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***Literature Survey*: 2**

RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AND THE CONTESTING CIVILIZATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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The following is a review essay on Gerald James Larson's book *India's Agony over Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995, pages xiv + 393).

1. The Nature of the Agony

Independent India, after throwing off the yoke of almost a century of British colonial rule, was faced with the dilemma of determining what direction the country would take; what kinds of sacrifices would be required from its citizens; and what sort of political, social and economic transformations would allow this ancient civilization to take its due place among the respectable nation-states of the world. While at least four thousand years of civilizational history were there to draw upon, the sediments of the Indian traditions were both deeply rich and deeply diverse. The challenges of keeping the religious, ethnic, regional, linguistic and social plurality of the Indian heritage alive and vibrant within the new political and geopolitical framework of nationalization and globalisation proved to be fraught with challenges, complexities and conflict. G. J. Larson's recent work *India's Agony over Religion* undertakes a thorough and informed examination of how the pluralism of India's heritage has affected its varying national identities and contemporary social and political struggles. As the title suggests, this work deals with the religious crisis (or crises) in contemporary India. It seeks to identify a deep connection between modern and ancient strands of

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thought and culture by way of seeing through the complexity of India's cultural heritage, the sources of which are as multiple as they are varied. Larson's argument is that a sustained study of these historical heritages is necessary to see the current crises in a fresh light (x). He contends that not only are there multiple sources and layers of India's cultural and intellectual heritage, but that most of these "layers of culture and history are operating in contemporary India ... as present-day living traditions demanding to be heard in the current struggles to shape India's future" (x).

In essence, the opening chapters (2 and 3) provide a "historical overview," an accurate but decidedly cursory one, of India's rich cultural and historical past. Larson's aim is to bring out the "broader dimensions" of India's history by locating what he calls the "Old" and "New" Indic formations. These classifications draw out the prescient differences while highlighting a continuity of a sort in the historical progression of what India has been. These are the aforementioned "layers" of the South Asian civilization and cultural traditions. They include "Old Indic Formations" such as the Indus Valley Civilization, the Indo-Brahmanical, the Indo-Sramanical and the Indic (Hindu-Buddhist-Jain) as well as the "New Indic Formations" which include the Indo-Islamic and the Indo-Anglian dimensions.

Chapter 4 deals with the heart of the matter, namely an attempt to locate the "essence" of Indian civilization with respect of the "discontinuities" explained in previous chapters. Chapter 5, the longest of all, addresses among other things, "India's hybrid discourse of modernity." It highlights eccentricities of the notions "religious," "secular," and "citizen" in Indian usage. It ends with a discussion of five major religious crises facing India today, applying the foregoing analysis to explicate the contemporary issues. The conclusion suggests recommendations for a possible solution to these crises.

The work is crafted to be useful for non-specialists, especially with its lengthy explorations into "the depth of India's religious crisis and its historical antecedents" (xi). However, the technical discussions and jargons concerning Indian philosophy and religions may not do much to keep the attention of a non-specialist intact, and Larson himself admits that the technical philosophical analysis he invokes is at times "rather dense and difficult." Despite his best intentions to lay out Indian philosophy in precise, simpler terms, Larson assumes some knowledge on the part of the reader as well.

2. The Agony of Being Incoherent

Before we proceed to discuss the heart of *India's Agony*, it must be said that Larson has taken a bold step in trying to contextualise the problem in such a wider historical sphere. In identifying the "problem," to use a simple word, Larson unmasks deep-seated "contradictions" inherent in the composition of the thick-layered cultural traditions of contemporary India. Among the most striking and notable of these is the notion of hybridity. Although no one should be surprised to see multiple strands of culture at work in Indian history, the way they are linked to India's deep past, on the one hand, and are shown to be operating in contemporary movements and in the contestation of religious identities, on the other, is refreshingly challenging. It is in this aspect that Larson's main contribution may be located. These hybrid identities turn out to be conscious and deliberate as a living proof of India's resilience in the face of multiple influences. Perhaps, it is the immense capacity of the mantle of Indian civilization to absorb in its thickness and "permanences" all that is different, which allows the hybrid to appear as indigenous over time.

