

## THE LEGACY OF AHITĀGNI RAJWADE

- Mangesh Kulkarni\*

Shankar Ramachandra alias ‘Ahitāgni’ Rajwade (1879-1952) was born in a middle-class, orthodox Konkanastha Brahman family in Pune which was the seat of the Maratha confederacy during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and became a major centre of cultural renaissance as well as anti-colonial mobilisation in the Bombay Province in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After graduating from the reputed Deccan College in the city, he chose to live as an independent scholar and completely dedicated himself to intellectual pursuits which he saw as a nation-building activity. Rajwade was an accomplished orator and toured throughout the country to deliver lectures on philosophical and social themes. As a champion of the Vedic tradition, Rajwade maintained the *agnihotra*—the perpetual, sacred fire—at the Sanātana Vaidika Dharma Kāryalaya; hence his sobriquet, Ahitāgni.

The mix of militant nationalism and conservatism, which was advocated by B. G. Tilak (1856-1920), the foremost leader of the freedom movement at the time, cast a spell on Rajwade in his younger days. He also had a short-lived association with hotheads like the Chaphekar brothers who were sentenced to death in 1897 for the assassination of W. C. Rand, an English official who had incurred people’s wrath because of his draconian measures to quell the plague epidemic in Pune. But eventually, Rajwade’s lecture tours along with a variety of debates he hosted at his residence were to be his chief mode of direct public engagement.

### I

Rajwade knew English well, but chose to write in Marathi—the regional language that could claim a millennium-long, rich literary tradition—and published almost all his books himself. His writings give ample evidence of a sound training in Sanskrit, a lifelong immersion in the canonical texts of classical Hindu thought, as also a close acquaintance with several religions, literature and the arts, Western philosophy and modern science. Following a dominant strand of the Indian philosophical tradition, most of his publications were presented in an exegetical or commentarial mode. However, this format should not be taken to indicate an absence of original thinking and it certainly did not prevent Rajwade from expressing unconventional ideas.

Almost all of Rajwade’s works reveal a unique blend of philosophy, science and socio-political thought. The first of these was *Gitābhāshya* (1916), a commentary on the first three chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita*, published only one year after the publication of B. G. Tilak’s masterpiece on the subject, namely, *Gitārahasya*. This was followed by *Nāsadiyasūktabhāshya* Part I (1927)—an exegesis of the *Nāsadiyasūkta* which is a celebrated cosmogonic hymn in the Rig-Veda. The three volumes of Part II (of which two deal with sexology) were to appear over the next twenty-

---

\* Dr. Mangesh Kulkarni teaches Political Science at Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, India.

two years. Meanwhile, Rajwade published *Nietzschechā Khristāntaka āni Khristāntaka Nietzsche* (1931)—a translation of Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist* together with a commentary on the philosopher’s life and work.

The subsequent four works dealt with various aspects of Vedic thought and the six *darśanas* or systems that are central to classical Indian philosophy: *Vaidikadharmā āni Shaddarshane athavā Chāra Vidyā vā Sahā Shāstre* (Ravbahadur Kinkhede Lectures published by the University of Nagpur in 1938); *Sanātana Vaidika Dharmapravachana Māla* (1947); *Śadarśanasamanvaya āni Puruṣārthamimamsā* (1949), and *Ishāvāsyopaniṣadbhāshya* (1949)—an explication of the *Ishāvāsyopaniṣad*. His autobiography—*Ahitāgni Rajwade: Ātmavṛitta* (Shreevidya Prakashan, Pune, 1980)—was published posthumously; but several of his writings on sexology, astrology and Zoroastrianism remain unpublished.

Commenting on Rajwade’s oeuvre, M. R. Lederle (1926-1986)—a German scholar-priest based in Pune—observed that they ‘approach the category of strictly philosophical works. Not many books of this type exist in the Marathi language today’ (*Philosophical Trends in Modern Maharashtra*, Popular, Bombay, 1976, p. 296). Yet, the corpus of analytical writings devoted to his intellectual legacy remains meager. Even the multi-volume *Marathi Vishvakosha* (encyclopedia) has no entry on Ahitagni Rajwade. While Lederle gives a good overview of his key ideas in the above-mentioned book, my article entitled ‘Radical Translation: S. R. Rajwade’s Encounter with F. W. Nietzsche’ in *Philosophy in Colonial India* (ed. Sharad Deshpande, Springer, New Delhi, 2015) is perhaps the only scholarly work in English that primarily focuses on his thought.

