

# Leadership in a Flat World: the Past, Present and Future of India\*

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## Abstract

A developmentalist, Marxist, psychoanalyst, structuralist, or poststructuralist scholar might maintain that "leadership" is a culturally and historically neutral concept. A historian, however, informed by cultural exegesis and discourse analysis theories, would not. That is not to say that even when such a historian looked at the historical specificities in her case she was not likely to come up with many of the same findings, at a certain level, as her colleagues with other disciplinary approaches. At another level, her findings would underscore the particularities of the case under study.

In this study of leadership in India, I wish to propose a new approach that builds on several familiar approaches: those of nationalist and postcolonial history and those of cultural analysis. I will add to these discussions a new focus: that of *a plural formation of consciousness*. With data on leaders in India over the last two hundred years, I will suggest how the past and present of India signal the possible nature of leadership in the future.

## The Modernity of India

From the end of the eighteenth century to the present, there has been a single mainstream narrative in India: how to be modern. That is the issue to which leaders address themselves.

The dates for the first "modern man" in India and the leader of India's modernization, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, are 1772/1774 to 1834. There is a long series of men and women from Ram Mohan Roy to Man Mohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India in 2006, who have addressed themselves to the questions of, "What does it mean for India to be 'modern'?" and, "How shall we go about it?"

The context within which these leaders worked is important to delineate in some specificity. The colonial state, first under the East India Company from 1764 to 1857, then under the British Crown from 1858 to 1948, was 'colonial' in the predictable economic, political and administrative ways.

### **The economic context of leadership**

Economically, the colonial state de-industrialized India (Bagchi 1982), instituted a new rule of private property (Guha 1963), and created a balance of trade in favor of Britain over India (whereas the East India Company had in its early days paid in bullion for Indian manufactured goods). From being a fabled land of luxury goods, India developed into a prototypical colony that supplied raw cotton, jute, tea, tobacco, opium and indigo. The accompanying colonial effort was to make it into an informed market for British manufactures through tax manipulations and consumer advocacy. If modernity needs an infrastructure of industrial and commercial development in order to be established with stability, the colonial state did an explicit disservice to India by rendering its economic infrastructure stagnant. This was quite evident from Britain's own published statistics (Chandra 1966). In the face of these explicit data, its justification for rule in India was the inherent or essential backwardness of India, somehow due to Indian race, climate, religion, or proclivity. For an Indian leader, there could be a dilemma. The leader could be aware of the history of British economic exploitation (Chandra 1966, Dutt 1969, Naoroji 1962) and write about it with perspicacity and passion. But he was also a product of the new classes and professions that had evolved under colonial rule (Kling 1976). He was educated in British systems of thought, and was a loyal British citizen. Largely unconsciously, the Indian leader was himself persuaded, through an ironic twist of events, into considering himself inferior, even though deep inside he may have been unable to ever existentially believe that, and as I shall argue below, his family socialization was such that it precluded a total ideological conversion to a subjugation of the self.

### **The political context of leadership**

Politically, the colonial state held a dual identity: a spokesperson for democracy, equality and liberalism at home and of control and inequality in the colony. All Indians were by definition inferior to the British, who were de facto at the top of all existing caste systems. All Indians were censored in voicing their aspirations. If from c. 1800 to 1857 this was a kind of direct rule of autocracy, after 1858 it had an interesting new face as non-interference. The colonial state deliberately refrained from social reform, whereas a representative state would have not have. The lessons for Indian modernity are extremely interesting and ironic here. As I have mentioned elsewhere (Kumar 2000), modernity world-wide has been a type of colonization, where villages, hinterlands, provinces, communities, have been colonized into the normative ways of the centre (Weber 1976) and the resultant production of a rational, modern nation state has been seen (until recently) as a triumph that merits no questioning or skepticism. In fact, just as with the colonization of faraway lands, the colonization of one's own contiguous spaces, was also accompanied by the destruction of alternate lifestyles and belief systems. In contrast to

the foreign colonization, however, internal colonization or the building of modern nation states had a positive outcome: political democracy, economic liberalism, and infrastructural developments such as universal education and the rule of law. In the case of colonization abroad, as of India with the British, the colonial state was forced to avoid, for its own existence, any political or economic rationality, and imagined that it had to avoid, again for its stability, universal education and social reform.