Thus, as Larson reiterates, there is no essence of Indian civilization, but rather, emerging out of the five historical periods enumerated above, there is a "certain distinctive kind of ongoing conversation or cluster of conversations about the salience of certain diverse, even contradictory cultural values" (143). He goes on to ask a question that thematises the problematic: "How is it possible to maintain a reasonably stable community over time in a context of mutually contested values" (143). The premise that a stable civilization cannot be sustained without some sort of axiological continuity leads Larson to conclude that "the deep and substantive coherence in Indian history and civilization is in the ongoing conversation itself that cuts across or spills over the boundaries of periods and groups and provides, finally, an all-India dialogue" (143).

A proposed "sketch" of India's ongoing conversation is offered based on selected "frameworks of meaning" or "semantic fields" within and between which religious and philosophical issues were enjoined by various contesting parties in each historical period. This is done with the qualification that India's systems of thought taken together do not present us with an essence of values, but rather with Wittgensteinian “family resemblances” (145). The dialogue and confrontation that emerge from Indian history do not present the same themes over and over again varying only in manners of expression, but “overlapping themes” that allow us to cogently compare, contrast and classify them (145).

Larson proposes an innovative way to carry out the classification of the different periods of thought and religions in Indian history. He makes reference to the notion of *abhāva* or “absence” that was employed by the classical Naiyāyikas, and Navya-Nyāya since Vācaspatimiśra to explain relations between certain phenomena. There are in this scheme four kinds of absence. The first is called *prāg-abhāva*, or “prior absence,” which one can say of particular phenomena before their material creation. The next is called *atyanta-abhāva,* or “absolute absence,” which characterizes putative phenomena that in material or logical reality cannot possibly exist, such as a “round square” or “the son of a barren woman.” There is also *anyonya-abhāva* or “mutual absence,” which is a relation between distinct phenomena, such as between a jar and a tree; the locus of a tree having the absence of a jar, for example. Finally, we have *pradhvāṁsa-abhāva,* or “consequent absence,” which is said to be the mode of a material phenomenon after its destruction. Larson notes further that these four kinds of absence are sometimes reduced to two kinds, namely, *samsarga-abhāva*, “absence of relation,” which includes the strictly material prior, absolute and consequent absences, and *anyonya-abhāva,* which is a logical mode of absence. This methodological approach provides us with a new analytic tool for identifying and classifying things, as it “enables one to speak about an object, or tease out what an object is, in terms of what it is not” (147). Larson commits himself to making special use of the notion of mutual absences in classifying the “family resemblances” that can be found to exist in the periods of Indian intellectual and spiritual history (148).

For purposes of brevity, we shall simply reproduce the chart Larson constructs contrasting the different characteristics of the major periods of Indian philosophical and religious history, and then clarify what these contrasts entail. The chart assumes that under the “Old Indic” forms of thought are included the historical periods identified earlier as the Indus Valley, the Indo-Brahminical, Indo-Sraminical, and Indic, while under

"New Indic" forms we should include the Indo-Islamic and Indo-Anglian periods. The chart contrasts these periods according to their ontologies, epistemologies, psychologies, social anthropologies and theologies.

Indian Frameworks of Meaning
(Larson, Table 4.1, page 161)

Old Indic	*New Indic*
1. Ontology	
- no separation of mind-body, thought-extension	- separation of mind-body, thought-extension
- indeterminate ultimacy (*nirguṇa*)	- determinate ultimacy (*saguṇa*)
2. Epistemology	
- no separation of reason experience	- separation of reason and experience
- cognitive frustration	- cognitive certainty
3. Psychology	
- no separation of birth and rebirth	- separation of birth and death
- intra-personal plurality	- individual person or believer
- diachronic ontogeny of more than one life	- single life experience
4. Social Anthropology	
- no separation of person and person	- separation of person from person
- interpersonal plasticity	- individual person in community
- synchronic phylogeny of hierarchical ranking	- historical existence

5. Theology

- no separation of divine and human	- separation of divine and human
- cosmo-theology of polymorphic unity	- theology of monomorphic multiplicity and certainty

Larson repeats in several places the caution that what he is offering in this work is only a “preliminary sketch” of the contrasts that these different periods, the “Old India” and the “New Indic,” exhibit, since there are many qualifications and nuances to be taken into consideration with regard to each of the characterizations of thought systems falling within each particular period listed in the chart, as well as blurry boundaries between the Old and New Indic which have seen a great number of “overlapping” themes (160). With this qualification in mind, we can briefly explain the contrasts between the Old and New Indic under each of the categories in the following ways.

