The Modern Era

In 1600, Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to the British East India Company, a private trading company made up of some eighty London merchants. Step by step this private trading company gradually wrested control of an empire from the Mughal rulers. After the overthrow of the last Mughal emperor in 1858, Queen Victoria signed the bill that transferred political control of India from the East India Company to the Crown. For almost another century, India was the “Jewel in the Crown” of the British Empire. The British Raj thus replaced the Mughal Raj. It was through this transfer from Muslim to British rule that India gradually became assimilated into the modern world. Ironically, it was also partly at least the influence of Western political thought made possible by the British Raj, that led finally to the birth of the modern independent state of India in 1947. As it became gradually more apparent that the spirit of accommodation meant accommodation to the West and not with the Muslims, some thinkers began to be influenced by Western ideas, and thus the main feature of the early development of Indian philosophy during the modern era is this spirit of accommodation to Western ideas. Later, with the flowering of the “Renaissance” of Indian philosophy in the 19th and 20th centuries, there would continue to be some incorporation of ideas from the West, but there would also be a resurgence and greater synthesis of Hindu philosophy, which now increasingly found it’s own way to the West.

Rammohun Roy (c. 1774—1833)

Rammohun Roy (or Ram Mohan Roy) is often considered the “Father of Modern India” because of his pioneering reforms in religion, morals, journalism, education, the status of women, and legal and political thought. Though born into a Bengali Brahmin family, he was educated in the classic Persian and Arabic curriculum of the day, and seemed to prefer Persian to Sanskrit culture as a young man. However, increasingly captivated by Western ideas, he turned against Muslim culture and ended up using Western Enlightenment ideas to rejuvenate Hindu Culture. In 1828 he founded the Brahmo Samaj, the Society of the Devotees of Brahma. Combining a Upanishadic monotheism with modern European Enlightenment ideas, he sought to save the heart of Hinduism by purifying it of all the evils denounced by Western critics. He thus became a tireless advocate of social reform, condemning idolatry, the practice of sati, female infanticide, child marriage, and caste privilege.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824—1883)

Swami Dayananda was the founder of the Arya Samaj, another 19th century reform movement, which, in contrast to the Brahmo Samaj, drew its inspiration purely from indigenous sources—the Vedas. This “Vedic Revivalist” sought nothing less than the cleansing of India of all foreign influences, and a returning of India to its pure Hindu roots. Though at one level the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj are deeply opposed, both helped to shape the early character and goals of the Indian national movement. Reflecting the fervent Hindu revivalism of its founder, the Arya Samaj has contributed to the militancy of Hindu nationalism.
Śri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836—1886)

The “Hindu Renaissance” began with the mystic saint Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna authored no commentary on the sacred scriptures and founded no new school like the acharyas Shankara and Ramanuja. His greatness was in the impact of his saintly person which led to a revival of Hinduism, and Vedanta philosophy. For most of his life he was associated with the Temple of Kāli at Dakshineshwar in the vicinity of Calcutta. The story goes that after his father’s death, a young grief-stricken Ramakrishna went to the temple, and just as he was about kill himself with one of the ceremonial swords from one of the statues, and thus offer his blood as an offering to Kāli, he was stopped by a radiant vision of the goddess that led to a profound ecstatic experience. There were strongly Tantric overtones to Ramakrishna’s worship of the Divine Mother, which placed him outside the framework of classical Vedantic theism. However, he later accepted a follower of Advaita-Vedanta as his guru, and under this spiritual guidance, had his own experience of nirvikalpa samādhi. He thus became a monk in the Shankara order. The Ramakrishna order, later established by his disciple Vivekananda, adheres to the Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Nevertheless, the Shankara school cannot lay exclusive claim to Ramakrishna and his followers. He agreed, on the one hand, with Shankara, that all the various Hindu deities should be regarded as equally valid aspects of the supra-personal Brahman. On the other hand, he was critical of the impersonal abstraction of Shankara’s Nirguṇa Brahman. Ramakrishna’s view was that all religions worship the same God. The God of the Hindus is the same as the God of the Christians and the God of Islam. All these personal Gods are the same One Supreme Being, who yet can be the object of intense devotion.

