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978-0-521-44181-0 - The Religious Culture of India: Power, Love and Wisdom

Friedhelm Hardy

Excerpt

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PART ONE

*Power: the challenges of the external world*

## CHAPTER 1

*Consulting the oracle once again*

Let me introduce you to José Arcadio Buendía – adventurer, colonist and founder of a lineage that is to last for a hundred years. Somewhere in a fictionalized Colombia and isolated from the rest of the world, a dynastic history unrolls that is filled with violence, mercenary sex and frustrated love. It is an earthy history that is subject to an inexorable and cruel fate and that condemns five generations of Buendías to lives of mental and emotional solitude.

José Buendía, we are told, had been a friend of Melquíades, a gypsy who, shortly before his death, had left José a parchment purporting to reveal to him the future destiny of his descendants. And a mysterious destiny it was to be! Pure lust and strict adherence to a code of wifely duty, but never love, motivated the procreation of Buendía children. For the family was bedevilled by a strange fascination – that of nephew for aunt and of aunt for nephew. As the generations passed, this obsession came increasingly close to realization in an act of physical love. But the dread of producing a child ‘with a cartilaginous tail in the shape of a corkscrew and with a small tuft of hair on the tip’<sup>1</sup> prevented this time and again. Yet during the last phase of the Buendías’ history, such a child was actually produced – ‘the only one in a century who had been engendered with love’.<sup>2</sup> This culminating event in the family’s history coincided with the decipherment (by the boy’s father, Aureliano) of the mysterious manuscript.

Caught up in the predicament of being forced into a love that the threat of disaster frustrated, previous members of the Buendía family had tried to decipher the text and so to unravel the mystery of their fate, but to no avail. ‘The letters looked like clothes hung out to dry on a line and they looked more like musical notation than writing.’<sup>3</sup> The breakthrough came only when Aureliano discovered that it was written

in Sanskrit – a language he then learnt. But the moment he had read the last line of the text and uncovered the secrets of the Buendías' fate, their history came to an end: the boy with the pig's tail died. The final comprehension of the alien writing put an end to the isolation and solitude of the Buendías.

This powerful and uncanny story is told in the novel *One hundred years of solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. It is not difficult to see in the figure of the gypsy, Melquíades, and his Sanskrit manuscript, a metaphor of India as the oracle that the West has been consulting in ever so many ways (I shall return to these at a later stage). At the same time, this metaphor allows me to suggest in a rather colourful manner what the following pages will be about. Specifically, it is about the religious culture of India and, more generally speaking, about that mysterious relationship between the development of one culture and the exploration of another. At the same time, speaking of metaphor here puts up a clear warning sign against taking the symbol of the oracle literally. The allegory tells us that an understanding of the mysteries of the East, of the oracle that contains the revelation of our destiny, or, in even more naive terms, of the truth, will only become possible at the moment when our destiny has itself reached its inexorable fulfilment; that the solitude of our own world can only be removed by our growing ability to divine our innermost drives; and that there can be no short-cut from lived, physical reality to an abstract code that anticipates its course. But in that case, an opponent might object, is not the real message to be derived from the allegory a different one? Does it not simply tell us that all the effort spent by the Buendías on deciphering the manuscript was merely a waste of time? What is the use of searching for the truth 'out there', if we can find it only by previously realizing it within ourselves? A fair comment, it would seem, and deserving of closer attention. But further opponents have gathered and insist on being heard first.

We live in the age of the computer, one of them tells us, where creativity is made available to us of such a totally different and superior kind that anything that the ancient cultures of the world have to offer dwindles to insignificance. Just look at the way we have broken down form and sound to their most atomic components, in the video and sound chips, and how we can dominate these in total freedom. Look at how completely new worlds have opened up – the culmination of a

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scientific culture! Ks and bytes and go-toing, saving and killing, software and disc drives are as much part of the everyday vocabulary of seven-year-olds as comics, lollies and Meccano were in a less modern age. Even the politicians are prepared to acknowledge that this is one of the very few areas where education can be relevant and useful. And, indeed, the educational advance here is staggering. As it said in one computer magazine: 'The eight- to ten-year-old kids of today prefer to write their own games' software than to depend on the old-fashioned stuff produced by senile fifteen-year-olds.' Thus, what possible relevance could such unscientific and obsolete matters as Indian religions have to the concerns of our society?

