

Contributions to Indian Sociology

<http://cis.sagepub.com>

Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay

A. K. Ramanujan

Contributions to Indian Sociology 1989; 23; 41

DOI: 10.1177/006996689023001004

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cis.sagepub.com>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Contributions to Indian Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://cis.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://cis.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.in/about/permissions.asp>

Citations <http://cis.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/23/1/41>

Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay

A.K. Ramanujan

Walter Benjamin once dreamed of hiding behind a phalanx of quotations which, like highwaymen, would ambush the passing reader and rob him of his convictions.

I

Stanislavsky had an exercise for his actors. He would give them an everyday sentence like, 'Bring me a cup of tea', and ask them to say it forty different ways, using it to beg, question, mock, wheedle, be imperious, etc. My question, 'Is there an Indian way of thinking?', is a good one for such an exercise. Depending on where the stress is placed, it contains many questions—all of which are real questions—asked again and again when people talk about India. Here are a few possible versions:

Is there an Indian way of thinking?
Is there an Indian way of thinking?
Is there an Indian way of thinking?
Is there an Indian way of thinking?

The answers are just as various. Here are a few: There *was* an Indian way of thinking; there isn't any more. If you want to learn about the Indian way of thinking, do not ask your modern-day citified Indians, go to the pundits, the *vaidyas*, the old texts. On the contrary: India never changes; under the veneer of the modern, Indians still think like the vedas.

The second question might elicit answers like these: There is no single Indian way of thinking; there are Great and Little Traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk. Each language, caste and region has its special world view. So, under the apparent diversity, there is

A.K. Ramanujan is William A. Colvin Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations, University of Chicago, 1130 E. 59th Street, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

***Contributions to Indian sociology* (n.s.) 23, 1 (1989)
SAGE Publications New Delhi/Newbury Park/London**

really a unity of viewpoint, a single supersystem. Vedists see a vedic model in all Indian thought. Nehru made the phrase 'unity in diversity' an Indian slogan. The Sahitya Akademi's line has been, 'Indian literature is One, though written in many languages'

The third question might be answered: What we see in India is nothing special to India; it is nothing but pre-industrial, pre-printing press, face-to-face, agricultural, feudal. Marxists, Freudians, McLuhanites, all have their labels for the stage India is in, according to their schemes of social evolution; India is only an example. Others, of course, would argue the uniqueness of the Indian Way and how it turns all things, especially rivals and enemies, into itself; look at what has happened to Indo-Europeans in India, they would say: their language gets shot with retroflexes, their syntax with nominal compounds, they lose their nerve—the British are only the most recent example (according to Nirad Chaudhuri). Look what happens to Buddhism, Islam, the Parsis. There is an *Indian* way, and it imprints and patterns all things that enter the continent; it is inescapable, and it is Bigger Than All of Us.

The fourth question may question whether Indians think at all: It is the West that is materialistic, rational; Indians have no philosophy, only religion, no positive sciences, not even a psychology; in India, matter is subordinated to spirit, rational thought to feeling, intuition. And even when people agree that this is the case, we can have arguments for and against it. Some lament, others celebrate India's un-thinking ways. One can go on forever.

We—I, certainly—have stood in one or another of these stances at different times. We have not heard the end of these questions—or these answers.

II

The problem was posed for me personally at the age of 20 in the image of my father. I had never taken a good look at him till then. Didn't Mark Twain say, 'At 17, I thought my father was ignorant; at 20, I wondered how he learned so much in three years'? Indeed, this essay was inspired by contemplation of him over the years, and is dedicated to him.

My father's clothes represented his inner life very well. He was a south Indian Brahmin gentleman. He wore neat white turbans, a Śri Vaiṣṇava caste mark (in his earlier pictures, a diamond earring), yet wore Tootal ties, Kromentz buttons and collar studs, and donned English serge jackets over his muslin *dhotis* which he wore draped in traditional Brahmin style. He often wore tartan-patterned socks and silent well-polished leather shoes when he went to the university, but he carefully took them off before he entered the inner quarters of the house.

He was a mathematician, an astronomer. But he was also a Sanskrit scholar, an expert astrologer. He had two kinds of exotic visitors:

American and English mathematicians who called on him when they were on a visit to India, and local astrologers, orthodox pundits who wore splendid gold-embroidered shawls dowered by the Maharajah. I had just been converted by Russell to the 'scientific attitude'. I (and my generation) was troubled by his holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology; I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he didn't seem to care about, or even think about. When I asked him what the discovery of Pluto and Neptune did to his archaic nine-planet astrology, he said, 'You make the necessary corrections, that's all.' Or, in answer to how he could read the *Gītā* religiously having bathed and painted on his forehead the red and white feet of Viṣṇu, and later talk appreciatively about Bertrand Russell and even Ingersoll, he said, 'The *Gītā* is part of one's hygiene. Besides, don't you know, the brain has two lobes?'

