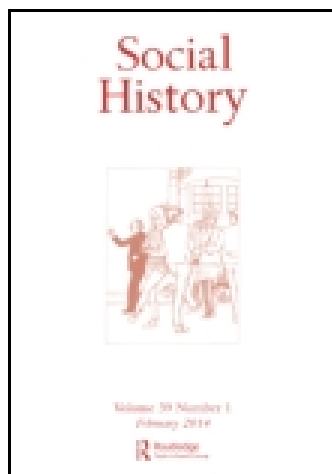


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### Between the political and the non-political: the Vivekananda moment and a critique of the social in colonial Bengal, 1890s-1910s

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Prathama Banerjee

# Between the political and the non-political: the Vivekananda moment and a critique of the social in colonial Bengal, 1890s–1910s

This article falls somewhere in between social history and political philosophy, two popular modes of enunciating the *political* that is in currency today. Social history presumes that we already know what the ‘political’ is and can intuitively grasp it in contradistinction to the economic, the cultural, the spiritual and the affective: that is, in contradistinction to the non- or not-yet political. I, however, want to question precisely this apparent self-evidence of the political – a self-evidence which derives either from the identification of the political with the modern state and party-form, or from the over-determining generality of the political in modern-day imaginations of ‘everything is political’. Political philosophy, on its part, asks the theoretical question ‘What is the political?’ It seeks to work out the answer, once and for all, in the form of a philosophical resolution in the realm of thought. Before political philosophy, then, history appears as a narrative of normative ideal-types – the story of liberalism, secularism, socialism, democracy and such – into which heterogeneous histories of thought, action and life are made to fit (or not). I restate the philosophical question ‘What is the political?’ as a historical question – namely, what becomes the political and how, in a particular time and place – such that the political itself becomes amenable to re-theorization.

It is in this spirit that I write the story of renunciation in colonial India to raise the question of the contingency of the division between the political and the non-political. I refer to a time when the familiar disciplinary divisions between politics, society, culture and economics were yet to be fully secured and self-evident in the colony. It bears mentioning here that by the end of the nineteenth century, three political orientations had emerged in Bengal, as in India more generally – that of economic nationalism (which critiqued colonial resource extraction policies), social reform (which demanded rights for different social groups and progressive social legislation) and cultural nationalism (which asserted the constitutive difference of the nation’s language, culture and civilization). These political orientations – through the mediation of colonial modern knowledge-forms – in time went on to consolidate the respective categories of the economic, the

social and the cultural. South Asian historiography broadly sees the social and the economic as realms of liberal politics and the cultural as ground for militant nationalism.<sup>1</sup> In this formulation, the political appears to surface through the work of either the economic or the social or the cultural. It is here that I see renunciation as a distinctive moment when there was an effort to wrest, even momentarily, the purely political from the grasp of all the three modern categories of the social, the cultural and the economic. I call this a moment of *institution* in the sense that this was an ‘originary’ or at least an early moment, when the division and distribution of properties between the political and the non-political were still unsettled<sup>2</sup> – so that the question here was whether spirituality was proper to the political, and whether spirituality could lend a unique intensity to the political by exceeding the social and cultural orientations of contemporary politics.<sup>3</sup> Thus my attempt is to write a history of the political by showing up the mutual constitution of the political and the non-political: namely, by bringing to bear upon the story of the political the surplus or supplement that gets necessarily generated in modern times as modes of purely social or cultural or spiritual or affective being. Such an attempt inevitably destabilizes the political itself, even as it seeks to specify it.

This article argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, renunciation – as act and idea – emerged as critical to the imagination of the political in Bengal. I base this proposition on a reading of the iconic ascetic figure of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), though I must clarify right away that this is not his story as such. I demonstrate how the ascetic figure, as well as the renunciatory act, assumed a general criticality at this time and informed contrary political forces, such as of nationalism and socialism, Hindutva and Gandhism, casteism and anti-casteism. I also try to indicate how renunciation came to be elaborated in philosophy and literature, as well as life. I argue that the renunciatory mode was precisely what produced the ‘political’ at this moment, by becoming an embodied critique of the state-centricity of ordinary politics on the one hand and the ‘social’ orientation of reformism and progressivist activism on the other.

After all, renunciation is generally understood as a religious matter, and, therefore, not quite proper to the domain of the political. As such, renunciation appears as a retreat from rather than an affirmation of the political, given that modern politics is defined by publicity, activism and deep worldly involvement rather than by reclusivity, renunciation and non-attachment. If, however, one demonstrates the political relevance of the renouncer as a figure, as in the context of colonial Bengal, then the risk is that one might end up demonstrating once more the dangerous mix of religion and politics that is conventionally seen to prevent the rise of the purely and properly political in backward

<sup>1</sup>Bipin Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (Delhi, 2004 [1966]); Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Delhi, 2008); Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago, 2008); Christopher Bayly, *Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Rancière, ‘Ten theses on politics’, *Theory and Event*, v, 3 (2001).

<sup>3</sup>In this, I partially differ from Partha Chatterjee’s argument about the inner and outer domains in his *The Nation and its Fragment: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi, 1994), 125–6.

societies. The risk becomes even greater if one invokes Vivekananda, who is seen – by both secularist social historians, such as Sumit Sarkar, and trenchant critics of secularist modernity, such as Ashis Nandy – as a modern and rationalist figure who reinvented Hinduism for purposes of an aggressive and masculinist nationalism.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this article, therefore, is precisely to thwart such an easy reading of what I call the ‘Vivekananda moment’ and, consequently, open up the conceptual question of what is the political.

To be clear, I dwell not only on the ascetic as a figure, but also on the act of renunciation as such, foregrounding what became a foundational question regarding the political at this time – namely, is the political a specific mode of subjectivity or is it a particular mode of action. In other words, I show that renunciation in colonial Bengal embodied the basic tension out of which the political emerged – namely, the tension between the political as subjectivity and the political as action. Clearly, the nature of my question is very different from the question of secularism and religion, which is the framework within which the Vivekananda moment has been studied in South Asia. I feel that it is anachronistic to read into Vivekananda, whom I shall argue was actually quite resistant to nationalism, the late twentieth-century appropriation of Vivekananda by the Hindu right. I therefore dwell on the Vivekananda moment, in all its contemporaneity, complexity and contrariety, as an unresolved moment open to many future histories of the political.

