

# *From Absent Authority to Present Responsibility: An Agenda for Indian (English) Criticism*

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## I The Problem(s)

I WANT TO BEGIN with three questions: do we need a modern Indian tradition in criticism? Do we have a modern Indian tradition in criticism? And what should be the shape of a modern Indian tradition in criticism? When it comes to the need for such a tradition, I doubt whether there is anyone who would seriously question it, though several, less unambiguous issues are implicated in the question. I admit, though, that this need is voiced in different ways, less and more direct, by contemporary critics. C. D. Narasimhaiah, for instance, who has often advocated an Indian approach to English studies, phrases it this way:

The need for a common Poetic for Indian Literatures today is part of a larger realisation [,] since Independence, of the need to forge forward. On the other hand, thanks to a long period of colonial rule, we tended to look up to Western models—first English, then European—for our writing and look at Western literature exclusively through Western eyes, both of which led to a complacency which made us dependent on Western critical criteria and even values in dealing with our own literatures and inhibited exploration of viable Indian alternatives. (43)

In invoking Narasimhaiah, I am citing only one contemporary Indian English critic, though perhaps the most senior, who has consistently advocated an independent and indigenous critical outlook. Actually, this statement reflects the sentiments expressed in innumerable appeals, both within and without the academy, in favour of the revitalization, resurgence, and reform of Indian critical traditions in relation to the West. Such pleas are a part of what might be called the discourse of decolonization, whose beginnings may be traced to the very first native responses

to the emergence of institutionalized colonialism itself. In this discourse can be included most of our major thinkers, activists, and cultural figures in the last two hundred years or so.

This essay argues that it is in this broader intellectual tradition that our contemporary critical discourse needs to be located. However, I arrive at this conclusion in a somewhat indirect manner, through the examination of a key text of an American critic, John Oliver Perry, whose long and lengthy engagement with Indian literature over the last two decades has gone nearly unnoticed. It is only after a careful examination of the issues raised in his pioneering study *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism* (1992) that the kind of construction or recovery of tradition that I advocate can be effected fruitfully.

## II John Oliver Perry's "Absent Authority"

In India, immediately after a big book, there is usually a big silence. In the rarefied world of postcolonial academics, the intellectual air is usually thin. Consequently, a big book leaves us gasping. Or else we scurry to take cover, scrambling to repeat and domesticate metropolitan responses to the book. But if the big book in question is published only in India, there is no compelling or urgent reason to react to it immediately. A considerable period of time thus elapses before an adequate response emerges, before the Indian intellegensia brings itself to take note of its contents. Usually, however, such books are ignored, falling prey to the prevailing snobbish self-depreciation according to which only books published abroad really matter. By this logic, the "best" of Indian critics who, naturally, resort to Anglo-American publishers, disdain to contend with a book published in India, even if its author is an American. *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism*, then, lacks authority precisely because it is not published by a reputable Western publishing house or its agent in India. Thus will-nilly it participates in the very condition of postcolonial powerlessness and inconsequentiality which it tries to problematize and overcome; in other words, it falls prey to the very disease it tries to diagnose and cure.

Yet Perry's book is important. It qualifies as a landmark not only because it is the first book on the criticism of Indian English

poetry (that is, the first sustained exercise in metacriticism in the Indian context) and because it is so thorough, even exhaustive, but also because it raises some crucial issues. Of course, some might complain that it is repetitious and verbose, that a concentrated and compressed argument would have been more stimulating and effective, that its prolixity and egocentric untidiness rendered it unpublishable in the West, and so on. Some of this might be true, but Perry's desire to provide what he calls "an informative analytical description" and a history of contemporary critical debates perhaps excuses, if not necessitates, the garrulity. The repetitiveness is, at least partly, because several portions of the book were first published as independent papers in various, mostly Indian journals. So, for the present purpose, I would like to leave aside such criticisms.

Besides being the first book of its kind and so thorough in its coverage, what makes the book a significant intervention is its politics, pragmatics, and thematics. Taking the "immense diversity and dynamic inclusivity of Indian culture" as his base and noting the lack of "any prior authoritative tradition" (9) in Indian English criticism, Perry argues for a "reliable and responsible criticism of Indian English poetry" with "a more indigenous, if appropriately mixed, critical approach" (29). In trying to define such an approach, on the one hand, he rejects the "short-range hedonistic-pragmatic-capitalistic" aesthetic which we import from the West, as he does the older, phallogocentric, "Western Classical-Christian" tradition (33). On the other hand, he also rejects the classical Indian Brahminical tradition of literature as "authoritative law" (39) and its "harsh vision of a legalistic, ritualistic perspective on literature" (40). After departing from the Western and the Sanskritic traditions, Perry also distances himself from the third, "nativist" alternative. Here, he critiques the work of critics like G. N. Devy,<sup>1</sup> who in their search for local roots and alliances with the *desi* traditions, "succumb to distortions of perception and categorization that arise from seeking indigenous criteria in national and regional terms" (61). Thus, for Perry, a resultant situation obtains "in which 'absent authority' reigns both in India as a nation and society and in Indian English writing of poetry as well as criticism" (119). However, he

is not alarmed by this vacuum but sees in it instead "an opportunity for creating, not merely reviving or reconstituting from past sources, a 'contemporary tradition'" (49).

