

Preface

India is not just a geographical space, it is also a civilizational force. Its geography may have shrunk over the past several centuries, but its ideas are spreading to all corners of the world. India is like the moon seen in water that is broken and broken again by the ripples, yet still remains.

India's recent political history has been a continuing struggle to gain independence from another idea of India that was imposed on it by colonial scholars and administrators, and later uncritically perpetuated after the gaining of political independence.

India's experience of the British Raj was disastrous as it led to the destruction of native industry and education systems.¹ India was the world's leading nation in science before the Middle Ages, and it is estimated that India's share of world trade in 1800, although down from about 40 percent eight centuries earlier, was still about 20 to 25 percent.

When the mechanization brought about by the industrial revolution gave their own textiles a cost advantage, the British made sure that India was not provided the resources to build its own factories. As India became deindustrialized, it turned into a huge monopoly market for British products. British Raj made token investments in science and technology. India's share of the world economy dropped² to about 1.4% by 1914.

After dismantling India's own education system, which while not perfect, managed to educate an estimated 60–70% of the populace³,

the literacy rate on the British watch declined to about 12%, with a near complete loss of memory of its previous condition. The British account of Indian culture and its past was worse than superficial; it was just wrong. The great scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote this of histories of Hinduism by Western scholars and their Indian followers:⁴

[A]lthough the ancient and modern scriptures and practices of Hinduism have been examined by European scholars for more than a century, it would be hardly an exaggeration to say that a faithful account of Hinduism might well be given *in the form of a categorical denial of most of the statements that have been made about it*, alike by European scholars and by Indians trained in our modern sceptical and evolutionary modes of thought. [Emphasis added]

Repeated countless times over the past eighty years, this incorrect idea of India forms the foundation of instruction in schools and colleges, public policy, and the practice of law. People have internalized it and sincerely believe it to be the truth.

If we look at the understanding of India during the first millennium, we get a picture very different from the one constructed by colonial historians. India was the leading scientific nation of the world, and Arabic translations of Sanskrit scientific texts were communicated to Europe.

There was an even more massive translation of Sanskrit texts into Chinese, in fields ranging from “philosophy, linguistics, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, architecture, and virtually every other area of human endeavor.”⁵ These translations were to greatly influence the semantic and syntax of medieval Chinese, requiring the invention of many words. The American scholar Victor Mair claims that this influence led to the “*enlargement of the lexicon by at least thirty-five thousand words*, including many that are still in common use (e.g. *ch’a-na* from *kṣaṇa*), advancement of phonology as a science,

promotion of new modes of thought, and partial legitimization of the vernacular.”⁶

Declaration of Independence

In 1837, Emerson delivered a famous speech, titled *The American Scholar* that in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes became America’s “Intellectual Declaration of Independence”. Emerson’s speech marked the direction that America needed to take to actualize its own destiny.

India needs a similar declaration of intellectual independence to connect back to its spirit. Indians need to choose the path of the yogi—not the other-worldly one but that of the *karmayogi*—a person devoted to perfection in action, a warrior in the Kurukshetra of life. This will happen only if Indian civilization is understood in the right perspective.

The purpose of this book is to present a truer *idea of India* that has emerged from the cumulative work of many scholars around the world. It addresses both the geographical India connected now with the Indian State and the Civilizational India that is to be found all over the world in the adoption of Yoga, spiritual wisdom, and *ātma vidyā*. New findings from the history of art and textual analysis establish the evolution of these connections in the earlier periods. It is clear from this research that the traditional idea of India as a land devoted to the knowledge of both the inner and the outer, and the harmony between the two is correct, and that it was recognized that this idea was to be shared with the rest of the world.

This understanding was expressed creatively through the arts and practices of meditation and self-study. In the visual arts, the nature of the architecture and the many faces of the divine represent the diverse ways the mystery is revealed based on one’s preparation and receptivity; and in the performance arts, theatre and dance, there is a direct communication of the deeper experience of reality. We speak about these codes, but limit the discussion of influence of these

ideas beyond India's borders to Central Asia and Europe because the story of the Indianization of Southeast Asia is well known.

The book is divided into six parts that deal variously with India's own memory of its civilization, the central ideas behind the Veda and Yoga, a glimpse of the lesser-known aspects of its literature, India's early influence beyond the Himalayas, connections between India and earliest Europe, and the centrality of science in its imagination together with the relevance of civilizational India in dealing with pervasive automation and artificial intelligence, which are the great challenges of our times.