Further voices of opposition, particularly from the so-called Third World, make themselves heard. Some point out that the whole Orientalist enterprise is a Western, colonialist, capitalist affair. Advocates of the grand 'West=materialistic' versus 'East=spiritual' theory see it as basically analytical and incapable of reaching out to the inner, spiritual heart of the Eastern traditions. Or, related to this, the methods of scholarship are criticized. Our text-critical and historical approach is felt to impose a normative rigour ('the critical edition of the ur-text') on a live and multifarious development ('later interpolations that misunderstand and distort the original'). Others have seen it as escapism on our part: we pick and choose what we like, particularly 'safe' subjects like names of plants, inscriptions, or bits of old pottery, and call that 'studying another culture', without ever allowing ourselves to be challenged in our ways of looking at the world. From a different angle, the ridicule implied in the notion of 'primitive people' and in the way that live human beings have been treated like puppets or cog wheels in a machine, was seen as parallel to the degradation resulting from political and economic exploitation. Similarly, a link between this form of exploitation and our modes of research has been pointed out. We come, endowed with generous grants, look around and generally have a good time, and disappear to celebrate our victory with fame and fortune derived from the 'subject' we have researched. Others again resent our focus on spiritual matters and support the advocates of science and of progress. And perhaps most pressing in this array of voices is the resentment expressed against concepts like 'multi-culturalism', 'cultural development', 'acknowledging separate cultural identities' – for this is used in the propaganda of apartheid.

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On the surface, many of the points made are contradictory, and some reveal, when analysed, a hidden basis in precisely the Western attitudes that are being criticized. But it would be obnoxious to try and play the *divide et impera* game here, by playing one against the other and letting them cancel each other out. Behind it all remains the irrefutable truth of a divide between a First and a Third World, an inequality in terms of power and standard of living between the two, and even a contempt of one for the other.

The traditional Indian art of disputation would require me to look at each of these objections, demolish them by means of clever counter-arguments and, somewhat repetitively, follow this up by stating my own position. I shall not do so here. For, had we questioned a Buendía about the value or usefulness of deciphering the manuscript, he would have answered: give me time, until I know what it actually says. Thus it is clear that the task being undertaken here – the exploration of the religious culture of India – will itself be part of any final counter-argument. Until that task is completed, we must shelve those objections, although some preliminary comments will be made in the course of this first chapter.

Unlike the Buendías, who as amateurs had to create their own methods of decipherment, anybody setting out to explore Indian culture can, and in fact must, make use of the tools that are already available. But this leads me to a semantic difficulty: how to label in more precise terms the discipline responsible for such an enterprise? Terms like indology, Indian Studies, Orientalism tend to confuse more than they clarify. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that sometimes it makes me wish I were a spy, secret agent, detective, doctor, second-hand-car dealer, don, or whatever. Not only because through endless works of fiction and films about such heroes of modern society everybody knows what they are doing and has a secret or open admiration for them. But also, because – on a more serious level – society has reflected on the role of these professionals and has laid out a range of observations as to the ethics or purpose of their occupation. No identity crisis here, but an enormous amount of often stimulating ideals! But there is no use in lamenting the absence of a thrilling TV series or popular novel on the work of an indologist or Indian anthropologist or comparative religionist. Instead, let me turn to the one novel that I do know and with which I have been confronting myself for more than twenty years

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now. Let me introduce you to Professor Peter Kien, by means of a pastiche of quotes and paraphrases.

He was 'a tall, emaciated figure, man of learning and specialist in sinology'.<sup>4</sup> Like a hermit, he kept himself aloof from the trivialities of ordinary life and common people. 'Knowledge and truth were for him identical terms. You draw closer to the truth by shutting yourself off from mankind. Daily life was a superficial clutter of lies.'<sup>5</sup> 'He knew more than a dozen oriental languages' – not to mention the European ones – and 'no branch of human literature was unfamiliar to him. He thought in quotations ... Countless texts owed their restoration to him.' When he encountered bad readings or corrupt passages 'in ancient Chinese, Indian or Japanese manuscripts, as many alternative readings suggested themselves for his selection as he could wish. Other textual critics envied him; he for his part had to guard against a superfluity of ideas. Meticulously cautious, he weighed up the alternatives month after month, was slow to the point of exasperation.'<sup>6</sup> Many chairs of Oriental philology were offered to him, but 'the genuine, creative research worker' that he was, he contemptuously left them to the 'unproductive popularizers'.<sup>7</sup> Equally contemptuous he was of those 'beer-swilling dullards, the general run of university students'.<sup>8</sup> Naturally he refused to attend conferences. But what he regarded as the greatest threat of all to the pursuit of serious scholarship was – woman. 'Kien repudiated the idea of a wife. Women had been a matter of indifference to him ... a matter of indifference they would remain.'<sup>9</sup> That is why he held nothing but contempt for his gynaecologist brother, George, who had turned psychiatrist. In his eyes, George lived for sensations, was a womanizer who chased from one novelty to another, without ever reaching any depth. When the brothers met, soon before the tragic climax of the novel, Peter told George: 'That is the difference between you and me. You live by your lunatics, I by my books ... I could live in a cell, I carry my books in my head. You need a whole lunatic asylum.'<sup>10</sup>