Further, I must clarify here that I am not so much interested in Vivekananda and his ideas. Given that Vivekananda spoke in public much more than he actually wrote, I feel that an ‘intellectual’ history of Vivekananda as ‘thinker’ would not be quite appropriate. In fact, when reading his collected works – which include his systematic writings but also his innumerable speeches and letters – Vivekananda poses diverse and often contradictory statements. In addition, many later appropriations of Vivekananda by utterly distinct, even contrary, political forces throughout the twentieth century – revolutionary nationalists, Hindu militants, socialists, communists and, indeed, caste critics – further suggests that Vivekananda is not quite amenable to ‘content analysis’ in the simple sense of the term.<sup>5</sup> However, what is interesting is precisely that Vivekananda seems to be in the nature of an unresolved moment – a moment that makes Vivekananda vulnerable to multiple political appropriations as well as criticisms. My purpose, therefore, is to interpret Vivekananda – his words, acts and personhood – as a difficult and expressive performance. In that sense, I read Vivekananda as literally an embodiment of the moment that I am seeking to open up to historical interpretation. I avoid reading Vivekananda primarily as a ‘thinker’, in the way that political philosophy asks us to do, because I feel that thought is but one among many practices that claim to constitute the political, and must therefore be studied alongside other modes of being, acting and feeling the political – approaches often taken up by social historians.

<sup>4</sup>Sumit Sarkar, “‘Kaliyuga,’ ‘Chakri’ and ‘Bhakti’: Ramakrishna and his times’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxvii, 29 (18 July 1992), 1543–59, 1561–6; Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi, 1983), 24–5.

<sup>5</sup>Such content analysis only leads to irresolvable debates over whether Vivekananda was pro-caste or anti-caste, pro-women or anti-women, pro-Muslim or anti-Muslim. See Narasingha P. Sil, *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment* (Cranbury and London, 1997).

## THE CONTEXT OF COLONIAL DICHOTOMIES

At the very outset, it is important to note that the question of the political emerged in Bengal under the dominance of two colonial binaries – the social versus the political and knowledge versus practice. Modernity came to the colonized as first and foremost political modernity, inaugurated through conquest. In late nineteenth-century Bengal, therefore, many sought to placate the experience of political defeat by trying to disavow the political itself, arguing that India's history lay not in the vagaries of the political – that is, in the rise and fall of states – but in the deep continuities of *samaj* or indigenous social life. Some, most famously the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), even argued that the political was an essentially conflictual mode of being peculiar to the West and therefore foreign to a people committed to the primacy of the social.<sup>6</sup> But then, denying the political was also the ruse of the colonizer. After all, the legitimacy of colonialism depended precisely on disguising the fact of conquest. Modernity triumphed, it was argued, purely by virtue of money and reason, capital and knowledge, products of an evolved society rather than of political contingency. Indeed, this precisely was the seduction of modernity, the promise that the colonized too could become modern, and so politically sovereign, but only when it could prove to have socially evolved – that is, when it could demonstrate care towards the woman and the Shudra (the low caste), the two signs that marked the historical–temporal stage of a 'backward' Indian civilization.

In other words, the social–political binary emerged here in the form of a conceptual impasse. Having withdrawn self-consciously into the social, as opposed to the colonial–political, the colonized intellectual was now hard put to mobilize the social imperative as different from yet at par with the colonizer's political competence. The early response, we know, was to generate a momentum of social reform in India. By the late nineteenth century, however, nationalists such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) in Maharashtra argued that social criticism was a grave political error because it invited the colonial regime to meddle in the nation's autonomous social domain.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, caste radicals such as Jyotiba Phule criticized the upper-caste, upper-class prejudices of social reform, by arguing that the national social was precisely the site of caste and gender conflict in India, which only extra-national forces, such as the colonial state, could legislate against.<sup>8</sup> Caught between these two redeployments of the social, the question of appropriate practice in the late nineteenth century had to engage with two difficulties at the same time. It could not simply own up to the political, because it appeared as the technology of the colonizer; nor could it ensconce itself in the social, because it was always already conflicted and fraught.

The question of the political also foundered over the other defining binary of the times – namely, the knowledge–practice binary. Colonial power rested on a claim to abstract, context-free, universal knowledge, which was contrasted with supposedly classificatory

<sup>6</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bharatbarsher Itihas' (1902) in *Rabindra Rachanavali*, IV (Calcutta, 1940), 382–4.

<sup>7</sup>Tanika Sarkar, 'Rhetoric against the age of consent: resisting colonial reason and the death of a child wife', *Economic and Political Weekly*

(4 September 1993), 1869–78; Biswamoy Pati, 'Nationalist politics and the "making" of Bal Gangadhar Tilak', *Social Scientist*, XXXV, 9/10 (September–October 2007), 52–66.

<sup>8</sup>Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and Politics in Modern India* (Delhi, 2009).

and empirical Oriental knowledge and sensuous and symbolic primitive knowledge.<sup>9</sup> This colonial claim to universal knowledge, eventually, resulted, in the field of education, in the triumph of the Anglicists, Utilitarians and Evangelists over the Orientalists in India and the replacement of vernacular as well as classical learning by strictly English education for Indians.<sup>10</sup> This made redundant the very question of whether western ideas suited a non-western society. For if certain universalist ideas appeared to mismatch with indigenous practices and customs, it was henceforth the rationality of practice that would be put to question, rather than the generalized applicability of ideas. To the colonized, therefore, knowledge and practice appeared estranged in a new and unprecedented way, not because there was always a generic gap between idea and act, but because from now on, knowledge appeared as the *a priori* of practice, rather than simply coexistent with it.

There was another side to this universalist knowledge-claim of the colonizer – the argument that western knowledge was superior not just *qua* knowledge, but because it generated the most valid forms of practice. Apparently this was not the case with Indian knowledge-systems, which generated either irrational social practices or simply caused a withdrawal from practice into a personal quest for *moksha*, or liberation from the cycle of life. The dominant colonial and missionary critique of Indian religions was not just that they were superstitious and idolatrous, but that they were inferior precisely because they failed to generate a social ethic like that of Christian charity and therefore fundamentally disabled public action. The workings of the social/political and knowledge/practice binaries thus made the question of practice uniquely fraught in colonial modernity. This predicament of practice would come to haunt the idea of the political for a long time to come in Bengal. As a result, there grew in Bengal at this time a general ambiguity with the notion of practice itself.