## II

Rajwade’s intellectual endeavours were informed by his keen desire to defend and shore up the traditional Hindu social order in the face of the attacks launched by three generations of indigenous social reformers, and to reclaim (what he saw as) the essential message of the Vedas and the Gita from its later contamination by Buddhism and Śankaracharya’s doctrine of *advaita* (non-dualism). In an apparently curious move, he drew on the thought of the great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) to bolster his twofold project. The publication of *Nietzschecha Khristantaka ani Khristantaka Nietzsche* (henceforth, *Khristantaka*) was an important outcome of this philosophical maneuver.

It is well-known that modern European thinkers like Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), J. S. Mill (1806-1873), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) figured prominently in Indian intellectual debates during the colonial era; but Nietzschean thought remained somewhat peripheral to this universe of discourse. So Rajwade’s extensive engagement with Nietzsche was exceptional. He first came across references to the German philosopher in Tilak’s *Gitarahasya* and subsequently delved deep into *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* edited by Oscar Levy (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1909-1913). In

Lederle's opinion, 'Rajwade fully understood the spirit of Nietzsche's philosophy' (*Philosophical Trends in Modern Maharashtra*, p. 306).

Rajwade had studied Western thought at Deccan College under the guidance of Professor F. W. Bain (1863-1940), and had been influenced by his conservative philosophical, socio-economic and political views. Dismissing both spiritual and secular egalitarianism, the British educator emphasized the need to preserve an appropriately hierarchical order. Though Bain had never referred to Nietzsche, Rajwade saw them as kindred spirits since both criticized Christianity and Buddhism, but held the ancient Indian law-giver Manu in high esteem, and found fault with liberalism, utilitarianism, socialism and feminism. He invoked the duo to attack the heterodox ideas of social reformers like G. G. Agarkar (1856-1895) and R. P. Paranjpye (1876-1966), as also the doctrines of English philosophers like Mill and Spencer, which constituted the fountainhead of reformist opinion in India.

Rajwade held that the true nature of things could be grasped only through the lens of *dvandva* or 'polarity' (*Ishavāsyopanishadbhashya*, p. 609). According to Lederle, this key concept is centered on collateral and relative opposites like 'life and death', 'warm and cold', 'joy and pain'. The duality posited here is such that each part necessarily presupposes the other. Rajwade characterized the most profound philosophical formulations contained in the Vedas and the Gītā as *dvandvātita* (beyond opposites) and *nirdvandva* (without opposites) respectively. He held that Śankarācārya (700-750) distorted the central message of these texts by substituting the term *advaita* (non-dualism) for *nirdvandva*.

In *Nāsadiyasūktabhāshya* Part I (p. 237) Rajwade argued that Nietzsche's philosophy was fully in accord with the principle of *nirdvandva* and hence contained the bliss of *brahmanirvāṇa* or the unity of *atman* (the Self) and *Brahman* (the ultimate reality). To him, only such a philosophy affirming the will to happiness, the will to power and the will to suffer could produce the *Übermensch* (Superman/Overman). Rajwade applauded its reverence for the *Manusmṛti* and the disciplined Hindu social system based on *varṇāshramadharmā* as against the Biblically inspired permissive democratic order. He heartily endorsed Nietzsche's ruthless condemnation of Christianity for its alleged spirit of resentment and instinct for revenge.

We can now see why Rajwade chose to translate *The Antichrist* (1895)—a work that may seem quite marginal to the concerns of his readership which essentially comprised upper caste, middle class, Marathi-speaking Hindus. Commenting on the mindset of the English-educated gentry spawned by colonialism, he observed in his autobiography that these people were by and large not inclined to embrace Christianity; but rather wanted to transform Hinduism along Christian lines in the name of social reform (*Ahitāgni Rajwade Ātmavṛtta*, p. 331). Quite in keeping with this perception, he deployed Nietzsche's radical critique of Christianity as a lever to overthrow

the hegemony of Western modernity and to reinstate the pristine Hindu worldview and social order prefigured in the Vedas.

In his foreword to *Khristantaka* (pp. 7-8), Rajwade describes *The Antichrist* as a book originally written in German by a great modern European sage (*mahāmuni*) of a Brahmanic disposition (*brāhmaṇavṛtti*). He then suggests that the Marathi rendition of the book should be read by true-born Aryans and authentic followers of the Vedic dharma and civilization so as to retrieve the philosophical seedbed which was the source of their glorious but currently precarious spiritual heritage. Rajwade hoped that its message would help stem the degeneration of the prospective readers and provide them succor as well as food for thought. Both in word and in spirit, this foreword is truly representative of the subsequent translation and commentary.