But it was Peter who was insane, and the steady growth of the mental disorder and delusion in this 'head without a world'<sup>11</sup> is the theme of Elias Canetti's novel. It was published originally (in 1935) in German under the title *Die Blendung* ('The Blinding'); the English translation of 1946 is called *Auto da Fé*. Professor Peter Kien is pure intellect, but deprived of application and impotent in more than one

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sense of the word. All his knowledge, all his books serve him to no further end than to lock himself up more and more hermetically in his own ego. The wisdom of the East is merely a tool in his hands to protect himself against the intrusions of the outside world. Thus, over more than eight pages,<sup>12</sup> he can quote all the Eastern classics on the pernicious role of woman. Yet the traumatic intrusion of the alien outside world he cannot prevent.

It all started with one fundamental miscalculation. For eight years Kien had kept Therese as a housekeeper, employed exclusively to dust his books. When he surprised her wearing gloves while reading the filthiest book in his large library – some kind of pulp novel from his early student days – he was so impressed by her combined respect for his books and zest for the learning contained in them, that he decided to marry her. After the perfunctory ceremony, so much of practical wisdom was left in his mind, that he remembered: marriage also involved consummation. To delay matters as long as possible, he filled the couch – the only place in his flat where such an event was practical – with lots of books. But Therese ‘held up her little finger, crooked it menacingly and pointed at the divan. I must go to her, he thought, and did not know how ... What was he to do now – lie down on the books? He was shaking with fear, he prayed to the books, the last stockade. Therese caught his eye, she bent down and, with an all-embracing stroke of her left arm, swept the books on to the floor. He made a helpless gesture towards them, he longed to cry out, but horror choked him ... A terrible hatred swelled up slowly within him. This she had dared. The books!’<sup>13</sup> This was the shock from which he never recovered. The one thing he held sacred and loved, his books, had been violated, by the one thing he resented most: a woman. After that, this marriage turned into a nightmare for Kien. His obsession with the safety of first his, and then all books, increased steadily. His nightmares became filled with the sight of burning books, and in his attempts to save books from the devil – for he it was who burnt and ate books – he compared himself to the saviour Christ.<sup>14</sup> Were one to define the ultimate in absurdity, it would be – in the words of George Kien – Peter setting fire to himself and all his books.<sup>15</sup> Yet this is what happens at the end. George, who had come all the way from Paris to look after his ill brother, recreated the ideal external circumstances for Peter to carry on with his researches. However, the threats of the

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outside world became unbearable to Peter and the fire he lit to ward it off consumed him and his whole library.

Into this history of the madness that consumed an impotent, pure intellect, Canetti has woven further characters who realize their complementary nature to Peter Kien's. At a certain stage of their bizarre interactions, Therese actually threw Kien out of the flat, into 'the headless world'. Oblivious to his environment, he landed in the seedy underworld filled with prostitutes and crooks and people with their own bizarre dreams, delusions and fears. A hunchback, Fischerle – pimp, misogynist like Kien, shrewd and worldly-wise, competent chess-player with the ambition of becoming the world-champion and ultimately prevented by his own meanness from fulfilling his dream – attached himself to our lost professor. Protecting him in one way and exploiting him in another, he allowed Kien one insight which nevertheless remained without consequence: 'that Fischerle possessed precisely what he himself lacked, a knowledge of practical life, to its last ramifications'.<sup>16</sup> Shortly before his own murder, Fischerle sent a telegram to George in Paris, with the wonderfully simple message: 'Am completely crackers. [*Bin total meschugge.*] Your brother.'<sup>17</sup>

Peter's brother was a highly successful psychiatrist. His success derived from his remarkable talent of empathy. 'A rapid glance was enough. When he saw the slightest alteration, a mere crack which offered a possibility of sliding into the other's soul, he would act at once. Thus he lived simultaneously in numberless different worlds. Involuntarily he behaved to women as if he loved them. Surrounded and spoiled by innumerable women, all ready to serve him, he lived like Prince Gautama before he became the Buddha. He found the way to the wilderness in his twenty-eighth year.'<sup>18</sup> That was when he encountered a mentally ill man and was so impressed by him that he changed over to the study and cure of mental diseases.