The challenge, of course, is in how to define the ingredients of this tradition. Here, Perry attempts his crucial distinction between "Indian" and "indigenous." He argues that "'Indian' and 'Indian-ness' are not concepts useful for literary discussion" because "Indian must be so polycentric in its referential meaning as to be ineffective as a definitive term; its only use is as a non-exclusive category" (111). Instead, Perry makes a case for "'indigenizing' or making one's own, versus 'Indianizing,' or attempting to be Indian in an authoritarian, absolutist way" (276). Perry defines indigenization as "a personally and culturally inward-turning creative process," which works "as a natural means of coping with the various senses of 'absent authority'" (36). What we are left with then is "a positive pluralist attitude" that is

not passively "tolerant" and "open," but active in defense of threatened diversities (as neo-conservatives are) and in pursuit of new developments (as modernistic liberals are). Containing and restraining within itself the potentially destructive strains between neo-conservatism and liberalism, the truly pluralist contemporary perspective resists making hierarchies of value-systems, and in that sense is relativistic, democratically pluralist in a levelling, non-committal sense. Yet this process can also defend the inevitable hierarchies within value-systems and can even judge which is the least oppressive among them, making sure that genuine openness to productive conflict and non-violent change is thereby protected. (216)

The best specific instantiation of such multiculturalism offered in the book is the remark that there "is room in Indian criticism not only for a self-contradictory India-lauding American but also a self-contradictory India-rejecting Indian" (192). Such then is Perry's vision of a pluralist, multicultural criticism for a multicultural, multidimensional, and multilingual India.

There is one more reason why I think this book is significant. Perry is not content with merely trying to develop an adequate and viable criticism for Indian English poetry. His concern is larger and overtly more political. He provides the crucial linkages between his indigenous aesthetic and a broader political agenda for independent, democratic India. Identifying three



major problems which Indian polity faces—"feudal bossism based on dominant castes," "lack of leadership accountability," and "non-accountability of the bureaucracy" (207)—Perry advocates a realistically responsible criticism that is sensitive to "the politically loaded issue of the cultural representativeness of Indian English poetry" (206). He champions "an open and fluid visionary model of 'another India,' which will "resist authoritarian domination" without "utopian idealism in search of cultural integration" (211).

Perry, moreover, is not unaware of the contradictions inherent in his role as "another foreign gatekeeper" trying to promote "indigenous, i.e., multiculturally Indian criticism" (190). He asks these questions: "How much does or can the present American critic's status and power distort the priorities set by indigenous critics? . . . Can't Indians arrive at the same evaluations independently and with more authority?" (190). Answering his own queries, he concludes, "Certainly my analysis and consequent suggestions for indigenous criticism have generally not been and should not be deplored as alien merely because of my alien origins" (191).

Before I offer my own responses to Perry's ideas, let me acknowledge my own misgivings on first reading *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism*. First, I was surprised that anyone would take Indian English criticism so seriously. Because we do not take ourselves seriously, we tend not to take seriously those who do take us seriously. Then ironically it felt as if this 422-page book, documenting the uses and advantages of absent authority, had in its own being undone its central argument by constituting itself into a powerful presence. Furthermore, with its repeated qualifications and explanations, I wondered how much scope or space did the book really accord to a development, refinement, or even a critique of its main positions? Or was the silence, such as I feared I myself might lapse into, a more appropriate, long-term response? Yet I understood quickly that a great benefit of this book is that it is the first substantial recognition and validation of Indian English criticism by a Western scholar. Alas, we have not reached the stage when we can dispense with the need for such recognition or

validation. The book, if nothing else, should encourage those of us who always look only to the West, to take ourselves and our own colleagues a little more seriously instead.

Furthermore, even at the risk of itself losing its tenuous connection with contemporary Anglo-American scholarship, this book does help to integrate Indian English criticism with the international critical discourse. However frail and temporary such a bridge might be, its significance cannot be denied because, normally, the two discourses do not speak to each other. *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism*, then, does not compromise the identity of Indian English criticism; it does not, moreover, erase the difference between Indian English criticism and Western critical discourse. We, the Indian English critics, wish to be seen and heard too, no doubt, but this has to be on our terms, not through mimicry or ventriloquism. Perry's book thus constitutes a genuine and meaningful intervention; it is an example of how "advanced" Western scholarship might attempt truly to "help" us in our own cultural praxis.