The Old Indic schools of Nyāya, Sāṁkhya, Yoga and Vedanta held the mind to be more or less physical, leaving no distinction between mind and matter, while at the same time, in Sāṁkhya, Yoga and Vedānta, as well as Buddhism and Jainism, there is a sharp distinction between the concrete world of determinate phenomena and an indeterminate principle (*puruṣa*, *Brahman*, *kevala*, *nirvāṇa*) which is seen in various ways as the goal of the religious life (149-150). The New Indic ontologies, in contrast, separate pure Platonic ideas or the abstracted *cogito* from the phenomenal world, and their respective theologies tend to separate a determinate form or realm of pure, eternal existence (God, heaven, abstract rationality, etc.). Epistemologically, the Old Indic traditions made no room for a separation between reason and experience, as evidenced in Nyāya’s logical use of “empirical examples” (*dṛṣṭānta*), the doctrine of all the schools of event-centred cognitions, although they do generally agree, as in Sāṁkhya and Vedanta notions of ignorance, that empirical experience properly analysed turns out to be fundamentally uncertain (151-52). The New Indic epistemologies, on the other hand, put great amounts of faith in pure reason, *a priori* knowledge, scientific realism, or the determinate revelation of God in the Torah, the Qur’an or the Bible. In the realm of psychology, the Old Indic strands of thought viewed the individual as born with certain dispositional tendencies or "traces" (*saṁskāra*, *vāsana*) inherited from the karmic effects of previous lives, and, thus, individual identity was the result of a process that transcends the present life (*saṁskāra*) (153). The New Indic period sees life, on the other hand, as limited to the present individual existence, and so only its free choices and self-determinations have moral consequences for society and the individual's religious fate. In the Old Indic period, social life is ordered according to caste distinctions (as in the case of Indo-Brahminical and Indic categories) and monastic distinctions (as in Indo-Sraminical groups such as the Buddhists and Jains). In both, however, the individual is only a part of a more largely integrated social whole, and, thus, there is no clear-cut distinction between persons as such (154-55). In the New Indic period, however, we have the equality of all believers in the *dar al-islam* and an overriding focus on individualism, personal rights and citizenship in the Indo-Anglian state, both of which idealize the integrity of individuality (154-55).

Finally, in the Old Indic schools, whether they were the believing Vedic Brahmins or the Indic Devotionalists or the atheistic Sraminical Jains or Buddhists or the Sāṁkhya and Mīmāṁsā Indic philosophers, gods could always intervene in human affairs, become incarnate, or evolve into the natural world as a whole, or alternatively, *ajīva* matter was filled with *jīva* souls, or *saṁsāra* and *nirvāṇa* were the same (158-159). In any event, there was, for them, no absolute separation between the human world and the divine. The New Indic period, on the other hand, insisted on the clear-cut separation between God and the world in the religions of Islam and post-Reformation missionary Christianity (158, 160). Taken together in the qualified and general sense in which Larson has presented these contrasts, the differences between the "conversational themes" in the Old and New Indic periods are "dramatic and fundamental" (160).