*Khristantak* effectively echoes the polemical tenor of the source text and testifies to Rajwade's penchant for creatively appropriating Nietzsche's worldview. It highlights Nietzsche's rejection of ascetic ideals and democratic mediocrity, and projects the German thinker as an advocate of a social system akin to the *varṇa* order prescribed by Manu. Moreover, it is replete with phrases that felicitously convey the precise import of certain seminal Nietzschean formulations. This is best illustrated by Rajwade's rendering of 'the revaluation of all values'—the clarion call which serves as a coda to *The Antichrist*—as '*sarva arthaaanche arthaantarikaran*' (*Khristantak*, p. 174). The Marathi phrase literally denotes 'the transmutation of all *arthas*'. The term '*artha*' has a wide range of connotations including 'end' (as in *puruṣārthas* or the ends of human life), 'means', 'meaning', and 'subject-matter'.

Rajwade stridently advocated a rejuvenation of the Hindu philosophical and social ideals contained in the Vedic tradition, which he found consistent with a fascist political vision. His understanding of fascism finds a clear expression in *Ātmavṛtta* (pp. 259-264). While noting that the term had acquired a negative connotation, he claimed that in fact every person was a fascist by nature. He considered the fascist tendency (*fascistgiri*) to be a purely natural phenomenon—a symbol of the power (*bala*) every individual has and uses to safeguard and pursue his/her interests in various domains, depending upon each person's capacity and ambition. Accordingly, he viewed all other isms—in particular socialism and communism—as artificial ideologies, springing from weakness.

In characteristic fashion, Rajwade posits a polar relationship of *dvandva* between fascism and socialism. The former is rooted in nature and is an embodiment of self-interest; whereas the latter is a product of artifice and is an embodiment of cowardice. In a puzzling formulation, he then goes on to assert that the true fascist, who transcends this duality, is *dvandvātita*; hence it is wrong to label him as a 'fascist'. The course of evolution leads human beings from the primitive fascism of animal existence to the socialism of civil society, and thence to the higher fascism that

culminates in the rule of the *Übermensch*. Rajwade saw the Nazi regime as an approximation to the latter and regretted its collapse.

Rajwade evidently treated Nietzsche as a proto-fascist. Several scholars consider such an interpretation of the German philosopher to be utterly wrongheaded. Yet it is a fact that Nietzsche's blatant championship of 'master morality' made it possible for European fascists to appropriate his thought. Rajwade's version of Nietzsche may be seen as a cross-cultural instance of such appropriation. He thus foregrounded the fascist potential of the Nietzschean legacy. But Rajwade did not merely praise Nietzsche; he found fault with the latter's portrayal of the *Übermensch*, and argued that the Vedic conception of a '*deva*' as a dynamic, radiant (*tejaswi*) trans-human being truly corresponded to the ideal the German philosopher was trying to formulate (*Vaidikadharma āni Shaddarshane*, p. 21).

### III

It is difficult to agree with many of Rajwade's positions, such as his staunch defence of the Hindu orthodoxy and of the *varṇa* system in particular, his seeming justification of women's subordinate status, or his shocking fascination for fascism. But it must be noted that he was largely free of communal rancor, his public engagements did not involve rigid caste-based discrimination, his daughters and daughters-in-law were educated, and he did not offer a full-blown fascist political programme. Moreover, his erudite if eccentric inquiries into a broad spectrum of texts and traditions remain admirable both for their inventiveness and candor.

Rajwade addressed Indic, Zoroastrian, and Semitic religions as well as Western philosophy and science from an original, critical and comparative perspective. His knowledge of Islamic thought is exemplified by a section in the *Ishāvasyopaniṣadbhāshya* (pp. 671-678), which contains a perceptive account of the homology between the *Agni Mantra* and the first *sūra* (chapter) of the *Koran*. In the same book (pp. 440-544) he dwells at length upon certain important aspects of modern Physics and Astronomy. Such writings of Rajwade can suggest fruitful ways of pursuing intercultural, interreligious and interdisciplinary explorations.

Rajwade's interpretation of Nietzsche is of enduring interest. His re-reading of classical Hindu thought through the concept of *nirvāṇa* requires serious investigation. Specifically, his *dharma*-centric presentation of the *Puruṣārtha* doctrine deserves consideration. Rajwade's distinctive views on literature and the arts are also worthy of scrutiny. Finally, his pioneering and wide-ranging sexological work remains a potentially fertile but virgin territory.

Only a team of scholars who have the expertise needed to meet the intellectual challenges sketched above can do justice to the rich and multifarious legacy of Ahitāgni Rajwade.

-----