co. Internet archive
- BHULLAR, AVTAR SINGH. (1985). *India: Myth and Reality – Images of India in Fiction by English Writers*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- DAS, G.K. *E.M.* (1977). *Forster's India*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- ELIOT, T.S.(1922) *The Waste Land*. London: The Dial, The Criterion. New York: Open Road Integrated Media. Internet archive

³In expressing an interest in unknown Hindu Gods, Forster and Thompson are joined by other writers like L.H. Myers. In his account of the philosophical ideas of sixteenth century India in *The Near and the Far*, L.H. Myers alludes to some subversive cults of Hinduism, such as that of the Vamacharis or the Followers of the Left-Handed Way.

- FOUCAULT, MICHEL. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- FORSTER, E.M. (1924). *A Passage to India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- FORSTER, E.M. (1953). *The Hill of Devi*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- GHOSE, AUROBINDO. (1972). *The Upanishads*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust.
- KINSLEY, DAVID R. (1975). *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krsna, Dark Vision of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology*. California: University of California Press.
- KINSLEY, DAVID R. (1986). *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. California: Univ. of California Press.
- KOPF, DAVID. (1985). "Sexual Ambivalence in Western Scholarship on Hindu India: A History of Historical Images of Shakto-Tantrism 1800-1970." B. Lewis, E. Leites, M. Case Ed. *As Others See Us: Mutual Perceptions, East and West*. New York: International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations.
- MASSELOS, JIM. (1985). *Indian Nationalism: A History*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Ltd.
- MOORE, R.J. (1983). *Escape from Empire: The Attlee Government and the India Problem*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- MYERS, L.H. (1943). *The Near and the Far*. Oxford: The Alden Press.
- O'FLAHERTY, WENDY D. (1981). *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*. Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press.
- RADHAKRISHNAN, S. (1963). *The Bhagavadgita*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- RIDLEY, HUGH. (1983). *Images of Imperial Rule*. Kent: Croom Helm Ltd.
- RUSHDIE, SALMAN. (1980). *Midnight's Children*. New York: Avon Books.
- SAID, EDWARD. (1978). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- SIVANANDA, SRI SWAMI, *Bhagavad Gita*. The Divine Life Trust Society. WWWsite:<http://www.SivanandaDishq.org>
- THOMPSON, EDWARD. (1927). *An Indian Day*. London: Arnold.
- THOMPSON, EDWARD. (1932). *A Letter from India*. London: Edward Arnold. Internet Archive: digitallibraryindia;JaiGyan. Digital Library of India Item 2015.278502
- THOMPSON, EDWARD. (1928). *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophic Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- TOYNBEE, ARNOLD J. (1957). *A Study of History*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957.

MEENAKSHI MALHOTRA (Ph.D) teaches English in Hansraj College, Delhi University and has edited two textbooks, *Representing the Self* and *Claiming the I*. Her recent publications include articles on lifewriting as an archive for Gender and Women's Studies, *Women and Gender Studies in India: Crossings* (Routledge, 2019), on "Subjugated Knowledges and Emergent Voices" in *Revolving around Indias* (2020), "The Engendering of Hurt" in *The State of Hurt*, (Sage,2016), on "Reconceptualising the Subject in Queer Theory" in *Ways of Seeing/Ways of Queering*, (Interdisciplinary Press, 2016) , on Kali in *Unveiling Desire*, (Rutgers University Press, 2018) and "Ecofeminism and its Discontents" (Primus,2018). She has been a consultant for school textbooks, visiting faculty at Grinnell College, Iowa and UMD, Minnesota. She is currently a Nalanda Studies Fellow.