#### THE VIVEKANANDA MOMENT

Framed by this vexed question of practice, there arose in turn-of-the-century Bengal the notion of renunciation. This was the period around the 1890s–1910s –after the time of social reform movements and immediately before the rise of nationalist mass politics – when many intellectuals debated notions of appropriate practice and appropriate subjectivity for the colonized. It is important to remember that these discussions did not always explicitly invoke the political. The talk was often of religion, spirituality, culture, nation, civilization and such, thereby prompting today's historians to read these debates primarily through narratives of reformism/revivalism, nationalism/culturalism, communalism/secularism and so on. I suggest, however, that to reduce these debates to issues merely of culture, religion, community, and indeed nationalism itself, is to miss out on what was a rather significant moment in the history of the political, namely, the moment when questions of action and agency were thrown theoretically open by the colonized.

<sup>9</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1822; reprinted Cambridge, 1975); Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. & trans. David Carr (Evanston, 1970), 280–3.

<sup>10</sup>Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir, *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist–Anglicist Controversy, 1781–1843*, London Studies on South Asia, vol. 18 (London, 1999).

Indeed, the ways in which the political was owned up and yet simultaneously disavowed at this time are particularly crucial to our discussion of the Vivekananda moment.

Critical to our story is the rise to prominence of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda, originally Narendranath Datta, was born to a middle-caste Kayastha family in Calcutta and lived initially the unremarkable life of a moderately well-off (at least till the death of his father), middle-class, college-educated young man, who read diverse authors such as John Stuart Mill, August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, William Wordsworth, G. W. F. Hegel and Immanuel Kant. He was even known to have written to Spencer with some criticisms of his evolutionary social thought.<sup>11</sup> These were the usual set of western thinkers that the Bengali middle classes engaged with in this period, as did Vivekananda himself. In 1881, however, he came in contact with the rural Brahman mystic, Ramakrishna. After great struggle with the idiosyncratic persona of Ramakrishna and his version of ecstatic devotion to Kali, the goddess of destructive primal force, Narendranath was fundamentally transformed – though not at all in the image of his master Ramakrishna. He became a *sannyasi* (ascetic) and with fellow brothers set up a monastic order dedicated to spiritual cultivation, readings of Indian and western texts, and taking up physical labour and service of the poor and the sick. Soon, however, Vivekananda embarked upon a seven-year-long journey across the length and breadth of India as an ascetic traveller. He spent some of this time alone, in solitary contemplation, travel and sometimes even starvation. At other times, he studied with traditional scholars, while living with the poor, the low caste, native princes and urban elites. Eventually, he set out for the USA on a daring journey without much resource or contact, where he grabbed the attention of the world as speaker in the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. His return to India was met with tremendous enthusiasm, though also with some criticism from theosophists and missionaries on the one hand, and the Hindu orthodoxy on the other. Vivekananda died young, but by that time he had set up the Ramakrishna Math, an extant monastic institution today, travelled extensively across India, England and America, and spoken and written substantially, becoming in the process one of the most well-known political-cum-spiritual icons of modern India.<sup>12</sup>

Vivekananda embodied in his own self a struggle, and perhaps a partial reconciliation, of what can broadly be understood as three traditions – western intellectual, pre-colonial intellectual and rural–popular. With all three, Vivekananda engaged with difficulty and intensity as befitted the colonial condition. Vivekananda also embodied in his own self the mutual imbrication of the spiritual and the political, each imperative pulling against the other and yet by that very detractory move animating each other. It was this that made Vivekananda such an intense and troubled figure. He also embodied a tension between reclusivity and publicity – a tension that produced renunciation as specifically a modern political moment rather than as simply a question of the general human condition. Finally, Vivekananda also enacted, literally, a specific kind of double address – one directed towards the West and the other directed towards his own people, the colonized.

<sup>11</sup>G. S. Banhatti, *Life and Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda* (New Delhi, 1989), 6–7.

<sup>12</sup>Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (Calcutta, 1982); Rajagopal

Chattopadhyay, *Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography* (Delhi, 1999).

This double address produced the effect of an equipoised and equanimous self quite distinct from the nationalist subject.

Vivekananda came into prominence at a time when the dominant idiom of practice in Bengal, and India, was that of *karma*. Most famously put by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, in his 1888 text ‘Dharmatattva’, *karma* was meant to be desireless practice, without expectation of immediate success or personalized reward. *Karma* was not only an ethical proposition but also an historical judgement about the colonial–modern times, seen as unfree, hostile and generally non-conducive to just and effective practice. In times like these, it was argued that the only way to act was in an untimely way, that is, with indifference towards consequences.<sup>13</sup> *Karma* as desireless practice was also commonly posited as critique of interest-based liberal understandings of the political. As is well known, this particular understanding of practice was constructed out of a reinterpretation of the ‘*ma phalesu kadachana*’ couplet of the *Bhagavad Gita* – a couplet which said that one had a right to act but no right over the fruits of one’s actions. This was a couplet, though rarely referred to in pre-colonial *Gita* commentaries, which came to be the defining couplet of the *Gita* in colonial–modern times.<sup>14</sup>

I shall not dwell on this modern significance of the *Gita* here,<sup>15</sup> and I only refer to what I think was a crucial move in the rethinking of *karma* as practice in colonial–modern Bengal. This was the move of pitching *nishkama karma* or desireless action as *sannyas* or renunciation – but renunciation not in the earlier sense of a total critique of the world but renunciation as a mode of inhabiting the world itself. In other words, *karma* was pitched as a modern, worldly, active and yet unattached mode of being. As Bankimchandra said, *nishkama karma* was *sannyas* in the very heart of the world and the household.<sup>16</sup> By this move, renunciation was doubly rescued from the colonial accusation of being other-worldly and from being conditioned upon, as in pre-colonial times, a rigorous and ascetic secession from common life. Vivekananda did share this sensibility of renunciatory practice as constructed out of the *Gita*. And yet, he made quite a different move. He sought to retain and redeploy the stronger ascetic connotation that renunciation had in pre-colonial times – not so much in opposition to the worldly mode as a prior condition for it. Vivekananda posited renunciation as the condition for return to and re-engagement with the world, precisely after renouncing it. This was a way of owning up to the world that was specifically counterpoised to the social mode of inhabiting the world. While Vivekananda did invest in the idea of desireless *karma*, in his discourse on the *Gita* at the Alambazaar

<sup>13</sup>Bankim Chattpadhyay, ‘Dharmatattva’ (1888) in *Bankim Rachanavali*, II, ed. Jogesh Chandra Bagal (Calcutta, 1954), 591.