Indian leaders were again in a dilemma regarding the nature of political change under the colonial state. On the one hand, they did wish for many changes that fell within the categories of 'social,' 'cultural' or 'ritual/religious' (Kopf 1979). On the other hand, they did not wish for a foreign government to interfere in the internal lives of their communities, particularly when this government and all its spokesmen used the vocabulary of backwardness for Indians. The preferred way was then not for state-sponsored social change, but generic change from within communities.

But the history of social change in fact has typically been that of change engineered from above by the educated elite and those who envision a more liberated future. In a representative state with freedom of expression and an emerging national consensus, this is possible to do. In India, it was not possible. The state had a different and contrary agenda to that of Indian communities. Indian communities were isolated from each other, without state leadership and freedom of expression. To top it all, a burgeoning nationalist consciousness made them wish to defend those practices which could have successfully become the target of reform had there been no foreigners to set themselves up against. As Indian leaders became nationalist one of their strongest weapons became the internal social and religious practices of their communities. They wished to be reformers, but they wished to be nationalists even more. The dilemma was dramatically exemplified by Gandhi, who was a powerful advocate of reform, such as of untouchability, but when it came to a choice, was first devoted to the pursuit of freedom for India, *to be followed later*, by the fight for emancipation for untouchables, peasants, workers, tribals, and women.

### **The administrative context of leadership**

Finally, the administrative history of India under the colonial state is another twisted and fascinating story. Administrative change may be discussed under three heads: judicial, executive, and educational. In the judicial sphere, the British imported British civil law and what they imagined were 'Hindu' and 'Islamic' principles from their putative sacred texts as interpreted by chosen experts. The structure for the dispensation of justice was constructed anew in a way unfamiliar to all levels of Indian values. The result of all this was to create a profound gulf between two strata of society: those who had English education and could function within the new system, indeed, who made it function by being trained as lawyers and clerks, and gradually, judges; and those who remained outside the system and functioned within local, vernacular systems. They came to be seen, and to see themselves, as backward, underdeveloped, illiterate, rural and provincial. The significance of this for leadership in India has been that, through generations of

serving and functioning within the colonial system, the elite of India have come to also classify the majority of Indians as ‘backward.’

The executive change consisted of new policies for taxation and order, embodied in new all-India civil and police services. The members of these services set a tone for the governing of India that lasted for two centuries. With the more technical aspects of government went also the lifestyle aspects. So, again, there came to be an elite who lived in a world different to those of ordinary people, and was distanced from them in every way. Further, there was a larger change in social consciousness brought about by colonial executive structures. New professions replaced older ones: new lawyers, doctors, journalists, clerks, teachers, and reformers. One may say that a new type of *leader* appeared, fashioned by colonial economic, political, and administrative policies.

But I have saved the most profound change for last, which is the change in education. Leadership is a product of education (Nachtigal 2006). British colonialism in India is remarkable for launching a number of processes of change, but most of all for beginning an epistemological and intellectual revolution in India. Without going into the details of pre-colonial educational practices, suffice it to say here that the many structures of education that had existed before were destroyed in a planned manner from the 1830s onwards and replaced by a centralized system of education based on European definitions of history, philosophy, science and language. Seven to eight generations of educated Indians have been produced since who have been formally educated in the cognitive and epistemological norms of the west. More important than the consciousness of individual Indian leaders which we shall discuss below, is the fact that India, under colonial, then national, but colonized, leadership, has chosen to follow a precise path of development that reflects the paths followed by nation states elsewhere. Its Constitution, its Five Year Plans, its government structure, its political ideology and practice, its media, its public life has all been based—as a result of the education of its elite—on the model of the West. No continuity with the pre-colonial structures was permitted in colonial times, and in postcolonial times, it was neither possible nor desired. Indian leaders are *for all practical purposes* like their counterparts in the West. They wish to be judged by the same criteria, because they apply the same criteria to their functioning. Finally this is all due to their education.

### **Colonial and National Leaders**

While no continuity with pre-colonial structures of knowledge and epistemology was officially *permitted*, that is not to say that it did not exist. Every scholar who writes on the intellectual or political history of India addresses the issue of the continuity of the past into the present (for instance Hatcher 1994, Metcalf 1982), even if they try to reverse the usual equation of “tradition” yielding to the “modern” (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). In ongoing research on the intelligentsia of India I have found that the key to the so-called dilemma of “tradition” and “modernity” between which they are supposedly poised (Shils 1961) is to see these two processes sociologically as two sites of learning that were not exclusive but enriching and empowering.