The following poem says something about the way he and his friends appeared to me:

Sky-man in a man-hole
with astronomy for dream,
astrology for nightmare;
fat man full of proverbs,
the language of lean years,
living in square after
almanac square
prefiguring the day
of windfall and landslide
through a calculus
of good hours,
clutching at the tear
in his birthday shirt
as at a hole
in his mildewed horoscope,
squinting at the parallax
of black planets,
his Tiger, his Hare
moving in Sanskrit zodiacs,
forever troubled
by the fractions, the kidneys
in his Tamil flesh,
his body the Great Bear
dipping for the honey,
the woman-smell
in the small curly hair
down there.

(Ramanujan 1986: 24)

III

Both Englishmen and 'modern' Indians have been dismayed and angered by this kind of inconsistency. About twenty years ago, *The illustrated weekly of India* asked a number of modern Indian intellectuals to describe the Indian character—they did not seem to be daunted by the assignment and wrote terse, some quite sharp, columns. They all seemed to agree on one thing: the Indian trait of hypocrisy. Indians do not mean what they say, and say different things at different times. By 'Indians' they did not mean only servants. In Max Müller's lectures (1883) on India, the second chapter was called 'Truthful character of the Hindus', in answer to many complaints.

Recently I attended a conference on *karma*, a notion that is almost synonymous in some circles with whatever is Indian or Hindu. Brahminical texts had it, the Buddhists had it, the Jainas had it. But when I looked at hundreds of Kannada tales, I couldn't find a single tale that used *karma* as a motif or motive. Yet when their children made a mess, their repertoire of abuse included, 'You are my *karma*!' When Harper (1959) and others after him reported that many Indian villagers didn't know much about reincarnation, such a discrepancy was attributed to caste, education, etc. But the 2,000 Kannada tales, collected by me and others over the past twenty years, were told by Brahmins, Jainas (both of whom use *karma* in their explanations elsewhere quite readily), and by other communities as well. What is worse, Sheryl Daniel (1983) independently found that her Tamil village alternately used *karma* and *talaividi* ('headwriting') as explanations for the events around them. The two notions are inconsistent with each other. *Karma* implies the self's past determining the present, an iron chain of cause and consequence, an ethic of responsibility. *Talaividi* is one's fate inscribed arbitrarily at one's birth on one's forehead; the inscription has no relation to one's prior actions; usually in such explanations (and folktales about them) past lives are not even part of the scheme (see also Wadley, in this volume).

Another related characteristic seems to preoccupy observers. We have already said that 'inconsistency' (like my father's, or the Brahmin/Jaina use of *karma*) is not a matter of inadequate education or lack of logical rigor. They may be using a different 'logic' altogether. Some thinkers believe that such logic is an earlier-stage of 'cultural evolution' and that Indians have not developed a notion of 'data', of 'objective facts'. Edward Said's *Orientalism* cites many such European stereotypes about the 'Third World'. Here is Henry Kissinger's explanation:

Cultures which escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view that the world is almost completely *internal* to the observer . . . [Consequently] empirical reality has a much different significance for many of the new [old?] countries

than for the West because in a certain sense they never went through the process of discovering it (Said 1978: 47).

Such a view cannot be dismissed as peculiar to Kissinger's version of Newtonian optics. One meets with it again and again in travelogues, psychological writings, novels. Naipaul quotes Sudhir Kakar, a sophisticated psychoanalyst, deeply knowledgeable in matters Indian as well as Western, an insider/outsider:

Generally among Indians there seems to be a different relationship to outside reality, compared to the one met with in the West. In India it is closer to a certain stage in childhood when outer objects did not have a separate, independent existence but were intimately related to the self and its affective states The Indian 'ego' is underdeveloped; 'the world of magic and animistic thinking lie close to the surface; so the grasp of reality is 'relatively tenuous' (1977: 107).

In a memorable and oft-quoted section of Foster's *A passage to India*, Mrs. Moore muses vividly on the relations between inside and outside in India; the confounding of the two is not special to humans in India:

Going to hang up her cloak, she found the tip of the peg was occupied by a small wasp. She had known this wasp or his relatives by song; they were not as English wasps, but had long yellow legs which hung down behind when they flew. Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch—no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside the house as out, it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses, trees, houses, trees. There he clung, asleep, while jackals bayed their desires and mingled with the percussion of drums (1952: 35).

And sympaticos, like Zimmer, praise the Indians for not being hung up on an objectivity that distinguishes self from non-self, interior from exterior; what for Naipaul is a 'defect of vision', is for Zimmer vision itself:

India thinks of time and herself . . . in biological terms, terms of the species, not of the ephemeral ego We of the west regard world history as a biography of mankind, and in particular of Occidental Man Our will is not to culminate in our human institutions the universal play of nature, but to evaluate, to set ourselves against the play, with an ego-centric tenacity (1946: 21).