But despite these affirmations of appreciation, I must now say what I find wrong with Perry's whole formulation of absent authority. A general point of criticism would be that its most important concepts are not sufficiently elucidated or explained. Consider, for instance, the central idea of "indigenization." As I see it, Perry uses the word in one, very special sense. (According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, the word "indigenous" means "1. existing, growing, or produced naturally in a region or country; belonging (to) as native. 2. innate, inherent, inborn." The root word is the Latin "genus" meaning "birth, origin, race, species, kind." So "indigenous," in most cases, would be simply identical to Indian.) The special sense with which Perry endows the word—of making one's own—can only correspond to the idea of "production" implicit in one sense of "indigenous." Ordinarily the word would mean simply "native," that is, "not made Indian but already inherently Indian."

Thus, on closer examination, "indigenous" does not seem all that different from nativist or Indianist, both positions that Perry repudiates. But even if "making Indian" were different from "being Indian," the result is perhaps similar. Indigenization and

Indianization then imply very similar processes, even if there is a subtle attitudinal difference. Indigenization certainly appears less threatening, more individualistic, more flexible, more local, while Indianization seems to be connected with the larger project of nation, state, and country. Yet, when it comes to actual practice, they end up being quite similar. Let me illustrate with a hypothetical example. Would it be possible for an Indian critic to practice, say, a form of alien or alienating deconstructionism claiming that he has indigenized it? Would not indigenizing it mean also Indianizing it? Similarly, to assert that Coca-Cola and the British Council, to offer two totally unrelated and deliberately provocative examples, are Indian is as absurd as to say that they are indigenous. True, the contemporary Indian reality allows for—even privileges—much that is neither Indian nor indigenous, but that is no excuse to believe that every such artefact, idea, or trend, by its mere presence, ceases to be alien. What I have been arguing is that the distinction between indigenous and Indian is at best a flimsy one; a thing becomes Indian only when it has been indigenized and vice versa. It is to be expected that the actual processes of indigenization are likely to be very similar to processes of Indianization. To accept indigenization and to deny Indianization then would be tantamount to rejecting a variety of Indian identities. Such an evasion or erasure may be productive to some but not to all Indian critics.

Similarly, Perry's notion of "absent authority" is rather vague and self-contradictory. The word "absent" itself has at least two, different meanings: not-present and non-existent. If one is a follower of Jacques Derrida, then one would certainly celebrate absence, especially of the first kind. All authority then would be merely chimeral and elusive, foisted by the logocentricism of the metaphysics of presence and hence to be deconstructed for one's emancipation. The second sense would send—and has sent—alarm bells ringing in the minds of most thoughtful people. It suggests a cosmic moral anarchy which is susceptible to dangerous manipulations by cynical nihilists or power-seekers. Strenuous attempts have been made to refute such a lack of centre by reviving or revalidating several old and new moral centres, if not authorities, to counter it. The work of Michel Foucault, Edward

Said, Noam Chomsky, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Aijaz Ahmad, and others may be cited by way of examples.

In Perry's own book, the phrase "absent authority" is used in both these senses. Clearly, non-presence of authority is seen by Perry as a negative condition. It implies a condition in which Western imperialism directs the course of Indian criticism like an absentee landlord (119) or like a dead author, established critic, or ancient or modern theory used to control the production of textual meaning (391). Instead, Perry would seem to prefer a truly decentred world in which authority is not merely absent but non-existent. Such a condition would yield a correspondingly decentred (inter)textuality which would allow a contemporary—that is, ever-new—play of meanings and interpretations (35). However, such crucial distinctions between the two senses of authority are only implied, never clearly stated or explained in the text. Consequently, the fuller implications of Perry's ideas, which need to be worked out in detail, are not forthcoming. At present then "absent authority" remains a tantalizing concept, with hints of a cornucopia of hidden benefits, but without an actualization of its real advantages.

This lack of clarity at the crux of the text induces several related problems, of which I shall mention just two. First of all, Perry's agenda of positive pluralism and multiculturalism seems to contradict his celebration of the absence of authority. Second, it appears to negate the possibilities of any local, ethnic, or national identities. This fear of assuming an identity is best seen in his reaction against Indianness. At the same time, he is also opposed to the "supposedly liberated," atomized, fragmented, highly individualized search for "more and more frantic, marginal and insubstantial expressions of outward individuality" (215). Is not that a contradiction? One should not be local, regional, or national because that might be oppressive or chauvinistic, nor should one be irresponsibly and unconcernedly individualistic and hedonistic in the postmodern Western fashion. What then can one be as a practising cultural critic?