From the coming into power of the East India Company in Bengal in the 1770s onwards, Indians of literate and upwardly mobile classes were interested in the new employment opportunities offered by it. They considered the match of these new opportunities and the mastery of a new language natural. Those in direct contact with missionaries could get worried that the latter's vitriol against their culture could be disruptive of students' morale, but they could not and did not take the threat of religious or even cultural conversion seriously. As Alexander Duff put it, missionaries by merely teaching English believed that

In the very act of acquiring English, the mind, in grasping the import of new terms, is perpetually brought in contact with the *new ideas, the new truths...* so that, by the time the language has been mastered, the student must be *tenfold* less the child of Pantheism, idolatry and superstition than before (Laird 1972: 207-08).

For most Hindus, on the other hand, Christianity was not a real danger, and its discourses impinged little on their daily lives. English education was voluntarily chosen by the Indian intelligentsia and empowered them in a multitude of ways. But, over the whole century, while formal indigenous education declined, it continued informally for the intelligentsia at home. All those who grew up to be active in state bureaucracies; who were at different levels of the professions of law, medicine and teaching; who wrote, spoke and led from different platforms, had a vernacular education in early childhood. I cannot give the descriptions here-but this education took place in multiple sites, with a variety of teachers, based on numerous pedagogical procedures. But *all the new educated people* of India had it, over some seven generations. To mention only a few cases at random: Bankim Chandra (b. 1838) learnt Sanskrit as a child; Kali Prosunno Singh (b. 1841) had Bengali and Sanskrit lessons in his childhood; U. Ve. Caminataiyar (b. 1855) began learning Tamil at 7 or 8; Pandit Ajudhianath (b. 1840) studied Arabic and Persian; Surendranath Banerjea (b. 1848) learnt Bengali in his childhood; Kashinath Trimbak Telang (b. 1850) learnt Marathi very well; Shankaran Nair (b. 1857) learnt Sanskrit as a child; and Motilal Nehru (b. 1861) read only Arabic and Persian till 12.

The most evident result of this was to generate a continuing interest in the languages, literatures and philosophies of India among the intelligentsia. This re-discovery typically took place in later years, after an adolescent and youthful reception and digestion of Western learning had had its time. Then the memories of childhood training leavened with an urge of creativity, led to a re-learning, re-discovery and re-cognition, of the 'traditions' of India. The other, less conscious, more resounding result was that the possible absolute rule of 'Reason' in India was postponed. Since children were learning not *only* languages but *discourses*, the less than perfect reproduction of the Western models of history, society and truth were not due to any failure of capacity on the part of educated Indians, or in the very nature of imitation, or due to an inherent conflict between modern and pre-modern or West and East. It was due to *the other education* that they had also received.

Yet another result of this plural learning is expressed in the notion of the 'renaissance'. Its creativity arose from the workings of new Western knowledge not on some abstract 'past', but on other bodies of knowledge encountered in quasi formal and informal settings outside the school. Finally we have the familiar result of nationalism. The 'progress' of the nationalist movement from a 'moderate' to an 'extremist' phase was due, of course, to large changes in politics, economics and ideology. But it matched a similar process within the lifespan of single individuals who seemed to discover the missing dimension in their lives. Surendranath Banerjea (b. 1848) thundered when he was about 30 years old.

We are an astute people. We are not as wholly devoid of sagacity and common sense as some people take us to be. Well, then, our fathers, with the astuteness characteristics of our race, at once saw that England's greatness was, to certain extent at least, due to her noble literature, to the immortal truths taught by her science, and to the sublime morality which breathes through the burning words of her great writers and thinkers... Might not Bengal freely grope about, in the same direction, and under the same guidance? (Banerjea 1878: 6-7).

On the occasion of the inauguration of the Banaras Hindu University, when he was about 70 years old, he spoke—together with all the other speakers on the day—about the importance of incorporating 'Indian culture' into the modern curriculum:

We who have profited by experience are not going to make such mistakes. In our curriculum, Hindu ethics and metaphysics will occupy a foremost place, the Western system being used only for purposes of contrast or illustration. Special attention will also be paid to a knowledge of the country, its literature, its history, and its philosophy. (Sundaram 1956: 147).