A third trait should be added to 'inconsistency', and to the apparent inability to distinguish self and non-self. One has only to read Manu after a

bit of Kant to be struck by the former's extraordinary lack of universality. He seems to have no clear notion of a universal *human* nature from which one can deduce ethical decrees like 'Man shall not kill', or 'Man shall not tell an untruth'. One is aware of no notion of a 'state', no unitary law of all men.

Manu VIII.267 (quoted by Müller 1883) has the following: A Kshatriya, having defamed a Brahmana, shall be fined one hundred (*panas*); a Vaisya one hundred and fifty or two hundred; a Sudra shall suffer corporal punishment.

Even truth-telling is not an unconditional imperative, as Müller's correspondents discovered.

An untruth spoken by people under the influence of anger, excessive joy, fear, pain, or grief, by infants, by very old men, by persons labouring under a delusion, being under the influence of drink, or by mad men, does not cause the speaker to fall, or as we should say, is a venial not a mortal sin (Gautama, paraphrased by Müller [1883: 70]).

Alexander Wilder adds, in a footnote, further extensions:

At the time of marriage, during dalliance, when life is in danger, when the loss of property is threatened, and for the sake of a Brahmana
Manu declared whenever the death of a man of any of the four castes would be occasioned by true evidence, falsehood was even better than truth (Müller 1883: 89).

Contrast this with Kant's well-known formulation of his imperative: 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a Universal Law of Nature' (Copleston 1946: 116).

'Moral judgements are universalizable', says Mackie (1977: 83). Universalisation means putting oneself in another's place—it is the golden rule of the New Testament, Hobbes' 'law of all men': do not do unto others what you do not want done unto you. The main tradition of Judeo/Christian ethics is based on such a premise of universalisation—Manu will not understand such a premise. To be moral, for Manu, is to particularise—to ask who did what, to whom and when. Shaw's comment, 'Do not do unto others as you would have they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same' (Mackie 1977: 89) will be closer to Manu's view, except he would substitute 'natures or classes' for 'tastes'. Each class (*jāti*) of man has his own laws, his own proper ethic, not to be universalised. Hegel shrewdly noted this Indian slant: 'While we say, "Bravery is a virtue," the Hindoos say, on the contrary, "Bravery is a virtue of the Cshatriyas"' (Hegel *ca.* 1827: First part, Sect. 2, 'India').

Is there any system to this particularism? Indian philosophers do not

seem to make synoptic 'systems' like Hegel's or Kant's. Sheryl Daniel (1983) speaks of a 'tool-box' of ideas that Indians carry about, and from which they use one or another without much show of logic; anything goes into their 'bricolage' (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 16–36). Max Weber, in various writings, distinguished 'traditional' and 'rational' religions. Geertz summarises the distinction better than other writers:

Traditional religions attack problems opportunistically as they arise in each particular instance . . . employing one or another weapon chosen, on grounds of symbolic appropriateness, from their cluttered arsenal of myth and magic . . . the approach . . . is discrete and irregular Rationalized religions . . . are more abstract, more logically coherent, and more generally phrased The question is no longer . . . to use a classical example from Evans-Pritchard, 'Why has the granary fallen on my brother . . . ?' but rather, 'Why do the good die young and the evil flourish as the green bay tree?' (Geertz 1973: 172).

IV

It is time to step back and try a formulation. The grammarian sees grammar in all things; I shall be true to my bias and borrow a notion from linguistics and try it for size.

There are (or used to be) two kinds of grammatical rules: the context-free and the context-sensitive (Lyons 1971: 235–41). 'Sentences must have subjects and predicates in a certain relation' would be an example of the first kind of rule. 'Plurals in English are realised as *-s* after stops (e.g., dog-*s*, cat-*s*), *-es* before fricatives (e.g., latch-*es*), *-ren* after the word *child*, etc.'—would be a context-sensitive rule. Almost all language rules are of the latter kind.

I think cultures (may be said to) have overall tendencies (for whatever complex reasons)—tendencies to *idealise*, and think in terms of, either the context-free or the context-sensitive kind of rules. Actual behaviour may be more complex, though the rules they think with are a crucial factor in guiding the behaviour. In cultures like India's, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation. Manu (I have already quoted a law of his) explicitly says: '[A king] who knows the sacred law, must imagine into the laws of caste (*jāti*), of districts, of guilds, and of families, and [thus] settle the peculiar law of each' (Manu 7.41).

In an illuminating discussion of the context-sensitive nature of *dharma* in its detail, Baudhāyana enumerates aberrant practices peculiar to the Brahmins of the north and those of the south.

There is a difference between the South and the North on five points. We shall describe the practices of the South: to eat with a person not having received Brahmanical initiation; to eat with one's wife; to eat food prepared the previous day; to marry the daughter of the maternal

uncle or paternal aunt. And for the North: to sell wool; to drink spirits; to traffic in animals with two rows of teeth; to take up the profession of arms; to make sea voyages.