<sup>14</sup>We find numerous reproductions of the *Gita* and of this particular *sloka* from the late nineteenth century onwards. See Shibaji Bandopadhyay, ‘Atha Ma Phaleshu Kadachana’, *Anushtup*, (Autumn/Puja issue, 2006), 1–233. In the nineteenth century, there were 28 English *Gita* translations and 44 Bengali ones. By 1959, there were 132 English and 152 Bengali ones! See Winand

M. Callewaert and Shilanand Hemraj, *Bhagavadgita: A Study in Transcultural Translation* (Ranchi, 1983).

<sup>15</sup>For a discussion on the *Gita* in colonial modernity, see Nagappa Gowda K., *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse* (Delhi, 2011) and Shrutu Kapila and Faisal Devji (eds), ‘The *Bhagavad Gita* and modern thought’, special issue of *Modern Intellectual History*, VII, 2 (2010).

<sup>16</sup>‘Dharmatattva’, *op. cit.*, 571.

Math in 1897, he zeroed in on a couplet other than the popular *ma phalesu kadachana* one – ‘There is no sin in thee, there is no misery in thee; thou art the reservoir of omnipotent power. Arise, awake, and manifest the Divinity within.’<sup>17</sup> Addressing monks, Vivekananda was clearly articulating the possibility of an extraordinary purified, ascetic, anti-social self acquiring power akin to God’s own. In this sense, he was seeking to replace the self-ironic writerly mode deployed by late nineteenth-century colonial intellectuals, such as Bankimchandra himself,<sup>18</sup> with a performative idiom of self-mastery and power proper to a renouncer.

Interestingly, Vivekananda was one of the earliest public figures in Bengal and India to mobilize the figure of the ascetic Buddha as ideal, in distinction to the admittedly more popular and politic figure of Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>19</sup> According to him, Buddha refused his own personal *moksha* many times over, so that lesser creatures in the world could first be saved. Additionally, Buddha acted without the comfort of belief in a personal god or a personal soul. Buddha, the ‘perfect agnostic’, in other words, was the first and most effectual public figure in India.<sup>20</sup> Also, history showed that the rise of Buddha’s renunciatory ideal and the rise of politically effective imperial power in India (i.e. of the Maurya king Ashoka) were simultaneous.<sup>21</sup> Despite his repeated refusal of the political label, Vivekananda clearly saw renunciation and political agency as closely related. For example, he states, ‘[m]onk and king were obverse and reverse of a single medal’;<sup>22</sup> and in another place as saying, ‘what the world wants today is twenty men and women stand in the street yonder and say that they possess nothing but God’.<sup>23</sup> It is hard to miss the strange similarity between this notion of the ascetic who possesses nothing and the communist notion of the revolutionary proletariat who too possesses nothing and therefore is constitutively political!

It is easy to slip immediately into reading all this as a mark of Hindutva, i.e. of a potentially militant Hindu nationalism that instrumentalized religious ideals in order to create a nation out of diverse and conflicting class, caste and territorial groups. But let me propose an alternative argument here, namely, that once we take Vivekananda out of this teleology, it becomes quite apparent that his renunciatory mode – his particular moment, so to speak – was not easy to harness to nationalism. In order to argue this I put Vivekananda in a genealogy of the political, while resisting the collapse of the political into the national, even though to a historicist eye, these were indeed overwhelmingly nationalist times.

<sup>17</sup>‘Thoughts on the *Gita* – I’ in Amiya P. Sen (ed.), *The Indispensable Vivekananda* (Delhi, 2006), 151–7, 157.

<sup>18</sup>Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (Delhi, 2002), 34.

<sup>19</sup>This was the time of the ‘rediscovery’ of the Buddhist moment of Indian history. Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* came out in 1870. Rajendralal Mitra published *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* in 1882.

Aghornath Gupta’s 1882 *Sakyamuni Charit o Nirvanatattva* was the first vernacular text on Buddha. Girish Ghosh’s play *Buddhacharit* was commercially staged in Calcutta in 1885.

<sup>20</sup>Vivekananda, ‘Religion: the true basis of moral life’, excerpted from ‘Practical Vedanta IV’, London, *Indispensable Vivekananda, op. cit.*, 148.

<sup>21</sup>Sister Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him* (Kolkanta, 1910), 161.

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*, 152.

<sup>23</sup>*ibid.*, 30.

## OTHER HISTORIES OF RENUNCIATION

Before going further, however, one should note that even though today the *sannyasi* appears fully integrated into a Brahmanical imagination of Hinduism, there is much evidence of the historically uneasy relationship of the renouncer with both Brahmanical and kingly power in earlier periods of Indian history. For example, William Pinch shows that in pre-colonial rural India, monks, belonging to various heterodox sects, were a common and critical political figure. Often armed warriors, reckoned with by kings and landlords, monks were also the centre of mobilization of lower-caste peasants, who emerged as political blocs in the form of dissenting religious groups or *sampradays*, transforming the power dynamics of the northern and eastern Indian countryside in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Early colonial power had to engage politically and militarily with these monks as part of its project of ‘pacifying’ the countryside. The ‘political *sannyasin*’ therefore emerged as a disturbing and threatening figure in the colonial records, and would remain so well into the twentieth century. Tellingly, in colonial–ethnographic rendering, the peasant claim to being divinely ordained warriors or Kshatriyas, often led by an ascetic, rather than to being cosmically created slaves or Shudras, showed up as signs of upward social mobility rather than as instances of political action. And in nationalist historiography, the *sannyasi* showed up as a ‘communal’ figure because he worked through the sectarianism of the *sampraday* rather than through the unity of the national social. And yet the figure of the *sannyasi* continued to inform – in greatly changed but persistent manners – the modern imaginations of the political in India.<sup>24</sup>