A language not only opens the gate to a literature, which is in itself a repository of ethics, common sense and philosophies of the self, a language is a discourse in itself, with a critical definition of every thing in its purview. The locus for the new, synthetic, syncretistic consciousness of modernity of the intelligentsia, then, was largely the language(s) they worked with, that they comprehended the world through, that they had learnt both in school and outside school or in less formal schools. But what they learnt went beyond language; Let us imagine the life of an intellectual in the nineteenth century. Let us look at the extreme case of Aurobindo Ghosh. Born in 1872, Aurobindo had a father who, lost in admiration for the British way of life, wished to preserve his son from any contact with Indians. Aurobindo was, therefore, sent to a convent in India at the age of 5 and to the care of an English family in England at the age of 7. Ten years of English education later, he was master of Western knowledge. He was as anglicized as his father would have liked and knew almost nothing about India. But it seems that his father had slipped up somewhere. Otherwise how would Aurobindo have known the little Hindustani and Bengali that he apparently did know? And how was his father to take care of his color and his name, so that when at Cambridge, Aurobindo could not be kept immune from Indian politics? By 1890, when he sat unsuccessfully for the Indian Civil

Service examination, he was already on his way, at the age of 18, to being a full-blown nationalist.

If we look at the course of his life and his education, we may find at least one missing clue. His mother, the daughter of a Vedanta scholar, was ‘an orthodox Hindu lady’. The two sources of his ‘alternative.’ knowledge were his own independent study upon his return to India, and what he must have learnt in his first five years in India from her. The education we are speaking of is close to what a Hindu calls *samskara*, or the ethical dimensions of living as learnt from one’s ancestors. In all fairness, transmission of values, or *samskara*, is not the monopoly of the mother, and for a more complex reason than the workings of patriarchy. It is because ‘mothering’ is not exclusively the domain of one parent. My argument is not for a mother as a somehow unique personage, but rather for recognition of the spaces within which the child learnt outside school.

Because English education did not and could not take over the whole of life, and language teaching continued, and because ethical teaching—the passing down of *samskars*—was so central to the existence of the ‘family’, the process of education that actually occurred is what may be described as that of plural education. The mother and father prepared the child for a career by cooperating in the disciplines of the new education, whether it took their physical labor or their mental compromise. Even as the father and mother ensured that their son got the English education the father himself may not have had, they taught values or *samskara* that was not confined to certain rituals and practices that he might well abandon. It consisted of an unspoken epistemology and ontology that may be glimpsed in all his later writings and actions. In Indian history the child is regarded as the battleground of cultures, but we may want to question this metaphor. Learning is continuous and, rather than confrontational, is creative, enriching and empowering.

My conclusion is about the nature of the Indian leadership. Education seemed to have caused the displacement of Indian by Western modes of thinking. My research reveals that instead of being merely a trap, which of course it largely is, this Europeanization of the imagination provided a valuable resource for the elite. The empowerment of the elite occurred because the elite were perspicacious enough to merge their English learning with the learning of Indian languages and world-views.

My argument about elite empowerment through their intimacy with plural intellectual worlds is different to the long debate on tradition and modernity. I suggest that there is no *inherent* conflict between these two experiential worlds because to live in plural worlds was a norm. Plural mothers, mother tongues, identities, learning, epistemologies, histories, truths and modernities, can all be taken as the norm rather than their singular opposite. The pluralities existed throughout the modern period and are extant today not only because the centralizing and homogenizing mission has failed, but because plurality was actively courted and welcomed, and continues to be not merely tolerated today but considered normal. Because my research has focused on the actual sites of learning where discourses are produced and transmitted—the home, the neighborhood, the worlds of work and leisure—I can suggest that it is *natural* for people to inhabit plural worlds, to

speak several languages, to have access to varying notions of truth, to share cultural meanings between the so-called 'east' and 'west'. It is *normal* for them to be comfortable and at home in the epistemologies of their grandmothers as well as that of their formal syllabus in colonial schools. 'Tradition' and 'modernity' are not actual experiences that are at war with each other. They are rather the names of a politics.