After this admirable ethnographic description, he notes that all these practices are contrary to the precepts of *śruti* or *smṛti*, but these *śiṣṭas* (learned men) know the traditions and cannot be blamed for following the customs of their district. In the north, the southern ways would be wrong and vice versa (Lingat 1973: 196).

Add to this view of right and wrong behaviour, the ethical views of the *āśramadharmā* (the conduct that is right for one's stage of life), *svadharmā* (the conduct that is right for one's station, *jāti* or class, or *svabhāva* or given nature), and *āpaddharmā* (conduct that is necessary in times of distress or emergency, e.g., one may even eat the flesh of dogs to save oneself from death by starvation, as sage Viśvāmitra did). Each addition is really a subtraction from any universal law. There is not much left of an absolute or common (*sādhāraṇa*) *dharma* which the texts speak of, if at all, as a last and not as a first resort. They seem to say, if you fit no contexts or conditions, which is unlikely, fall back on the universal.

I know of no Hindu discussion of values which reads like Plato on Beauty in his *Symposium*—which asks the initiate not to rest content with beauty in one embodiment but to be drawn onward from physical to moral beauty, to the beauty of laws and mores, and to all science and learning, and thus to escape 'the mean slavery of the particular case'. (I am reserving counter-instances for later.)

Or take Indian literary texts. No Indian text comes without a context, a frame, till the 19th century. Works are framed by *phalaśruti* verses—these verses tell the reader, reciter or listener all the good that will result from his act of reading, reciting or listening. They relate the text, of whatever antiquity, to the present reader—that is, they contextualise it. An extreme case is that of the *Nāḍiśāstra*, which offers you your personal history. A friend of mine consulted the Experts about himself and his past and future. After enough rupees had been exchanged, the Experts brought out an old palm-leaf manuscript which, in archaic verses, mentioned his full name, age, birthplace, etc., and said suddenly, 'At this point, the listener is crossing his legs—he should uncross them.'

Texts may be historically dateless, anonymous; but their contexts, uses, efficacies, are explicit. The *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* open with episodes that tell you why and under what circumstances they were composed. Every such story is encased in a metastory. And within the text, one tale is the context for another within it; not only does the outer frame-story motivate the inner sub-story; the inner story illuminates the outer as well. It often acts as a microcosmic replica for the whole text. In the forest when the Pandava brothers are in exile, the eldest, Yudhiṣṭhira, is in the very slough of despondency: he has gambled away a kingdom, and is in

exile. In the depth of his despair, a sage visits him and tells him the story of Nala. As the story unfolds, we see Nala too gamble away a kingdom, lose his wife, wander in the forest, and finally, win his wager, defeat his brother, reunite with his wife and return to his kingdom. Yudhiṣṭhira, following the full curve of Nala's adventures, sees that he is only halfway through his own, and sees his present in perspective, himself as a story yet to be finished. Very often the Nala story is excerpted and read by itself, but its poignancy is partly in its frame, its meaning for the hearer within the fiction and for the listener of the whole epic. The tale within is context-sensitive—getting its meaning from the tale without, and giving it further meanings.

Scholars have often discussed Indian texts (like the Mahābhārata) as if they were loose-leaf files, rag-bag encyclopaedias. Taking the Indian word for text, *grantha* (derived from the knot that holds the palm leaves together), literally, scholars often posit only an accidental and physical unity. We need to attend to the context-sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of modes (tale, discourse, poem, etc.) and materials. This manner of constructing the text is in consonance with other designs in the culture. Not unity (in the Aristotelian sense) but coherence, seems to be the end.

Tamil (and Sanskrit) lyrics are all dramatic monologues; they imply the whole 'communication diagram': who said what to whom, when, why, and often with who else overhearing it. Here is an example:

What his concubine said about him (within earshot of the wife's friends, when she heard that the wife had said disparaging things about her):

You know he comes from
where the fresh-water shark in the pools
catch with their mouths
the mangoes as they fall, ripe
from the trees on the edge of the field.

At our place
he talked big.

Now back in his own
when others raise their hands
and feet,
he will raise his too:

like a doll
in a mirror

he will shadow
every last wish
of his son's dear mother.

Kuruntokai 8
(Ramanujan 1967: 22)

The colophons give us the following frames for this poem:

Genre: *Akam*, love poetry, the 'interior'.

Landscape: agricultural, with pool, fresh-water fish, mango trees.

Mood: infidelity, sullenness, lover's quarrels.

The poetry of such a poem (see Ramanujan 1967 for details) depends on a taxonomy of landscapes, flora and fauna, and of emotions—an ecosystem of which a man's activities and feelings are a part. To describe the exterior landscape is also to inscribe the interior landscape. What the man has, he is: the landscape which he owns, in which he lives (where sharks do not have to work for the mango, it falls into its open mouth) re-presents him: it is his *property*, in more senses than one. In Burke's (1946) terms, *Scene and Agent* are one; they are metonyms for one another.