If Perry appears somewhat cryptic and abrupt in formulating his thesis, he is also somewhat casual and hasty in his elimination of available options in arriving at it. In his anxiety to disallow any

one position to dominate or usurp the vacant stage of Indian criticism, Perry seems to be a trifle summary and facile in his dismissal of available options. For instance, he attacks Sanskrit poetics for being hierarchical and authoritarian (189, 315-19) but no serious scholar is advocating its revival in its pristine form. It is generally recognized that the framework needs to be altered to suit our present needs. Krishna Rayan, whose four books on the subject demonstrate such modifications and alterations, would readily assent. So would K. Ayappa Paniker, who has lectured and written on Classical Indian aesthetics, repeatedly asking his listeners to re-read, even misread these texts creatively. Paniker says that if we took ourselves at least as seriously as the ancients did themselves, then we would quarrel with them intellectually instead of obeying them blindly. Such quarrels, reconsiderations, and misreadings are as much a part of our tradition as is an unquestioning obedience. An even more pertinent point in this context is that the ancient texts—as the late K. J. Shah was never tired of reminding us—are not being even coherently articulated for them to be properly understood, let alone rejected.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Perry is unable also to appreciate the arguments of R. B. Patankar, Bhalachandra Nemade, Devy and others who wish to localize their criticism to make it more meaningful.<sup>3</sup> The point is that not just that Sanskritists but nativists, and indeed Dalits, feminists, and other contemporary critics are all trying to find immediate and relevant contexts for their work. Their search may commit them to some forms of exclusionism or extremism, but it also gives them a sense of purpose and direction, which are so necessary in a postcolonial society. It seems to me that Perry's own ideas of indigenization will remain barren without these attempts to find a relevant critical ideology. It is not that I am opposing Perry's thesis in toto, but I am arguing only that its fulfilment lies in pursuing precisely the kinds of strategies that he seems to reject. Perry himself would appear to allow some use for what he rejects earlier because in a section called "Some Suggested Directions," he reopens the question of how Sanskrit, nativist, and other indigenized foreign critical traditions can be translated into a contemporary practice (306).

On the one hand, Perry's book advises us that we need not lament our lack of a critical tradition, that this lack can actually be turned to our advantage. This is a wonderful insight and one which should give us repeated succour. But, on the other hand, if our lack of a critical tradition is not a disadvantage, why do we continue to mourn this loss? Why have we not, even before Perry's suggestion, taken advantage of this absence by putting it to use? There may be a peculiar blindness which afflicts us, which renders us unable to apprehend the "objective" reality of our world, to turn our powerlessness and lack of authority to some positive use. Perhaps it is the obverse of the kind of blindness which makes it impossible for people in other parts of the globe to stop being imperialistic or racist. Both kinds of blindness are caused by the contradictions of our situations and times; more often than not, we are unable to free ourselves from their debilitating grasp.

The multiculturalism which Perry offers is similarly rewarding, even ennobling as a concept. But I am afraid it is the sort of solution which is "metaphysical," that is, purely theoretical, impossible to attain in practice. Even theoretically, it has some problems: how, for instance, can one be multicultural and yet Indian at the same time? Commitment to any one form of identity surely implies the suppression or denial of another. What we must work towards instead is the possibility of overlapping and multiple identities wherein one's being, say, Indian does not deny one's being also a male, a Maharashtrian, a Delhiite, an Indian English critic, and so on. All these identities, of course, derive from some fundamental notion such as that of being human in such a manner as not to oppress other living and non-living forms.

So while it is clear that Perry is very good at recognizing the dangers implicit in any kind of cultural commitment, he does not seem to be equally troubled by the ill-effects of a lack of commitment. While the atomism, mindlessness, alienation, anomie, and emotional trauma that are the consequences of such deracination are also deprecated, no convincing alternative is offered. The multiculturalism that he advocates then is tantamount to an infinite tolerance coupled with a lack of chauvinism. This is

certainly a state of mind to aspire to, but because its cultural coordinates are missing, it ends up being not much more than a laudable but empty concept, a *rechauffé* of old-fashioned liberalism, parading in a postmodern garb.

But it is not because of these difficulties that I find Perry's formulation unsatisfying. Rather, I believe that Perry's solution is too abstract, too removed from the ground reality of being a contemporary Indian English critic. In other words, the solution offered is ultimately not just idealized but also universalized—it can apply to anyone in any part of the world. In this sense, it is not inadequate or misguided, so much as inappropriate or misdirected. Instead, the solution we need is one which takes cognizance of the present realities, of the daily experience of frustrated directionlessness, of the material and pecuniary anxieties which seem to rob us of the dignity of our vocation, of the particular, unique, and, yes, postcolonial context in which we live and function as critics.