Understanding the fundamental contrasts in thought and themes between the Old and New Indic periods offers boons to both the scholarly investigation of Indian thought in the West, as well as to a more general, deeper understanding of the ongoing conversation and conflicts of Indian civilization. Larson cites the "endless articles and books on 'Saṅkara and Bradley' or 'Saṅkara and Hegel'," and dismisses any equations that might be made between Indic philosophical views such as those of Vedānta and Yogācāra and German Idealistic systems (162). After all, distinctions that hold for New Indic philosophical appropriations such as Idealism are "simply absent" from Old Indic philosophical themes, and this makes it fundamentally and methodologically illegitimate to analyse and explicate the latter in terms of the former. More importantly, however, is the lesson that neither the Old nor the New Indic strands of thought (or spirituality) constitute "essences." They are, each in their turn, rather contributors, bearing certain "family resemblances," in "the ongoing conversation regarding the nature and future of India as a civilization-state" (162). The Old Indic traditions, merely because they are more ancient and putatively more native – though they are still present in the Indian life and need to take their full place in this "ongoing conversation" – cannot by any means be construed as the "foundation" or "essence" of India to satisfy some conservative representations of national identity. Similarly, even though the "New Indic" traditions are latecomers, and "aggressive and strident" latecomers to the subcontinent at that, they can neither be rejected as irrelevant intruders to Indian civilization nor idealized as the modern, progressive future of the country, rendering its more traditional forms of culture obsolete. The New Indic patterns of thought and faith have after all been part of India's life for centuries now, so rather than privileging or rejecting them they should be full partners in the living multi-logue of the culture (163).

Larson's conclusions about the partnership of the Old and New Indic forms of Indian culture in the "ongoing conversation" of the civilization are certainly welcome. This metaphor of "conversation" is made all the more satisfactory when one considers that, during the Indic period, the favoured form of religious and philosophical dissent was the debate. Entire handbooks on the rules, etiquette, conditions of victory and defeat, and kinds of debate were found on all three of the religious traditions of the Indic period, and the various schools of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain philosophies continually refined this art through confrontation with one another and in conformity with the continued innovations in logic that all the schools were putting forward. This most remarkably civil form of religious and philosophical disagreement of the Indic period could serve as a fruitful and more peaceful model for the future of this "ongoing conversation" of Indian civilization.

There seems no reason to overly quibble with the contrasting distinctions Larson posits between Old and New Indic worldviews and values, given the insight and care he has invested into justifying and qualifying the classifications he suggests. There is something odd, nonetheless, about Larson's introduction of *abhāva*s or "absences" as a methodological tool to contrast Old and New Indic forms. There may be something attractive about using an Indian philosophical tool for characterizing relations in the analysis of Indian history, but in this case, it seems the attractiveness of this attempt is much greater than the validity in applying it. Larson claims that the similarities between schools of thought and religion within the Old and New Indic periods do not constitute "essences," but rather are "family resemblances" in the Wittgensteinian sense. He goes on, after presenting his chart of contrasts between the Old and New Indic, reproduced above, to assert that the "absences of separation" between reason and experience, person and person, the divine and the world, and so forth, are the "counterpositives" (*pratiyogin*) of the doctrinal features of the New Indic period (160). In the Navya-Nyāya, however, mutual absence (*anyonya-abhāva*) is determined by the identity (*tādātmya*) of the substances involved in the given relation. That is to say, the identity (*tādātmya*) of an object is defined as the mutual absence of its counterpositive (*tādātmyasaṁbaṁdha-vacchinnapratiyogutako 'bhavo nyonyabhāvah*). Put simply, the relation of "mutual absence" that Larson wishes to use to compare historical doctrines was actually used within the Nyāya logic to compare concrete particulars. Furthermore, these particulars were thought to have their own "essences" (*tādātmya* = "that itself") partly by virtue of the fact that they were not the *loci* of whatever other substances that were not identical with them. Absences traditionally conceived could not compare mere family resemblances, much less doctrines of historical religions or philosophies, which are not thought by Larson to be homogeneous essences, but rather pluralistic agglomerations. So the attempt to use absences as they were formulated and employed by Navya-Nyāya in an analysis of Larson's kind is simply not methodologically appropriate, at least not without a complete reformulation of the idea of "mutual absence," a reformulation Larson does not offer. Even were this not a problem, it could still be asked: what sort of sense can we make of the claim that what gives New Indic forms of thought and religion their identity, or what confers "family resemblances" on them, is the absence of corresponding Old Indic ideas from them? The identity of historical forms of thought cannot merely be conceived as the absence of other forms of thought from them. Larson's attempt to locate a quasi-logical "coherence" to India's "conversations" of Old Indic and New Indic periods in this way smacks more of a project with Hegelian, rather than Indian, assumptions. In our view, Larson needs to seek out more cogent methodological foundations for his picture of the history of Indian thought.