The poem does not use a metaphor. The human agents are simply *placed* in the scene. Both parts of the comparison (the man and shark) are part of one scene, one syntagm; they exist separately, yet simulate each other. The Tamils call such a figure *ullurai* 'inward speaking'; it is an 'inset', an 'in-scape'. In such a metonymic view of man in nature—man in context—he is continuous with the context he is in. In Peircean semiotic terms, these are not symbolic devices, but indexical signs—the signifier and the signified belong in the same context (Peirce 1931–58).

One might say, from this point of view, that Hindu ritual (e.g., vedic sacrifice, or a coronation; see Inden [1978]) converts *symbols*, arbitrary signs (e.g., sacrificial horse), into *icons* where the signifier (the horse) is *like* what it signifies (the universe) and finally into *indexes*, where the signifier is *part* of what it signifies: the horse is the Universe is Prajāpati, so that in sacrificing and partaking of it one is sacrificing and partaking of the Universe itself (see the passage on the Horse in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, First Adhyāya, First Brāhmaṇa).

Neither in the Tamil poem nor in the upaniṣadic passages (e.g., the Horse), does the Lévi-Straussian opposition of nature-culture make sense; we see that the opposition itself is culture-bound. There is another alternative to a culture vs. nature view: in the Tamil poems, culture is enclosed in nature, nature is reworked in culture, so that we cannot tell the difference. We have a nature-culture continuum that cancels the terms, confuses them even if we begin with them.

Such container-contained relations are seen in many kinds of concepts and images: not only in culture-nature, but god-world, king-kingdom, devotee-god, mother-child. Here is a *bhakti* poem which plays with many such concentric containments:

My dark one
 Stands there as if nothing's changed,
 after taking entire
 into his maw

all three worlds
the gods
and the good kings
 who hold their lands
 as a mother would
 a child in her womb –
and I, by his leave,
have taken him entirely
and I have him in my belly
for keeps.

Nammālvār 8.7.1
(Ramanujan 1980)

Like the Nala story in the Mahābhārata, what is contained mirrors the container; the microcosm is both *within* and like the macrocosm, and paradoxically also contains it. Indian conceptions tend to be such concentric nests: the view of the 'sheaths' or *kośas*, the different 'bodies' or *kāyas* (Egnor 1975) are examples. Such impressions are so strong and even kinesthetic that analysts tend to think in similar terms: one example is Dumont's (1970: Sects. 31, 34, 106, 118; App. E, F) notions of hierarchic encompassment, where each higher category or *jāti* encompasses all the earlier ones: the Kṣatriya is distinct from but includes the Vaiśya, as the Brahmin encompasses the Kṣatriya. Many Indian lists, like *dharma-artha-kāma* tend to be successive encompassments. (For the separation of *mokṣa*, see below.)

Even space and time, the universal contexts, the Kantian imperatives, are in India not uniform and neutral, but have properties, varying specific densities, that affect those who dwell in them. The soil in a village, which produces crops for the people, affects their character (as liars, for instance, in E.V. Daniel's village (1984); houses (containers par excellence) have mood and character, change the fortune and moods of the dwellers. Time too does not come in uniform units: certain hours of the day, certain days of the week, etc., are auspicious or inauspicious (*rāhukāla*); certain units of time (*yugas*) breed certain kinds of maladies, politics, religions, e.g., *kaliyuga*. A story is told about two men coming to Yudhiṣṭhira with a case. One had bought the other's land, and soon after found a crock of gold in it. He wanted to return it to the original owner of the land, who was arguing that it really belonged to the man who had now bought it. They had come to Yudhiṣṭhira to settle their virtuous dispute. Just then Yudhiṣṭhira was called away (to put it politely) for a while. When he came back the two gentlemen were quarrelling furiously, but each was claiming the treasure for himself this time! Yudhiṣṭhira realised at once that the age had changed, and *kaliyuga* had begun.

As hour, month, season, year, and aeon have their own properties as contexts, the arts that depend on time have to obey time's changing moods and properties. For instance, the *rāgas* of both north and south Indian classical music have their prescribed appropriate times. Like the Tamil poems, the genres and moods are associated with, placed in, hours of the day and times of the season. Even musical instruments have their caste properties; a *viñā*, no less than the icon of a god, has to be made by a particular caste, or family, after observing certain austerities (*vrata*), made on an auspicious day; the gourd from which it is made has to be taken from certain kinds of places. Their *guṇas* (qualities of substance) affect the quality of the instrument, the music.

The same kind of contextual sensitiveness is shown in medical matters: in preparing a herbal medicine, in diagnosis and in prescription. As Zimmermann's work (1980) is eloquent on the subject, I shall say little. The notion of *rtusātmya* or appropriateness applies to poetry, music, sacrificial ritual, as well as medicine. As Renou (1950a, 1950b) points out, *rtu*, usually translated as 'season', means articulation of time; it is also the crucial moment in vedic sacrifice. *Ṛtā* ('order', the original notion behind *dharma*) is that which is articulated. *Kratu*, sacrifice, is a convergence of events, acts, times and spaces. The vocabulary of *rtusātmya* 'appropriateness', *rasa* 'essences, flavours, tastes', *doṣa* 'defects, deficiency', and of landscapes is common to both medicine and poetry: the arts of man reading and re-forming himself in his contexts.