Ultimately, if I were to summarize my own dissatisfaction with this otherwise admirable book, it is this: the book lacks a sense of Dharma, of a wider, moral, aesthetic, and cultural perspective that can only come from the sense of belonging to a tradition. To belong to a tradition does not mean necessarily to be subservient to its authority; instead, I see tradition as providing a direction, a source of knowledge and values which can help us shape the future. The negation of all traditions does result in a radical liberation, but this is a liberation whose value is dubious and dangerous. To apply this logic to Perry, we know that the absence of authority that he exults in certainly has its advantages: it allows polysemy, a free play of competing and contradictory significations. But such moral relativism is also unsuitable to those who are looking for viable solutions to real-life problems. Perry's book, despite being so open-minded, ends up oppressing precisely because it hesitates to engage with contingencies of Indian criticism, insisting instead on felicitous conditions which approximate the impossible. Simply speaking, after dethroning all forms of existing authority, he does not seem to offer us real alternatives. The book thus does not satisfy, uplift, or even inspire; it provides no positive framework for criticism, no sense of

values or direction. What we need actually is not absent but responsible authority.

### III The Responsibilities of Indian English Criticism

As I hinted at earlier, Perry's book has made us, the domestic gate-keepers of Indian English criticism—to invert his own characterization of himself—sit up and take notice; usually, we are wont to drowse in a complacent lull instead of keeping vigil. One reason Perry's book took us by surprise is because I think it could not possibly have been written by an Indian at this time. I am not ruling out the possibility of an Indian's ever having written such a book in the next three or five years, but I think its release in the 1990s would have been unlikely. There is a complicated web of reasons for this inability, but I would point simply to the lack of an adequate infrastructure or institutional support and to the absence of a community of critics. This is not to imply that Perry wrote the book only because he had the institutional support; Perry's involvement with the subject goes back at least to the mid-1970s, when he came to India to edit a book on poets of the Emergency. His book also bears witness to his long, sustained, and often personally funded involvement in the field.

Yet I do not think he himself would deny the various kinds of institutional and personal support that he received for this project. Just to invert the situation, I wonder if it would be possible for an Indian to travel to the US over eight times during fourteen years, meet the major practising critics in America, give talks all over the country, publish in the leading journals, finish a book on contemporary American criticism, have it published by an established US publisher, and then participate in a seminar to launch the book, as was the case with Perry in India. These facts can be taken into account only if the material conditions in which criticism as an activity flourishes are foregrounded. Perhaps, it is the difference in these material conditions which enables a Perry—not an Indian—to write such a book.

For us in India, even meeting each other, reading each others' work, publishing regularly in our own let alone foreign journals, travelling to libraries in India, being invited to talk to students and colleagues even within the same city let alone in other parts



of the country are almost next to impossible. Besides, finding a publisher for a book on Indian English criticism is, as I can personally testify, exceedingly difficult. I am not claiming that institutional support would alone be sufficient to turn us into good or responsible critics, but I believe it would help considerably.

From an examination of the prevailing conditions, I would like to draw three related conclusions which have a bearing on critical practice in India. First, I would argue that it is not as if Indian English criticism is indeed characterized by a total absence of authority. There are presiding authorities such as the older, established critics—K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C. D. Narasimhaiah, M. K. Naik, for instance. There is also the somewhat backward authority of institutions like the Sahitya Akademi, the various university Departments of English, the major publishers like Oxford University Press (India), the print media with its assortment of amateur reviewers, and so on. Behind all of these is the ever present, though not direct, authority of the West, of its military, political, economic, cultural, and critical hegemony, often mediated in India through bodies such as the United States Information Service, the American Studies Research Centre, the British Council, Alliance Française, and the Max Mueller Bhavan.

Intellectual activity in a postcolonial society is perforce performed within such broad parameters of conformity and subordination. We tend to have a centralized, powerful, inefficient, and often corrupt state with its totalizing tendencies and its overall inferior position in the larger community of nations. The result is that our intellectuals suffer from a double complex: not only are we usually “inferior” to our Western counterparts, but our domestic position is also dubious. Compared to the former, we not only earn and produce less but, more important, whatever we say is automatically devalued or ignored in the world intellectual system.