Pinch persuasively argues that M. K. Gandhi, even in colonial perception, was legible in terms precisely of this familiar combination of humble peasant and simple monk. Gandhi’s simple garb, his spare meals, his *ashram* or sanctuary, his celibacy, his daily routine of meditation, prayer and service, and his non-violence – all evoked ideals of religious asceticism and rural simplicity, and allowed, I would add, a renewed ‘politicization’ of poverty, patience and suffering within modernity. Interestingly, hundreds of *sannyasis* attended the 1920 Indian National Congress meeting in Nagpur, whom Gandhi invited to spread the message of non-cooperation in the countryside.<sup>25</sup> It is important, however, not to focus solely on Gandhi and the Gandhian version of disciplined and non-violent asceticism, which is what we often do under the sway of Gandhi’s exceptionalist image. Instead, we should note that there were other modes of renunciation too in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that competed with Gandhi’s. Thus, there was Swami Sahajanand Saraswati (1889–1950) in Bihar, who broke publicly with Gandhi in the mid-1920s on the basis of his vision of a Vaishnava obligation to serve the oppressed peasant through ideals of caste equality and social reform.<sup>26</sup> There was also the earlier ascetic figure of Sri Narayanaguru (1856–1928) in Kerala, who mobilized the low-caste community of the Izhavas in the late nineteenth

<sup>24</sup>William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996).

<sup>25</sup>*ibid.*, 4–5. Also see William Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge, 2006).

<sup>26</sup>*Sahajanand on Agricultural Labour and Rural Poor: An Edited Translation of Khet Mazdoor*, ed. and trans. Walter Hauser (Delhi, 1994).

century through a dissident interpretation of Vedanta, a school of early Indian philosophical thought.<sup>27</sup>

All this is to argue that Vivekananda's reworking of renunciation as appropriate practice under colonial modernity was not quite a maverick position. However, while all this might imply a general amenability to the political mobilization of the renunciate in turn-of-the-century Bengal, Vivekananda's argument was not merely a reiteration of a pre-colonial tradition of political and militant monks. The existence of such a tradition surely made Vivekananda's position more easily intelligible. But the nineteenth-century context added other dimensions to the question of renunciation. For one, popular discourses on the *kaliyuga* (the age of decline, or the dark ages) made explicitly moral arguments at this time about the excesses and pleasures of colonial modernity,<sup>28</sup> which might have rendered to the renunciate a renewed and modern kind of legitimacy. After all, even Gandhi's status as Mahatma depended greatly on his minimalist and ascetic lifestyle, tied to his 1909 *Hind Swaraj* critique of western civilization as consumerist and excessive.<sup>29</sup> But more important to me is the other question that inflected the notion of renunciation at this time – namely, the question of the social.

#### CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIAL

My argument is that in the specific context of the 1880s and 1890s, Vivekananda formulated renunciation as neither a moral–ethical position vis-à-vis the excesses of modernity nor as a heterodox position in the pre-colonial and early colonial mode. He formulated renunciation as a privileged position of critique vis-à-vis the social. In Bengal at this time two layers of meaning accrued to the term social. One was derived from the contemporary use of the English term society (as opposed to the state). The term used for society in Bengali was *samaj*, which additionally retained the pre-colonial trace of the term *samaj* as caste-based hierarchical order. As we know, from the early nineteenth century onwards, middle-class, upper-caste, literate men enacted political modernity in Bengal through the question of reform and rationalization of social practices. Debates around various social practices – especially around questions of caste and gender – occurred, broadly, along the lines of a face-off between revivalists and reformists, conservatives and progressivists. Needless to say, in its very structure, this debate had reached a kind of dead-end by the turn of the century. It is in this context that Vivekananda appeared on the scene, and angrily spoke of the contemporary reform/revival debate as shameful and fruitless.<sup>30</sup> In a direct critique of Utilitarian ideas of public good and happiness, Vivekananda argued that ethics of public action could derive only from a spiritual and not a social ideal:

<sup>27</sup>S. Omana, *Sree Narayana Guru* (Trivandrum, 2005); Udaya Kumar, 'Self, body and inner sense: some reflections on Sri Narayanaguru and Kumara Asan', *Studies in History*, XIII, 2 (1997), 247–70.

<sup>28</sup>See Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (Delhi, 2006), chap. 1.

<sup>29</sup>M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>30</sup>'The right approach to reform', *Indispensable Vivekananda*, *op. cit.*, 102.

Any system that wants to bind men down to the limits of their own societies is not able to find an explanation for the ethical laws of mankind. The utilitarian wants to give up the struggle after the Infinite . . . as impractical and absurd, and in the same breath asks us to take up ethics and do good to society. Why should we do good? We must have an ideal. Ethics itself is not the end but the means to the end. If the end is not there, why should we be ethical?<sup>31</sup>

In Vivekananda's formulation, society was a transient and contingent human construction. There was nothing sacred or eternal about society. In fact, he went so far as to say that society itself was a passing phase in human history. In the future, humans might possibly learn a more evolved and encompassing form of togetherness than the merely social.<sup>32</sup>

Nivedita (1867–1911), the Irishwoman turned Vivekananda disciple, further explained in her work entitled *The Master as I saw Him* (1910) that Vivekananda maintained all social customs to be arbitrary.<sup>33</sup> According to her, only by acknowledging this could one even begin to approach society with empathy. Society must be approached through neither the strict watchfulness of the reformer nor the blind complicity of the conservative, but the patient and indulgent eyes of a poet.<sup>34</sup> In Nivedita's reading, as an ascetic, Vivekananda saw society neither as object of reform nor as repository of tradition. Instead, he brought a poetic relationship into play vis-à-vis the social, which could thematize both the beauty and the suffering of the social being even while showing both up to be utterly contingent. Speaking of his own campaign plans, Vivekananda said that the social reformer behaved like a philosopher to a drowning boy – lecturing him while forgetting to step into deep waters to rescue him! 'Our people cry', he said, '[w]e have had lectures enough, societies enough. . . . Where is the man who really loves us?' Having thus invoked love, Vivekananda, almost in the same breath, goes on to talk of 'political sanction'. Addressing the reformers, he goes on:

First create the power, the sanction from which the law will spring. The kings are gone, where is the new sanction, the new power of the people. Bring it up.<sup>35</sup>

Vivekananda is known to have said that the modern state – the faceless, impersonal, empty structures of bureaucratic government and legislative authority – was particularly unkind to the poor, because, unlike in the times of kings, the poor no longer had access to an embodied ruler whose mercy and discretion could be called upon.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, Vivekananda was making two simultaneous yet apparently unconnected moves. He was implicitly arguing – by invoking love or poetic empathy – for a particular orientation towards the social that could only be assumed by one who had no stakes in society and, therefore, no relationship of necessity with it. At the same

<sup>31</sup>'Religion: the true basis of moral life' in *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>32</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Nivedita was born Margaret Elizabeth Noble, and met Vivekananda for the first time in London in 1895. By 1898, she had moved to India and became Vivekananda's

disciple. He soon gave her the name Nivedita, meaning 'dedicated to God'. See Sister Nivedita, *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 5 vols (Calcutta, 1955).

<sup>34</sup>Nivedita, *The Master*, *op. cit.*, 111.

<sup>35</sup>'The right approach to reform', *op. cit.*, 102.

<sup>36</sup>Nivedita, *The Master*, *op. cit.*, 71.

time, he was arguing that the legitimacy of a political form lay not in its abstract or normative constitution but in its intelligibility and accessibility to common people. Presumably, the renouncer answered to both these demands – in his being indifferent to the social and also in his being, unlike the modern state, embodied and proximate to the poor. In other words, Vivekananda was struggling to enunciate a political position, which was other than that of both the state (which reformists invoked) and society (which the conservatives invoked). To my mind, it is here that one can fleetingly glimpse the instituting moment of the political that I am trying to capture.

Let us read this in the context of the familiar history of western political thought. We know that the seventeenth-century rise of the absolutist state in Europe reinvented the political imperative as something above and outside the social, thus making possible the invention of society as an ordered and governable field. This was also a pre-condition to the rise of the social sciences, of Comte's sociology, of demography, social statistics, social reform, and eventually Herbert Spencer's imagination of the purely social organism. The state–society binary made possible, in other words, the political–social binary in Europe. This tradition of political thought was quite familiar to Bengali literate men of the late nineteenth century, including Vivekananda. In the colonial context, however, it was clear that the state–society binary produced a political impasse. Here the state appeared as a foreign imposition – inadmissible both as the location of a nation's political self and as the conceptual counterpoise to *samaj*. The renouncer, on the other hand, offered an alternative non-state mode of distancing from *samaj*. The renouncer was able to critique society by *a priori* giving up stakes in it and yet refuse to align with the colonial state apparatus, as did the social reformers and the Indian National Congress. In other words, the renouncer in Vivekananda emerged as the political axis, which was neither the locus of the state nor the locus of the social. It was indeed an escape from the social–political binary that colonialism had imposed on the nineteenth-century colonized.

#### RENUNCIATION AND NATIONALISM

Renunciation in Vivekananda was thus a complex configuration. In what way did this produce the political at the turn of the century? The conventional reading is as follows. Vivekananda modernized and homogenized Hinduism and thus made it national. With him, the figure of the Hindu ascetic became a rallying point around which nationalist passions surged. This politicization of the figure of the ascetic produced the possibility of renouncing personal interests for the sake of the nation. It also inspired at times the actual sacrifice of life by individual revolutionaries. It is true that this militant Hindu nationalism was one of the legacies of Vivekananda. However, my argument is quite the opposite. I argue in this concluding section that the possibility of the political emerged in Vivekananda precisely at the point where he resisted nationalism.

Vivekananda's greatest burden, as we have already seen, was to argue against the social orientation. Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842–1901), one of the most prominent social reformers and economic nationalists of the nineteenth century, had said that the ascetic could never be an effective public activist because he had no

experience of real life, having renounced society itself. He was addressing the Indian Social Conference, the body which the Indian National Congress had set up as the space for social reform separate from the space of politics. Vivekananda sharply retorted by saying that history showed that in all ages and lands monks were the most militant, because they acted without any sense of 'recompense' or 'putrid duty': that is, without any economic motivation or social stake.<sup>37</sup> No less imperative for Vivekananda, however, was the argument against culturalism and nationalism. Nivedita, who tried more than anyone else to translate Vivekananda into nationalist terms, recalls Vivekananda's relentless struggle against nationalist sentiments and patriotic anger. Vivekananda insisted that an ascetic must resist attachment to country and history in the same way that he resisted thoughts of home and family. The *sannyasi* must be an ascetic and only that, and remain equidistant from all races, societies and cultures.<sup>38</sup> He must be an impersonal 'witness' rather than 'for or against India' and thus avoid what we call today the politics of *ressentiments*.<sup>39</sup>

Nivedita had ruefully to admit that if Vivekananda was a nationalist he was so in spite of himself – for 'of the theory of this [nationalism], he was unconscious'.<sup>40</sup> Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (1872–1945), a writer, editor and patron of Bengali revolutionaries, also complained that Vivekananda failed his followers, by refusing to become their political leader and ideologue.<sup>41</sup> Vivekananda even shocked nationalists by saying: 'None deserve (sic) liberty who is not ready to give liberty. Suppose the English give over to you all the power, why, the powers that be will hold the people down, and let them not have it. Slaves want power to make slaves.'<sup>42</sup> Clearly, for Vivekananda it was the project of equality rather than that of nationalism that was relevant. He saw that nationalism as such could constrain the equality principle, because the latter could be posited not through community and difference but only through the enactment of a universal human condition. Hence his performance of a double address to the West and to fellow Indians – a double address by which he rendered equivalent the two questions of equality among Indians and equality between the colonizer and colonized. (In later times, this would be the bone of contention between nationalists and socialists, the former arguing that the agenda of equality was secondary to national dignity, the latter arguing that national dignity was derivative of a prior condition of universal equality.) In this sense, Vivekananda sought to claim the place of the universal through renunciatory practice. Mark the difference of this enacted universalism with the epistemological universalism based on the work of reason. This explains Vivekananda's desire to be named an ascetic and only that; and his advice to followers that they must follow the path of neither nationalism nor social reform – i.e. neither culturalism nor liberalism in today's terms –

<sup>37</sup>'The Social Conference Address', *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (hereafter *CWV*), IV (Calcutta, 1972), 303–7.