Thus, all things, even so-called non-material ones like space and time or caste, affect other things because all things are 'substantial' (*dhātu*). The only difference is that some are subtle (*sūkṣma*), some gross (*sthūla*). Contrary to the notion that Indians are 'spiritual', they are really 'material minded'. They are materialists, believers in substance (Marriott 1976, 1980): there is a continuity, a constant flow (the etymology of *samsāra*!) of substance from context to object, from non-self to self (if you prefer)—in eating, breathing, sex, sensation, perception, thought, art, or religious experience. This is the grain of truth glimpsed by many of the stereotypes cited in the earlier parts of this essay. Zimmermann (1979) points out that in Indian medical texts, the body is a meeting-place, a conjunction of elements; they have a physiology, but no anatomy.

Where Kissinger and others are wrong is in not seeing that this view has nothing to do with Newtonian revolution, education, or (in)capacity for abstract thought. Cognitive anthropologists like Richard Shweder (1972) have studied descriptive phrases used by highly intelligent Oriya and American adults and shown that they describe persons very differently: Americans characterised them with generic words like 'good', 'nice', Oriyas with concrete contextual descriptions like 'he brings sweets'. The psychoanalyst Alan Roland (1979) suggests that Indians carry their family-context wherever they go, feel continuous with their family. He posits a

familial self, a 'self-we regard', sees no phase of separation/individuation from the parental family as in modern America; hence there seems to be no clear-cut adolescent phase through which one rebels, and thereby separates and individuates oneself in opposition to one's family (the exceptions are in 'modern' urban-centred families). Roland remarks that Indians develop a 'radar' *conscience* that orients them to others, makes them say things that are appropriate to person and context. (No wonder Max Müller had to insist that Indians were truthful!) Roland also found that when directions to places are given, Indians always make reference to other places, landmarks.

Such a pervasive emphasis on context is, I think, related to the Hindu concern with *jāti*—the logic of classes, of genera and species, of which human *jātis* are only an instance. Various taxonomies of season, landscape, times, *guṇas* or qualities (and their material bases), tastes, characters, emotions, essences (*rasa*), etc., are basic to the thought-work of Hindu medicine and poetry, cooking and religion, erotics and magic. Each *jāti* or class defines a context, a structure of relevance, a rule of permissible combinations, a frame of reference, a meta-communication of what is and can be done.

It is not surprising that systems of Indian philosophy, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jaina,

confine themselves to the consideration of class-essences (*jāti*) called genera and species in Western philosophy. They never raise the question of whether there are universals of other types, namely identical qualities and relations. The assumption seems to be that qualities and relations are particulars, though they may be instances of universals (Dravid 1972: 347).

The most important and accessible model of a context-sensitive system with intersecting taxonomies is, of course, the grammar of a language. And grammar is the central model for thinking in many Hindu texts. As Frits Staal has said, what Euclid is to European thought, the grammarian Pāṇini is to the Indian. Even the *Kāmasūtra* is literally a grammar of love—which declines and conjugates men and women as one would nouns and verbs in different genders, voices, moods and aspects. Genders are genres. Different body-types and character-types obey different rules, respond to different scents and beckonings.

In such a world, systems of meaning are elicited by contexts, by the nature (and substance) of the listener. In *Brhadāraṇyaka* 5.1., Lord Prajāpati speaks in thunder three times: 'DA DA DA'. When the gods, given to pleasure hear it, they hear it as the first syllable of *damyatā*, 'control'. The antigods, given as they are to cruelty, hear it as *dayādhvam*, 'be compassionate'. When the humans, given to greed, hear it they hear it as *dattā*, 'give to others'.

V

All societies have context-sensitive behaviour and rules—but the dominant ideal may not be the ‘context-sensitive’ but the ‘context-free’. Egalitarian democratic ideals, Protestant Christianity, espouse both the universal and the unique, insist that any member is *equal* to and *like* any other in the group. Whatever his context—birth, class, gender, age, place, rank, etc.—a man is a man for all that. Technology with its modules and interchangeable parts, and the post-Renaissance sciences with their quest for universal laws (and ‘facts’) across contexts intensify the bias towards the context-free. Yet societies have underbellies. In predominantly ‘context-free’ societies, the counter-movements tend to be towards the context-sensitive: situation ethics, Wittgensteinian notions of meaning and colour (against class-logic), the various relativisms including our own search for ‘native categories’ in anthropology, holistic movements in medicine (naturopaths who prescribe individually tailored regimens) are good examples. In ‘traditional’ cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context. So *rasa* in aesthetics, *mokṣa* in the ‘aims of life’, *sannyāsa* in the life-stages, *sphoṭa* in semantics, and *bhakti* in religion define themselves against a background of inexorable contextuality.