At home, non-academic considerations usually take precedence over academic ones. What postcolonial intellectuals best understand and long for is real power and legitimacy. Yet, paradoxically, the former is opposed to the latter: to gain power,

intellectuals must resort to precisely those means which deny them legitimacy. It is not that cynical professionalism or power-mongering are absent in the metropolitan academy, but the urgency of their practitioners is greater here, inversely proportional to the extent of our real or perceived deprivation. So academics, on its own terms, is only for fools. Thus a certain anti-academic, anti-critical, anti-intellectual culture develops all over the country, which the authorities do little to curb or correct. When higher education is subverted for political ends and hijacked by those in power for personal profit, what obtains is not the absence but the abdication and, worse, corruption of authority.

The question really is not if authority is absent but if those vested with authority are performing their functions properly. I would not like to venture into an instant radicalism by advocating an overthrow of all these authorities. Nor am I going to make a claim that each of the existing wielders of authority is incompetent, inadequate, or corrupt. All I will say is that most of us, as practising Indian English critics, find ourselves increasingly dissatisfied and frustrated by the absence of avenues or forums for self-expression. Such an absence of recognition cripples us intellectually.

Having said this, however, I would now like to shift the focus of my dissatisfaction from the system to ourselves, its so-called victims. This is not because I naively believe that we can change the system if we wanted to. Indeed, I am constantly reminded that the system is averse to change just as the “authorities” are intolerant of criticism. In that sense, postcolonial intellectuals are pretty undemocratic: we do not really want to listen to each other; more often than not, if we are in power, we want to dominate, to rule unopposed. Yet I wish to focus not on the structural dynamics of authority in India, but on the real, albeit unnoticed authority that is actually vested in us.

In fact, from authority I should like to move to an alternative idea—responsibility. I contend that all of us, as practising Indian English critics, have a certain responsibility, even if we have very little authority. In fact, this paradox accounts for our dispirited

condition. Our lack of authority paralyzes us and makes us think we are helpless. But if we focus on our responsibility instead, we would get a more accurate notion of how much authority we really have. Then instead of surrendering even such little power as we do actually possess, we could try to maximize its utility and efficacy. Thus instead of crawling even before we are asked to bow, we will remain upright even if we are encouraged to bend.

What then is our responsibility as Indian English critics, teachers, intellectuals, and writers? And, in however varying degree, what is the amount of real power and authority that we could exercise, if only we lived up to our responsibilities? These are the questions which interest me.

It seems clear to me that our responsibility is to recognize, first of all, our tremendously privileged position as members of a hypereducated elite in India today, however ineffectual we might consider such an elite to be. About half the country is illiterate; even those who are literate cannot be said to be educated in any significant sense of the term. Of these, even fewer are intellectuals. And of these intellectuals, very few teach at colleges and universities as we do. It is as if 900 million Indian people have, in effect, mortgaged or entrusted their intellectual rights to us. We are thus, against or with our will, the trustees of India's intellectual wealth. We hold this great treasure and resource as its custodians, to protect it, enrich it, augment it. It is our responsibility to see that it is not sold off cheaply in the international marketplace (where the rupee is so weak); it is likewise our responsibility to ensure that we ourselves are not bought off cheaply in the same marketplace.

I would have agreed with Perry's celebration of absent authority in a perfectly egalitarian, perfectly just, perfectly open world order in which each individual was free to move wherever he or she wished to and would be guaranteed a fair recompense for his or her talents. But in an unequal and hierarchical society such as ours, to take refuge in postmodern indeterminacy or free play would be, I submit, to shirk one's share of the national burden. We who are so privileged have to recognize our responsibility towards those who are not. To claim to be powerless, emasculated, postcolonial subjects, with no purpose, direction, or goal

would be utterly futile, even dishonest. To do so would be to cop out, to deny all the advantages that we enjoy, to renege on our social debt—in a word, to cheat ourselves and to break an unwritten but real pledge.

It is now time to define, more specifically, what the responsibility of Indian English critics might be—even if I do so deliberately in traditional terms. The system of *purusharthas* enjoins an appropriate Dharma for each person. The conventional manner of defining this was the *varnashrama* system. Today, we may not believe in *vama* (caste) or *ashrama* (the concept of four stages of life) but we cannot dispense with Dharma; moreover, I believe that one's profession can certainly be an adequate substitute for *vama*. Thus, we have a Dharma appropriate to our own profession as teachers, scholars, critics, and state-supported intellectuals. We have a Dharma to safeguard the intellectual property of this country, though we need not define it in a narrowly patriotic, statist manner, but rather in a pluralistic, civilizational matrix. We have a duty to develop systems and institutions necessary to allow our culture, with all its diversity and richness, to flourish. Moreover, the discharging of the duties of teachers, especially, imposes upon us a very heavy moral responsibility. However corrupt other professions become, a country cannot afford corrupt teachers. If that happens, they will, willy-nilly, teach and exemplify corruption and thereby destroy the whole of society.