Thus George is introduced to us as a man singularly endowed with the talent of entering into the minds of others and acting according to their liking – the gift of the playboy as much as of the psychiatrist. The title of the third part of the novel, 'The world in the head', might be meant for him. He himself offers us a comparison between George and Peter. 'If I were to ask you,' said George to his brother, "'tell me now, how did you fall into the hands of that woman [Therese]?', that you would not be able to do. You see it is just this kind of memory,



which you lack, and which I possess – a memory for feelings, as I'd like to call it.'<sup>19</sup>

Thus, like Fischerle, but in a different way, George's personality is complementary to Peter's. But Canetti, at least in the subsequent words of George, goes further: 'Both together, a memory for feeling and a memory for facts – for that is what yours is – would make possible the universal man ... If you and I could be moulded together into a single being, the result would be a spiritually complete man.'<sup>20</sup> But in the end, neither George nor Fischerle could help Peter.

I think what we have here are the outlines of a programme, both of its method and its possible contents. Behind the different complementary characters lies the problem of the relationship between intellect and emotion, between reflection and experience, and between the abstract, absolute and the concrete, particular. Once again we encounter here the dichotomy between the quest for truth or understanding or knowledge, and the realities of actual human life. An imaginary and obviously non-existent fourth part of Canetti's novel, which by the logic of the titles of the first three ought to be called 'Head in the world', suggests a kind of synthesis. Meticulous and accurate scholarship, combined with a playful imagination and empathy, and directed towards the 'practical life, to its last ramifications' – this would make the ideal indology. 'Head in the world' would mean: an analytical, engaged and self-reflecting preoccupation with the lives of real people and their pursuits of power, love and wisdom. It would mean to aim for the moment of total decipherment, when love replaces lust and coercion, when the walls of solitude come crumbling down and when self-destructive madness is averted through total self-reflection.

It is a grand and fascinating programme that could be extricated from Canetti's novel. To this kind of empathetic scholarship few people could object. It is also an ideal that nobody can actually achieve. Nevertheless, like the belief that the manuscript could explain the agonizingly mysterious fate, or the belief in some ultimate, immutable truth 'out there', such an ideal methodology might stimulate aspirations towards it. In the course of moving closer towards it, something of what is aimed for might become actualized. It is easy enough to see where Peter Kien went wrong. But it is much more difficult to do better than him. How can we empathize with a totally

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alien culture? How can we prevent ourselves from imposing an order, a structure, a rigidity upon it that is merely the product of our own solitary or neurotic minds? It seems worth looking at these questions in greater detail, for it would be disappointing if, at the end of our journey, we found that we had missed most of the important sights, or discovered that we had got completely lost. At the same time, it is only fair to tell any potential traveller, before he begins the journey, what to expect and what the route is going to be.

The journey will take us to India, the original home of the gypsy and of Sanskrit, the language he chose for his secret message – the India also of many of the texts so ingeniously reconstructed by Professor Peter Kien. That it is not the whole of India, or all of its cultures, will become apparent presently. Nor will it be each and every facet of this fascinating country that we shall be looking at. Neither its steam-engines, nor its many kinds of exotic birds; neither the motifs on its many types of saris, nor its immensely variegated cuisine will be our concern. Our journey will take us into the religions native to India.

Now it is easy to point at a particular building and state that it is a Hindu temple. But the minute we start asking questions, we seem to be drawn into a bottomless pit. ‘What is the difference between a “temple” and a “church”?’ ‘What makes a Hindu temple different from a Jain one?’ ‘What is the “philosophy” of temple worship?’ ‘Why does a Hindu go into a temple?’ ‘What is the meaning of life for a temple-visiting Hindu?’ By now it should be clear that by choosing religion, instead of looking at saris or travelling in steam-trains, we have chosen the most difficult of all possible topics.

One difficulty lies in the fact that the ‘religious individual’ is a totally closed book to us. We cannot directly look into the mind or heart of a Buddha, a Śāṅkara, or of any other person we may see visiting a temple or meditating. But here something can come to our assistance – what I shall call ‘culture’.

The religious individual is not closed off against the world and the society in which he lives. In a dual manner, he is open in relation to these. Logically, prior to any ‘religious experience’, he has received from society a whole host of symbols, concepts and spontaneous emotive associations connected with these. They flow into his experience and flavour it and provide a social or ‘cultural’ dimension to it. Nobody could even identify in his own consciousness a religious