Where *kāma*, *artha* and *dharma* are all relational in their values, tied to place, time, personal character and social role, *mokṣa* is the release from all relations. If *brahmacārya* (celibate studentship) is preparation for a fully relational life, *grhassthāśrama* (householder stage) is a full realisation of it. Manu prefers the latter over all other states. *Vānaprastha* (the retiring forest-dweller stage) loosens the bonds, and *sannyāsa* (renunciation) cremates all one’s past and present relations. In the realm of feeling, *bhāvas* are private, contingent, context-roused sentiments, *vibhāvas* are determinant causes, *anubhāvas* the consequent expressions. But *rasa* is generalised, it is an essence. In the field of meaning, the temporal sequence of letters and phonemes, the syntactic chain of words, yields finally a *sphoṭa*, an explosion, a meaning which is beyond sequence and time.

In each of these the pattern is the same: a necessary sequence in time with strict rules of phase and context ending in a free state.

The last of the great Hindu anti-contextual notions, *bhakti*, is different from the above; it denies the very need for context. *Bhakti* defies all contextual structures: every pigeonhole of caste, ritual, gender, appropriate clothing and custom, stage of life, the whole system of homo hierarchicus (‘everything in its place’) is the target of its irony.

Did the breath of the mistress
have breasts and long hair?

Or did the master's breath
wear sacred thread?

Did the outcaste, last in line,
hold with his outgoing breath
the stick of his tribe?

What do the fools of this world know
of the snares you set,
O Rāmanātha?

Dāsimayya, 10th century
(Ramanujan 1973)

In European culture, one might mention Plato's rebellion against (even the limited) Athenian democracy. Or Blake in the technocratic democracy of the 19th century railing against egalitarianism, abstraction, and the dark Satanic mills, calling for 'minute particulars', declaring 'To generalize is to be an idiot' (generalising thereby); and framing the slogan of all context-sensitive systems: 'one law for the lion and the ox is oppression'. I would include the rise of minute realism in the 19th century novel, various 'indexical' movements of modern art in this counter-thrust towards particularism in the West.

Neither the unique, nor the universal, the two, often contradictory, concerns of western philosophy, art and polity, are the central concern of the Indian arts and sciences—except in the counter-cultures and modern attempts, which quickly get enlisted and remolded (witness the fate of *bhakti* movements) by the prevailing context-sensitive patterns.

VI

In conclusion, I would like to make a couple of observations about 'modernisation'. One might see 'modernisation' in India as a movement from the context-sensitive to the context-free in all realms: an erosion of contexts, at least in principle. Gandhi's watch (with its uniform autonomous time, governing his punctuality) replaced the almanac. Yet Gandhi quoted Emerson, that consistency was the hobgoblin of foolish minds. Print replaced palm-leaf manuscripts, making possible an open and egalitarian access to knowledge irrespective of caste. The Indian Constitution made the contexts of birth, region, sex and creed irrelevant, overthrowing Manu, though the battle is joined again and again. The new preferred names give no clue to birth-place, father's name, caste, sub-caste and sect, as all the traditional names did: I once found in a Kerala college roster, three 'Joseph Stalins' and one 'Karl Marx'. I have also heard of an Andhra named 'Bobbili Winston Churchill'.

In music, the *rāgas* can now be heard at all hours and seasons. Once the Venkaṭeśasuprabhātam, the wake-up chant for the Lord of Tirupati, could be heard only in Tirupati at a certain hour in the morning. Since M.S. Subbulakshmi in her devotion cut a record of the chants, it wakes up not only the Lord, but anyone who tunes in to All India Radio in faraway places.

Cultural borrowings from India to the West, or vice versa, also show interesting accommodations to the prevailing system. The highly contextualised Hindu systems are generalised into 'a Hindu view of life' by apologues like Radhakrishnan for the benefit of both the Western and modern Indian readers. The individual esoteric skills of meditation are freed from their contexts into a streamlined widely accessible technique. And when T.S. Eliot borrows the DA DA DA passage (quoted earlier) to end 'The wasteland' (1930), it becomes highly individual, introspective, as well as universal:

Then spoke the thunder

DA

dattā: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under the seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms

DA

dayādhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aetheral rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

DA

damyatā: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands

In reverse, Indian borrowings of Western cultural items have been converted and realigned to fit pre-existing context-sensitive needs. When

English is borrowed into (or imposed on) Indian contexts, it fits into the Sanskrit slot; it acquires many of the characteristics of Sanskrit, the older native Father-tongue, its pan-Indian elite character—as a medium of laws, science and administration, and its formulaic patterns; it becomes part of Indian multiple diglossia (a characteristic of context-sensitive societies). When Indians learn, quite expertly, modern science, business, or technology, they ‘compartmentalize’ these interests (Singer 1972: 320ff.); the new ways of thought and behaviour do not replace, but live along with older ‘religious’ ways. Computers and typewriters receive *ayudhapuja* (‘worship of weapons’) as weapons of war did once. The ‘modern’, the context-free, becomes one more context, though it is not easy to contain.