Besides, this professional Dharma, there is also a *yugaDharma* and *swaDharma*—a Dharma for the age or epoch and a Dharma for us as unique and discrete individuals. Each of us has to find these for himself or herself, but surely in our age they would include working for peace on earth, for the protection of all its living species, for the conservation of the environment, for a more equitable international order, and for our individual perfection—moral, ethical, social, and spiritual—as human beings. For our individual perfection, the combined and conjoint pursuit of *artha*, *kama*, *moksha* is thus still a valid means.<sup>4</sup>

The second lesson I wish to draw concerns what we lack and what Perry possibly has—the infrastructure and institutional support to enable genuinely valuable research, and the train-

ing to translate such support into productive work. Today, we may criticize the West for lacking a moral centre, for being confused, hedonistic, rapacious, decadent, even, ultimately, self-destructive. We may criticize its tremendous successes for the great price that it (and its victims) have to pay to achieve them—it is almost as if in transforming itself to its present prosperity, the West is in real danger of losing its humanity. I myself have found great meaning and solace, though no pecuniary rewards, in being a critic of imperialism, capitalism, modernity, racism, and sexism, as found in the West. Of course, I know and always remind myself that there is another face to the West as there is an oppressive, imperialistic, caste-ist, sexist, face to India itself. Moreover, I must admit that there is much in the Western modernity that I myself want—some of the efficient systems created by modern technology and the mental framework needed to run them.

The West, as I have said, may not have a moral centre, but it has enormously powerful and efficient systems to articulate even this lack. It is these systems we want, with the moral direction which our own civilization gives us. This may be an impossible combination besides being a self-deluding ambition. But we cannot deny that one of the main aims of our fifty-year-old country has been development, especially economic, even if it is not exactly on Western lines. If the nation's agenda is economic transformation, our own agenda involves the strengthening of institutional supports, systems, and forums to make our academic activity stronger and more independent. This needs much careful planning and thinking, plus governmental will and action, and cooperation on a national scale. These macro-decisions may be outside our sphere of influence, but we certainly have specific nation-building or developmental responsibilities vis-à-vis this larger agenda. Anyone who is a teacher in India knows how difficult it is to sustain one's faith in one's profession in the face of so many daily obstacles and difficulties. But to survive and to continue to believe in our profession, to maintain our dignity and integrity, and over and above this, to participate in some meaningful intellectual production is itself obviously not an insignificant achievement.

The third conclusion has to do with an agenda of critics and criticism. From the foregoing analysis of the conditions in which we live and operate, the agenda for us as critics should be quite clear: first, to survive, even flourish, as individuals and intellectuals under adverse postcolonial conditions; second, to recognize our objective positions in our hierarchical society and in the larger Western-dominated world order; third, to perform a function commensurate with our privileges and responsibilities in our own society, without succumbing to the temptation of trading our independence in exchange for pecuniary blandishments; and, fourth, to do our bit towards institution building and nation building. All of this involves a complete release of our energies from our routine and unavoidable irritations and their redirection and sublimation in a more satisfying, empowering, and enriching cultural praxis.

The agenda for criticism likewise may consist of the following: to preserve and conserve our cultural diversity and usable past; to resist foreign and domestic hegemonies; to work towards an empowerment of domestic critical traditions and practices; and to make criticism more political and socially responsive as befitting a democratic country.

I cannot elaborate on the ways and means of actualizing this agenda here, but I think it might be possible to speak of broad strategies. If what I have suggested is one of the viable ways in which we can define our responsibility as professional critics and intellectuals, then what we need is an effective, though not authoritarian, leadership, a system of guidance and encouragement, which enables us to maximize our contribution to the world and allows us simultaneously to enrich ourselves and our environment. In other words, as practising critics, we need a critical theory which integrates our reading and interpretation of individual texts with a larger national and international agenda. If what we do does not seem important on its own terms, then we need to attach it to what we truly consider to be important. Simply speaking, we need to find our own ways to intervene in what we see as our most important personal, regional, national, and international crises.

#### IV Constructing a Modern Indian Critical Tradition

To return now to the questions I raised at the beginning of this essay: do we need a modern Indian tradition in criticism? Do we have a modern Indian tradition in criticism? And what should be the shape of a modern Indian tradition in criticism? The answer to the first question ought to be amply clear: of course, we need a modern Indian tradition in criticism. The answers to the other questions are more problematic.