Swami Vivekananda (1863—1902)

In September of 1893 Ramakrishna sent his disciple Vivekananda to address the World Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair. This was the first time that a Hindu had carried the message of Hinduism to the West. Vivekananda’s address was a great success, and it inspired him to take the message of Vedanta to many countries. After four years of lecturing in America and England, he returned to India a national hero. He devoted the rest of his life to the Ramakrishna Mission, which he founded in 1892, and which was dedicated to both social work and religious education. His success in teaching to the world the greatness of Hinduism gave his countrymen a sense of dignity and pride in their own culture. The Indian nationalist leaders, up to then mostly influenced by European ideas, now had a new connection with their Hindu roots and thus with the vast majority of their countrymen. Gandhi, for example, acknowledged his debt to Vivekananda in this respect. Vivekananda was always more concerned with the broad teachings of Vedanta than the Kāli worship that was so dear to his guru. It was the spirit of compassion that he found in Vedanta which inspired his life’s work.
The History of Indian Philosophy

Modern India

Mohandas K. “Mahatma” Gandhi (1869—1948)

Through his spiritual strength, austere life-style, dedicated service to the poorest of his countrymen, and powerful leadership of the mass non-violent civil-disobedience movement that eventually led to India’s independence, Mohandas K. Gandhi became known to the world as Mahatma, “the great souled” one. Gandhi made his mark as the leader of the Indian National Congress, an organization that worked toward India’s independence. After many years of struggle against incredible obstacles, Gandhi achieved his goal in 1947, only to be cut down a year later by an assassin, a fanatical Hindu who thought Gandhi was too lenient with India’s Muslims. Gandhi’s greatness is not so much that he led India to independence, but the way in which he managed to achieve this goal. He referred to his movement as “Satyagraha”, which literally means “sticking to the truth” but has come to be more loosely translated as “passive resistance.” As the emphasis in this satyagraha was on ahimsa, sticking to the truth meant following a course of strictly non-violent passive resistance. Gandhi said that he drew his strength from the teachings of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. The wisdom that comes with understanding the tat tvam asi of the Upanishads, the wisdom of those who “see themselves in all, and all in them,” was the cornerstone of Gandhi’s Satyagraha. For Gandhi, liberation came only through a pure life of selfless service, and thus he has often been regarded as the master of karma yoga. Nevertheless, as he always exhorted the satyagrahis to look upon their act of disobedience as an offering of their bodies, souls, and lives to God, there is certainly an element of bhakti yoga in Gandhi’s conception of Satyagraha.

Śri Aurobindo Gosh (1872—1950)

Aurobindo Gosh was one of the most fascinating figures of modern India. He was a completely Westernized intellectual who became for a time a fanatical nationalist leader and ended up his later years as an accomplished yogi. Aurobindo loved the teachings of Vedanta, but with an education in Western philosophy as well as Vedanta, he sought to refashion the message of the Vedanta in modern terms. In his magnum opus, The Life Divine, Aurobindo anchored his teachings in the Upanishads, and the teaching of the ultimate goal of identity with Brahman. However, in order to explain the workings of samsara, he developed a unique theory based on modern evolutionary theory. Aurobindo argued that the entire universe is always in a state of evolution towards a higher state of perfection in identity with Brahman. He thus argued for the further evolution of humankind toward a “life divine,” through a program or lifestyle integrating all of the aspects of traditional yoga. Aurobindo founded a world-famous ashram called Auroville, located near Pondicherry in southern India.

Śri Ramana Maharshi (1879—1950)

In contrast to his contemporary Aurobindo, Ramana Mararshi adhered to an Advaita Vedantic conception of absorption that left little room for evolutionary development. What made Ramana Mararshi so extraordinary was that he seemed to so clearly embody the truth of his teachings. For many people Ramana Mararshi is the epitome of the legendary Vedantic jivanmukta, the “one liberated in body.” From the Sir Ramanasramam website: “Known as the Sage of Arunachala, He spoke very little and wrote even less. He preferred to communicate through the power of Silence, a silence so deep and profound that it stifled the minds of those ardent seekers who were attracted to Him from all over the world. His highest teaching of ‘Self-enquiry’ was understood in the infinite silence of his presence. Through this silence, countless numbers of devotees and visitors experienced the pure bliss of True Being” (http://www.ramana-maharshi.org/).
Paramahamsa Yogananda (1893—1952)

Paramahamsa Yogananda founded the “Self-Realization Fellowship,” one of the more successful organizations spawned from the Ramakrishna Mission which brought Vedanta to the West. Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* appeared in 1946 and became an instant classic introduction to yoga and Vedanta. “Today it is still one of the most widely read and respected books ever published on the wisdom of the East” (http://www.yogananda-srf.org/).