I rewrite the history of education and therefore of leadership in South Asia in the following way. The history of modernity in the west has been accompanied by industrialization and the growth of the nation state (and has been fuelled by colonialism), but the *secret* of its success is that a centralized educational system has normalized a concept of history, of the self, of science, and ontology. Over this same time in South Asia, approximately mid 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was an effort to put a similar centralized set of norms of historical, scientific, social, and humanistic truths in place. The project was not successful. The students who learnt one historiography in school, learnt yet another one, or other ones, outside school, and even in school from their peers and teachers, outside the government controlled syllabus. They learnt one science in school and another, or others, outside. They learnt one sociology in the classroom and others outside. If we take these historical processes seriously we are bound to recognize the plural consciousnesses of South Asian leaders accessed through the knowledge of many languages and many discourses.

### **The Postcolonial Leader of the Future**

A plural consciousness courts the danger of producing confusion in the minds of the subject. While he/she is skilled and can excel in chosen tasks, the analysis of her historical production eludes her. Only one site of production, namely the formal site of the school with its attendant activities of reading and examinations, is visible. The other site, difficult to label except as the home, the community and everyday space, is difficult to recognize and therefore analyze. It is almost impossible to reproduce even if it were recognized. In the very process of its construction, the *fact* of its objectification for construction acts as a technology that modifies it from one kind of learning tool to another. The way that 'culture' worked in the past, that *samskaras* or family ethics were handed down to a younger generation, depended on many other structures of relationships. To have them change and yet to insist that the family will play its old role of teaching in certain powerful ways is typically to introduce new forms of patriarchy, religious bigotry, and casteism that had not existed before.

Indian leaders at present reap the benefits of their plural education but are not necessarily going to be able to reproduce the same fortunate scenario for their succeeding generations. A great many of them misunderstand their learning at home to be an objectified "tradition" that they then seek to propagate as religion or rituals. An equal number of them misunderstand their modern skills as a modern education that differentiates them from "traditional" India, not comprehending that in India there is in fact no possible separation for anyone between the overlapping sets of knowledge that heuristically we may label "traditional" and "modern", or more recently, "local" and "global."

I would like to end on a note that expresses confidence in the future of the Indian leader. I believe that history is a discipline that is itself empowering in that it shows how open-ended all processes have been in the past and how almost anything that the imagination may dream of is achievable. I believe, however, that the future of leadership in India is jeopardized by the lack of analysis of the specific economic, political, and intellectual history of leadership in India. Hundreds of nationalist histories notwithstanding, there is almost no academic interest, and equally no popular discussion of the subject. The view among both academics and laymen seems to be that in India there is an involuntary synthesis of “tradition” and “modernity” that will somehow magically continue. The production of skilled and competent educated people will thereby continue. The questions of the sites of learning, the role of languages and childhood socialization, of importance of plural knowledges, are all unasked in public discourse.

In the discussions on the immediate present, such as in the best seller by Thomas Friedman called **The World is Flat** (2005) the same lacunae occur. One of the points that Friedman makes repeatedly in the book is that *somehow* educated Indians are able to not only compete but even out-compete in the world of technology and software that is today truly global. Well, the key lies in the historical structures of power. Educated Indians have been products of a formal education that had the same curricula as West European, specifically British, formal education. But *on top of that* they have also been educated in the home. The Indian family has been unflaggingly strong in its politics of control and its reproductive capacities. It educated its young members in their mother tongues, their classical languages, their narratives of the self, community histories, mythology, and ethics and values. *Then* it fearlessly sent them to colonial schools for formal education.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century the result of this existence in two worlds was that the Indian intelligentsia was able to develop and lead to success one of the most creative nationalist movements in the world, one that worried, not only about a future nation state, but about the condition of every citizen’s inner being. In the twentieth century that same existence-in-two-worlds syndrome is responsible for leadership in a flat world.

In my own work I have gone beyond researching and writing the history of leaders in India to craft more deliberately composite pictures of the overall patterns that can highlight the trajectory from the past to the future. Elsewhere (Kumar 2006b) I have listed the necessary steps towards overcoming a blindness to history and the joining of the lost past to experiences of the present and desirable futures. In my perspective it is essential to not only recognize the particular historical production of India’s leaders, but to see that history as continuous, and one indeed in which a scholar such as myself necessarily has to participate.

\* I use the designation ‘India’ for the place of my research alternatively with the designation ‘South Asia.’ South Asia was India before 1947 and much of my discussion

here is of the period before 1947. After that, my research is located only in India but my conclusions, I maintain, apply to all of South Asia.

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