<sup>38</sup>Nivedita, *The Master*, *op. cit.*, 48.

<sup>39</sup>*ibid.*, 51. For an exposition of the concept of the witness-self in early Indian philosophy, see Bina Gupta, *The Disinterested Witness: A Fragment of Advaita Vedanta Phenomenology* (Evanston, 1998).

<sup>40</sup>*ibid.*, 49.

<sup>41</sup>Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, 'Swami Vivekananda' in *Saraladevi Nirbachita Prabandha Sankalan* (Kolkata, 2004), 60.

<sup>42</sup>Letter from Vivekananda to Alasinga Perumal, 19 November 1894, in *CWV*, IV, 368.

but stay with the 'old grounds of universal salvation and equality'.<sup>43</sup> By thus invoking a resolutely pre-modern paradigm, Vivekananda was trying to resist the reduction of his spiritualized idea of liberation to the nationalist idea of political freedom and self-determination. For him, freedom – as enacted by renunciation of social norms – was meant to produce the condition of equality and equinamity, within and beyond the nation.

Vivekananda thematized the question of equality via the figure of the Shudra or the low caste. The Brahman (the priestly caste), the Kshatriya (the warrior caste) and the Vaishya (the producing and commercial castes) had ruled successive phases of history, he argued. Currently, there were emergent signs of the final phase of history, when Shudras would gain supremacy throughout the world, not by emulating Brahmins or Kshatriyas but in their full-blown 'Shudrahood'. 'Socialism, Anarchism, Nihilism and other like sects [are] the vanguard of the social revolution that [is] to follow'.<sup>44</sup> Muslim and British rule had ended the rule of hereditary caste privilege in India for good. The Shudra now had the option of converting out of Hinduism and, therefore, Hindus no longer had a choice but to admit to equality.<sup>45</sup> Vivekananda also saw himself as inaugurating an order of ascetics who would carry nothing but knowledge (because they possessed nothing else in the first place) to the poor and the Shudra. For caste privilege, above all, was based on the monopoly of knowledge of the upper castes, who traditionally denied the lower orders access to the world of intellectual and spiritual learning. Learning was every man's struggle, 'alone or in combination'.<sup>46</sup>

We know that caste movements had already become powerful in Bengal by this time. Additionally, Vivekananda had travelled extensively in Madras and Malabar and experienced the caste dissensus of the south. A middle-caste individual, he had himself been accused of daring to represent Hinduism to the world despite not being a Brahmin. The *Indian Messenger*, the journal of the reformist *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj*, wrote on 31 July 1897: 'How can Vivekananda, who is a Shudra assume the role of a *sannyasi*, a religious teacher of the people. Perhaps nothing is impossible under the modern revived Hinduism';<sup>47</sup> Vivekananda often argued that caste was not a unique national malaise but only a local instance of the generic hierarchy that marked all societies of the world. His critique of caste, therefore, emerged not so much from the imagination of the possibility of another society but from his position of disavowal of society as a form itself. Unsurprisingly, the poet Kumara Asan, disciple of the anti-caste ascetic Sri Narayanaguru of Kerala, became an admirer of Vivekananda and started a journal in Malayalam called *Vivekodayam* after the Swami's name. As importantly, Vivekananda was appropriated by many early socialists and communists.<sup>48</sup> Among the many revolutionary nationalists turned early communists

<sup>43</sup>'Our duty to the masses', letter from Vivekananda in Chicago to H. H. Maharaja of Mysore, 23 June 1894, *CWV*, IV, 362.

<sup>44</sup>Vivekananda, 'Modern India', original in Bengali, *Udbodhana*, March 1899, in *CWV*, IV, 438–80, 468.

<sup>45</sup>Vivekananda, 'The future of India', *CWV*, III, 294.

<sup>46</sup>Nivedita, *The Master*, *op. cit.*, 198–9.

<sup>47</sup>Cited by Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism*, *op. cit.*, 162.

<sup>48</sup>Arun Kumar Biswas, *Swami Vivekananda and the Indian Quest for Socialism* (Kolkata, 1986); VKRV Rao, *Swami Vivekananda: The Prophet of Vedantic Socialism* (Government of India, Delhi, 1979).

was also Vivekananda's own brother, Bhupendranath Datta.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, in an essay on 'becoming' Marxist in Bengal in the 1960s, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes that he and many others like him moved directly, though not without difficulty, from being admirers of Vivekananda to being followers of Marx. One of his experiences as a young communist was that Bengali communism required him, as an initiatory ceremony, openly to disown his own ancestry. This was far more than 'declassing' as a simple form of economic equalization; it was meant to be a public renouncing (and often denouncing) of one's social, cultural, familial background.<sup>50</sup> The resonance seems clear with the renunciatory mode that Vivekananda posited – a renunciation of one's social and cultural particularities as prior condition to becoming political.<sup>51</sup>

How then does one read Vivekananda's appropriation by the Hindu right in later times? It seems to me that the answer lies in a constitutive tension within what I am calling the Vivekananda moment. Vivekananda formulated renunciation simultaneously in two idioms, one of self-mastery and the second of self-effacement. The first produced the effect of a resurgent subjectivity; the second of an enactment of the universal human condition through oneness with the world. In Vivekananda, renunciation was caught between becoming a property of a masterful self, who could intervene in and change the world, and a property of the act itself, which by being emancipated from social, cultural and economic necessity rendered questions of self and subjectivity redundant. It remained uncertain, thus, whether renunciation was political by virtue of being a specific kind of an act or because it produced a specific kind of subjectivity. This tension between act and subject would go on to constitute the problematic of the political in our colonial and post-colonial history. It is in this sense that I have been calling Vivekananda an instituting moment of the political.