I have shown how Perry's idea of a "contemporary tradition" for Indian English criticism, however attractive, has its problems. The stress on contemporaneity frees the critic from obligation to or oppression by both the Western and the Indian past. Indeed, such a liberation is necessary for a flowering of a truly new, creative, and meaningful criticism. Yet, the contemporary would have to be not just new but ever new, always wedded to the present, always deconstructing even its own past even as it emerges from such a past into its timeless presence. But such contemporaneity would be a mystical experience—for lack of a better phrase. It can be practised in the manner in which we live, from day to day, moment to moment, empty of the burden of tradition, as J. Krishnamurti would have us live. But how appropriate is it for criticism?<sup>5</sup>

Criticism, it seems to me, is a communal activity, one which has broader cultural, social, political, even national dimensions. For criticism to flourish the co-existence of several corporate factors—such as institutions, journals, and some form of state patronage—is necessary. Hence criticism always functions within structural restraints and parameters. It certainly needs a past, a tradition, and a direction. Perry himself is aware of this because he uses the phrase contemporary tradition to characterize the kind of criticism that he advocates. But the moment the contemporary becomes traditional, it constitutes itself into an authority. When a certain body of such texts builds up, then we have a fairly effective and powerful means of self-expression and survival.

That is why I would argue that there does exist, for lack of a better word, a modern Indian critical tradition from Rammohun Roy to Gandhi, through Sri Ramakrishna, Dwarkanath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Madhav Govind Ranade, and Gopal

Krishna Gokhale; and from Gandhi, through Vinoba, Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), and even Ashis Nandy, to the present. The construction and constitution of this tradition may be varied to suit our cultural politics. Indeed, Jyotiba Phule, Pandita Ramabai, B. R. Ambedkar, and the “Others” excluded from the upper caste, male, dominant Hindu tradition ought also to be included in it. Similarly, a tradition of modern South Asian Islamic thought can be posited, with its various versions, convergences, and divergences. Such traditions, with their numerous contending strands, ought to form the bases of contemporary Indian English criticism; it is by aligning ourselves to them that we can end our isolation and inefficacy.

A certain kind of viable, contemporary, and modern tradition, such as Perry is calling for, then, already exists—if only we want to and know where to look for it. I have myself compared it to the mythical river Saraswati, which flows not so much out there, but inside us, whose discovery works like alchemy, enabling us to become invincible against not just the West but against the oppressions of our own pasts.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, no contemporary criticism can be effective if it does not simultaneously question existing hegemonies from both the West and from our own past.

I would like to conclude by extolling the virtues of the “via media” or the middle way, which not just the Gita and the Buddha but several other “authorities” in various parts of the world have recommended as the most appropriate for most people. Steering between the anarchy of a totally relativist pluralism and the oppressive, hegemonizing rhetoric of universalism, what we really need is a criticism that is unoppressive and democratic, but which still has a local, regional, national identity. This would be a criticism that is supple and yet strong, profound and yet not rigid. As a sort of traditionalist, though of a critical kind, I invoke in my closing sentences the two qualities which were once expounded to me as the defining characteristics of the *Bharatiya parampara: kutastha niti* and *pravaha niti*. Indian tradition is both unchanging and deep like a well, but also ever-flowing like a stream; it has both a continuity and a dynamic at the same time; it is cumulative and accommodative, with a momentum of its own, and yet provides scope for new directions; it is well-defined and



yet pliant. What is more, it is a total system of signification which, paradoxically, even predicts and anticipates its own breakdown. This is evidenced in the notion of Kaliyuga, the Age of Kali, in which Dharma undergoes a general collapse and is known only to a few, wise souls, who keep it alive.

## NOTES

- 1 Devy's *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (1992), published the same year as *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism*, went on to win the Sahitya Akademi award and become one of the most discussed texts in recent Indian criticism. Devy has followed its success with an even more ambitious sequel published recently, *"Of Many Heroes": An Essay in Literary Historiography*.
- 2 See Rayan's *Sahitya: A Theory for Indian Critical Practice*, the latest of his books, for instance. In this book, he advocates Dhvani as the criterion of literariness. Paniker made that remark to me when we were lecturing together at a Refresher Course; he was speaking on Classical Indian aesthetics, while I had to "cover" postmodernism for our audience of college teachers. For an introduction to the fascinating work of K. J. Shah, see "Philosophy, Religion, Morality, Spirituality: Some Issues."
- 3 For a discussion of the work of these critics, see Paranjape's *Nativism: Essays in Literary Criticism*.
- 4 Such are the cardinal ends of human life according to Hindu traditions. *Artha* signifies wealth and power; *kama*, pleasure and desire; *dharma*, moral conduct and cosmic order; and *moksha*, liberation and release. So, the pursuit of wealth and power are to be checked by moral conduct and cosmic harmony, and the pursuit of pleasure and desire is to be curtailed by the drive towards liberation and release.
- 5 For an introduction to the life and thought of Krishnamurti, see Jayakar, *Krishnamurti: A Biography*.
- 6 See my use of this metaphor in "On Raja Rammohun Roy's Response to the West" 237.

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