3. The Dialectic of the Current Crises

Finally, the analysis of the five religious crises "currently unfolding" in India (226; note that the work under review was published in 1995) is made possible by way of Larson's deeper discussions of Old and New Indic formations. These crises include the conflict arising out of the Sikh demands for Khalistan; Kashmiri Muslims' struggles with respect to issues of autonomy and separation from India; the Shah Bano case and the Muslim Women's Bill of 1986; the controversy surrounding the treatment of OBC's (Other Backward Classes) and the Mandal Report; and, finally, the most important of all, the Ayodhya crisis and the destruction of the 16th century mosque by Hindu nationalists. Larson gives excellent historical, political and ideological background and recounting of each of these major events, and explains each in terms of the Old Indic/New Indic paradigm which the earlier chapters have elucidated. The Sikh demands for Khalistan, for instance, are illustrated as an uneasy dynamic of the search for synthetic religious harmony at the foundations of Sikh faith with the pressures of progressive stages of New Indic nationalisms under the Mughals, the British Empire and the Independent India. The current economic and political difficulties with OBC's are also manifested as a dialectic of the ancient, paternalistic inclusivism of Old Indic Brahminical culture with the New Indic recognition of individual rights within the modern state. The Ayodhya crisis, in turn, is also a struggle of identities between the Old Indic in both its Brahminical and Devotional strands, which insists on the equivalence of modern Indian national identity with traditional "Hindu" values and the New Indic religious, axiological and political claims of the Islamic civilization. These modern crises, it is Larson's contention, simply cannot be understood without recourse to a comprehension of how the Old and New Indic "conversation" which constitutes contemporary Indian civilizational heritage, and informs modern issues such as "secularism," "communalism" and India's unique self-understanding of its "nationhood."

In this contention, we believe Larson is certainly right. A great deal of abundantly helpful light can be shed upon the contemporary problems and religio-political and social conundrums of India. However, we wonder whether Larson's reflective approach, thematised in this historical/analytic fashion, for all its manifest merit, can lead by itself to productive solutions. Larson claims that the Nehruvian vision of a secular India has basically failed, as its only two responses to the demands for respect from various Indian religious communities have been either complete cave-in or militaristic suppression (291). Larson adduces that, with the proper historical conceptualisation of how India's ongoing cultural conversation has resulted in the "hybridisation" of modern discourse he has offered, it needs to be accepted that religiosity in India has to serve as the basis for a revisioning of South Asian society as a "confederacy" of faiths, and so be conceived as the foundation for community rights, universal justice and a multi-religious state (292-300). Larson is careful to point out that the future of India is for the country's people to decide, and that what he offers here are nothing but tentative insights into "new beginnings" (292). It is doubtful, however, whether Brahmins in the "Hindi heartlands" are likely to see themselves anytime soon as embodying an "Old Indic" order, that India's one hundred twenty million Muslims understand their identity as more closely historically connected with the modern Indo-Anglian period, that even the state envisions itself, after the BJP takeover in the mid '90's and the recent Congress victory in the spectacular 2004 elections, as the secular tamer of the religious masses. While there may indeed be substantive validity to the perspective that India's religious communities have historically complicated sedimented identities, it is their self-understanding, and not rarefied academic schematisations of those identities, that have directed the mass social movements of the nation in the last hundred years and continue to do so, as the recent ransacking of the Bandarkar Institute in Pune amply demonstrates. We are left with the question of whose understanding of India's identity will help whom to accomplish what with India's future?

Despite these reservations, it is undeniable that Larson's *India's Agony over Religion* is indeed an erudite, complex, and robust inquiry, which confronts a series of challenging issues facing India today. Overall, it is provocative, thoughtful and deserves praise for taking up the mighty task of understanding "hybrid" discourses of modernity. In closing, it is hoped that the conversation Larson has initiated continues at various levels, as the future of India heavily depends on the "on-going debate not unlike the one that has always been unfolding through the centuries" (292).