Let me explain through an example. Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950), the revolutionary turned spiritual master, entered political life in his youth under the inspiration of Vivekananda and with support from Nivedita. His life and political career contributed a great deal towards the nationalization of Vivekananda. Aurobindo wrote a blueprint text in 1905 called *Bhavani Mandir*, in which he planned a Kali temple as the organizational hub of renunciatory self-fashioning and revolutionary political action for Bengali youth.<sup>52</sup> Contrast this with a well-known incident in Vivekananda's life. When told, during his travels through Kashmir, of a temple that had been destroyed by a Muslim king of the past, Vivekananda, refusing to take the route of resentment and revenge, said that he had heard Kali tell him: 'Do you protect Me? Or do I protect you?' 'So there is no more patriotism,' he went on to add, 'I am only a little child.'<sup>53</sup> If in Aurobindo's imagination, Kali's primal force was meant to fuel an efficacious, even violent, political subject, in Vivekananda's virtuoso performance – and indeed this was an exemplary rhetorical posture – Kali rendered the subject feeble and shadowy. Only thus

<sup>49</sup>Bhupendranath Datta, *Swami Vivekananda, Patriot Prophet: A Study* (Calcutta, 1954).

<sup>50</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Bidhi Bam? Kolkatae Marx, 1965–75', *Baromas*, 13 (2011), 77–82.

<sup>51</sup>For the persistent sway of the ascetic mode in Bengali communist politics, see Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The ascetic modality: a critique of communist self-fashioning' in Aditya Nigam

and Nivedita Menon (eds), *Critical Studies in Politics: Exploring Sites, Selves, Power* (Delhi, 2013).

<sup>52</sup>Aurobindo Ghosh, 'Bhavani Mandir' (1905), *Bande Mataram: Early Political Writings, 1890–1908* (Pondicherry, 1997), 61–74.

<sup>53</sup>Cited by Nivedita in *The Master*, *op. cit.*, 96.

could the autonomy of the act be established – whether the act was of renunciation or public action, resistance or non-resistance, antagonism or love. In other words, if renunciation in Aurobindo was a heightening of the self through sacrifice, in Vivekananda it was an arduous effort to make the act itself expressive and significant by diverting attention from the subject-self. Incidentally, when Vivekananda started his own organization of activist ascetics, he ended the initiation ceremony, not with worship of Kali, but with the offering of flowers at the feet of the Buddha. ‘Go thou’, he was meant to have said, ‘and follow Him who was born and gave His life for others FIVE HUNDRED TIMES, before he became Buddha.’<sup>54</sup>

Writing in 1893 from Baroda, Aurobindo Ghosh culturalized the political. He contrasted two national paradigms of the political – the British and the French.<sup>55</sup> Subsequently, he went on to deploy renunciation as India’s religio-cultural heritage, which could become an alternative paradigm of the Indian political. From here, it was just a step to Hinduizing the notion of renunciation and rendering the ascetic into a durable Hindu identity. In this nationalist recasting, renunciation was no longer a form of practice that liberated one from the prison of the particular. Renunciation itself became particularized, a Hindu subjectivity produced out of self-generated loss and sacrifice. Through a rendering of the political as national and only that, action became a mere *means* to achieve the nation that was an *a priori*, self-identical subjectivity.

And yet, it was not only a question of later recensions of Vivekananda. In Vivekananda himself renunciation as act *par excellence* reached its limits over the question of who renounces, a question that seemed impossible to resolve. Thus, at one place, Vivekananda is known to have raised the question of whether a beggar, who had nothing to give up, be called upon to renounce.<sup>56</sup> If renunciation was the transformational moment, was it accessible to the one already shorn of property and words? Or would the poor forever remain in an ironic relationship to the renouncer – jeopardizing the latter’s universalistic enactments and entry into the political? Would renunciation remain a parody of poverty? In another place, however, Vivekananda would argue that renunciation must be put to work ‘in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying’.

If you teach Vedanta to the fisherman, he will say, I am as good a man as you. I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have the same God in me as you have in you. And that is what we want, no privilege for any one, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the Divine is within and everyone will work out his own salvation.<sup>57</sup>

He would also go on to say, almost like a latter-day Marxist, that ‘it depends on you who have no money, because you are poor you will work. Because you have nothing, you will be sincere, you will be ready to renounce all.’<sup>58</sup> In other words, the question of the

<sup>54</sup>*ibid.*, 114.

<sup>55</sup>‘New lamps for the old’, *Indu Prakash* (30 October 1893) in *Bande Mataram*, *op. cit.*, 26–33.

<sup>56</sup>‘Karma Yoga: service before the self’ in *The Indispensable Vivekananda*, *op. cit.*, 202.

<sup>57</sup>‘Vedanta in its application to Indian life’, *CWV*, III, 228–45, 245–6.

<sup>58</sup>‘Influence of Indian spiritual thought in England’, speech given at Star Theatre, Calcutta, March 1898, in *CWV*, III, 445.

appropriate subject came back to haunt the pure and autonomous act, already in Vivekananda. In fact, it would continue to animate changing enactments of the political in India for decades to come. The Vivekananda moment was the inaugural act in this particular history of the political.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to restate that my purpose in this article has been to open up the categories of the political, the social, the cultural and the religious, rather than presume these as given, descriptive and stable categories. Only by thus interrogating disciplinary categories can one think of the political in its constitutive relationship with what appears in modernity as variously the non- and not-yet political. As a consequence, I have deliberately avoided an overtly sociological or culturalist reading of the Vivekananda moment – social history and cultural history being the other common ways of reading historical figures in South Asian historiography. I have also avoided an intellectual history of Vivekananda as such, resisting the common demand that political figures must be forced into the role of political philosophers to be of any worth. I look at Vivekananda as an embodied and unresolved moment, hoping to bring in questions of body and materiality as well as spirituality and affect into the study of the political. Such an attempt I believe helps us refigure both the idea of the idea and the idea of the political – which I think is necessary if we seek to de-provincialize the political in the first place in light of colonial and post-colonial experience. At the same time, such an attempt at least partially avoids the philosophical elitism of thinking the political as simply political idea, without necessarily reducing the political for that purpose into a purely empirical account sans ideas. The efficacy of a Vivekananda, I have argued here, rested on being an embodied instance of the political, which in its elaboration of renunciation answered to practices of both philosophical and everyday popular understandings of what it is to be and become politically efficacious at a particular place and time.

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