In modern thought, William James with his ‘sub-universes’, or Alfred Schutz with his ‘finite provinces of reality’ and ‘relevance’ as central concepts in any understanding, should be re-read in the light of what I have said about context-sensitive and context-free modes. The most recent kinds of science can hold together inconsistent systems of explanation—like wave and particle theories of light. The counter-movements in the West toward Schumacher’s ‘small is beautiful’, appropriate technologies, and the attention paid to ethnicity rather than to a melting pot, though not yet successful, are straws in the wind—like the ethnography of communication in linguistics.

My purpose here is not to evaluate but to grope toward a description of the two kinds of emphases. Yet in each of these kinds of cultures, despite all the complexity and oscillation, there is a definite bias. The Buddha (who said ‘When we see a man shot with a poisoned arrow, we cannot afford to ask what caste he or his enemy is’) also told the following parable of the Raft: Once a man was drowning in a sudden flood. Just as he was about to drown, he found a raft. He clung to it, and it carried him safely to dry land. And he was so grateful to the raft that he carried it on his back for the rest of his life. Such was the Buddha’s ironic comment on context-free systems.

REFERENCES

- BURKE, KENNETH. 1946. *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- COPLESTON, FREDERICK CHARLES. 1946. *A history of philosophy*, Vol. 6. London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne.
- DANIEL, E. VALENTINE. 1984. *Fluid signs: being a person the Tamil way*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DANIEL, SHERYL B. 1983. The tool-box approach of the Tamil to the issues of moral responsibility and human destiny. In Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, eds., *Karma: an anthropological inquiry*, pp. 27–62. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DRAVID, RAJA RAM. 1972. *The problem of universals in Indian philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

- DUMONT, LOUIS. 1970. *Homo hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications* (trans. Mark Sainsbury). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- EGNOR, MARGARET TRAWICK. 1975. Principles of continuity in three Indian sciences. M.A. paper, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
- ELIOT, THOMAS STEARNS. 1930. *The wasteland and other poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- FOSTER, EDWARD MORGAN. 1952. *A passage to India*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- GEERTZ, CLIFFORD. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- HARPER, EDWARD B. 1959. A Hindu village pantheon. *Southwestern journal of anthropology* 15: 227–34.
- HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH. ca. 1827. *Lectures on the philosophy of history*.
- INDEN, RONALD B. 1978. Ritual authority and cyclic time in Hindu kingship. In John F. Richards, ed., *Kingship and authority in South Asia*, pp. 28–73. Publication series, publication n. 3. Madison: South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE. 1962. *The savage mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LINGAT, ROBERT. 1973. *The classical law of India* (trans. D.M. Derrett). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- LYONS, JOHN. 1971. *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MACKIE, JOHN LESLIE. 1977. *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- MANU. 1886. *The laws of Manu* (trans. Georg Bühler). Sacred Books of the East, vol. 25. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MARRIOTT, MCKIM. 1976. Hindu transactions; diversity without dualism. In Bruce Kapferer, ed., *Transaction and meaning: directions in the anthropology of exchange and symbolic behavior*, pp. 109–42. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- . 1980. The open Hindu person and interpersonal fluidity. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Washington DC.
- MÜLLER, FRIEDRICH MAX. 1883. *India: what can it teach us?* London: Longmans Green.
- NAIPAUL, V.S. 1977. *A wounded civilization*. New York: Random House.
- PEIRCE, CHARLES SANTIAGO SANDERS. 1931–58. *Collected papers*. 7 vols. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- RAMANUJAN, A.K., trans. 1967. *The interior landscape: Love poems from a classical Tamil anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1973. *Speaking of Śiva*. Baltimore: Penguin.
- . 1980. *Hymns for the drowning*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 1986. *Second sight*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- RENOU, LOUIS. 1950a. Un thème littéraire en sanskrit: les saisons. In Louis Renou, *Sanskrit et culture*, pp. 145–54. Paris: Payot.
- . 1950b. Vedique *rtu*. *Archiv orientální*, 18: 431–8.
- ROLAND, ALAN. 1979. *In search of the self in India and Japan: toward a cross-cultural psychology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- SAID, EDWARD. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- SHWEDER, RICHARD. 1972. Semantic structures and personality assessment. Ph.D. dissertation. Harvard University.
- SINGER, MILTON B. 1972. *When a great tradition modernizes*. New York: Praeger.
- ZIMMER, HEINRICH ROBERT. 1946. *Myths and symbols in Indian art and civilization*. New York: Pantheon.
- ZIMMERMANN, FRANCIS B. 1979. Remarks on the body in ayurvedic medicine. *South Asian digest of regional writing* 18: 10–26.
- . 1980. *Rtu-sātmya*: the seasonal cycle and the principle of appropriateness. *Social science and medicine* 14B: 99–106.