Meher Baba (1894-1969)

Meher Baba drew upon his native Zoroastrianism, Sufism, as well as the teachings of Hindu gurus in developing an eclectic teaching emphasizing spiritual union with God. His followers regard him as an avatar of God for the dark age of our time. (http://www.indiayogi.com/content/indsaints/meher.asp)

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895—1986)

From the J.Krishnamurti International Website: “The core of Krishnamurti's teaching is contained in the statement he made in 1929 when he said: 'Truth is a pathless land'. Man cannot come to it through any organisation, through any creed, through any dogma, priest or ritual, not through any philosophic knowledge or psychological technique. He has to find it through the mirror of relationship, through the understanding of the contents of his own mind . . . (Statement by Krishnamurti in 1981).

Jiddu Krishnamurti was born on 11th May 1895 in Madanapalle, a town in south India, the eighth child in a middle-class family. At an early age he was adopted by Annie Besant, then the President of the Theosophical Society, with its headquarters in Madras. She took Krishnamurti and his brother Nitya to England where she had them educated privately.

On Krishnamurti’s return to India while still in his teens, Theosophists proclaimed him to be the world teacher whose coming they had been awaiting. They built a large and rich order round him, with many thousands of followers, but in 1929 Krishnamurti disbanded the organisation, returned the estates and monies that had been given to him and declared that his only purpose was to set human beings unconditionally free from psychological limitations. From that time he travelled throughout most parts of the world almost ceaselessly speaking to large numbers of people, until his death on 17th February 1986.”

(See also: http://www.indiayogi.com/content/indsaints/krishnamurti.asp)
**A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada** (1896—1977)

A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in 1966 in New York. The movement can trace its roots back to the medieval saint, Shri Chaitanya, who was perhaps the epitome of the bhakti movement and the embodiment of Ramanuja’s devotional Vedanta.

(https://www.indiayogi.com/content/indsaints/prabhupada.asp)

**Maharishi Mahesh Yogi** (1917—)

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, one of the world’s most prominent gurus, is the founder of the Transcendental Meditation Movement (TM) which brought a very simplified form of meditation into popular culture in the 1960’s. The Maharishi belongs to the traditional Advaita Vedanta lineage; but the excesses of the organization had led some to wonder whether Shankara would have approved. He came to prominence in the West through his influence upon the Beatles. The influence of Indian mysticism had a lifelong impact upon George Harrison. The Beatles trip to the Maharishi’s ashram in India was marked by controversy. Some say the Maharishi was the “sexy sadie” in Lennon’s tune by that name.

(https://www.indiayogi.com/content/indsaints/maharishi.asp)

**Bhagavan Śri Sathya Sai Baba** (1926—)

Sai Baba is by far the most famous of all the “holy men” in India. Sai Baba is an enigmatic figure, almost buried under the mass of largely mythological devotional literature that describes his life. He is best known for his miracles, the siddhis, which he claims as his “calling cards” and proof of his divinity. Sai Baba’s followers are drawn from every caste, class, race and religion, and he claims that as an incarnation of the Absolute he transcends the limitations of each individual creed. His cult is characterized by intense devotionalism.

(https://www.sathyasai.org/intro/message.htm)

**Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh “Osho”** (1931-1990)

The controversial guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh combined elements of many different philosophies into an eclectic teaching that had considerable appeal for many in the West dissatisfied with traditional religious traditions. Rajneesh established an ashram in Oregon which became somewhat widely known both for it’s “chaotic meditations” and also for the excesses of it’s founder and his fleet of Rolls Royces. For Rajneesh, Vedanta was only one of so many adornments, including a little of Tantrism, Sufism, Taoism, Zen as well as a number of Western therapies. In his last years, he took the name of “Osho” by which he is known by his followers today.

(https://www.religioustolerance.org/rajneesh.htm)