Hindu Perspectives on Evolution: Darwin, Dharma, and Design

by C Mackenzie Brown
New York: Routledge, 2012. 276 pages

reviewed by David L Gosling

GK Chesterton's tongue-in-cheek description of the USA as “a nation with the soul of a church” may offer an important clue as to why any mention of evolution there inevitably leads to speculation about religion. In the case under review, the religion is what C Mackenzie Brown characterizes as the Hindu dharma traditions, though it is not clear why the full title of the book refers to design, unless in the eyes of the publisher to capitalize on the notoriety of “intelligent design”.

Brown, professor of religion at Trinity University, San Antonio, is best known for his studies of Hindu goddesses in the medieval Sanskrit texts known as the Purāṇas. He describes his “immediate inspiration” for his more recent work as his interest in “the anti-Darwinian criticism of the Hindu creationist AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada,” founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or Hare Krishna Movement. This led to work on the Hindu tradition and science, which in turn led to speculation about the range of approaches modern Hindus have taken to evolution, and “how these Hindu perspectives might compare with the Christian spectrum of responses, from young-Earth creationism and Intelligent Design to divinely guided evolutionary theories. As this study shows, Hindus have developed their own vast and distinctive array of responses” (p xi).

They have, but what did Hindus understand by evolution prior to what is broadly known as Darwinian evolution, what motivated them to focus on Darwin’s theory, and what, if anything, has any of this to do with Christian creationism and “intelligent design”? I shall briefly discuss these points.

The nearest approximation to evolution in Sanskrit, as Brown points out, is parināma, a broad and secular term which can include such phenomena as the curdling of milk, which is far removed from Darwinian evolution. It is most strongly represented in a classical atheistic school of philosophy known as the Sāṃkhya, composed at the beginning of the common era. The Sāṃkhya Kārikā describes various categories of existence in terms of prakṛti—a kind of principle of energy and matter, and puruṣa, or spirit, the location of unfractured consciousness. It evolves from three initial aggregates into greater and greater complexity over a period of time, and recurs periodically. So the parallels with contemporary notions of evolution are very general and loose, and in any case, at the time when this literature was formulated, the important issues debated were not about evolution but whether or not God exists and rebirth occurs.
A major problem with Brown’s book as a whole is that he tries too much to “cover the ground” and resorts to “cherry picking” with respect to certain modern ideas, which include both evolution and design, which he “discovers” in the past. The Hindu tradition as a whole is vast and polycentric, so much so that it is misleading even to refer to “Hinduism” on the grounds that no such monolithic entity exists (as it does in the case of Buddhism or Islam). The Hindu tradition is a unity-in-diversity, and for virtually any allegedly cardinal Hindu doctrine some acknowledged Hindu school can be found historically which did not subscribe to it (such as rebirth and caste—the Čārvākas rejected both).

Brown does not appear to be aware that Hindu scripture is broadly divided into primary and secondary categories—the former is śruti (that is, declared), the latter is smruti (that is, remembered). Over periods of time, some secondary literature increased in importance—this happened with the Bhagavadgītā, which Gandhi venerated with the result that it has become more important for modern Hindus than most śruti.

Brown’s analysis of the nineteenth-century Hindu reformers fails to recognize distinctions between them, their motivations, and the fact that what they said to English-speaking audiences often differed substantially from what they said in their mother tongues. The introduction of English as the medium of instruction for higher education in 1835 precipitated a process of secularization whereby all aspects of religious thought and practice were called in question. The consequent reform movements responded by reasserting, adapting, or rejecting tradition. Most of the nineteenth-century Hindu reformers were either reasserters, such as Dayanand Saraswati, who led the Arya Samaj, or adapters, such as Swami Vivekananda, the leader of the Ramakrishna Mission, whose dramatic presentation at the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 marked the beginning of a new phase of Hindu outreach.

From the outset Brown attributes too much significance to Dayanand, discovering the notion of design (racanā) in his writing, without appearing to recognize how utterly polemical and anti-intellectual he really was (p 2). Whatever new scientific discoveries emanated from the West (for example, guns and airplanes), Dayanand could find references to them in the Vedic literature. His personal and literary arrogance earned him an early grave at the hands of a woman who poisoned him. By contrast, very little is said about Rabindranath Tagore—admittedly somewhat later—who held erudite conversations with Albert Einstein about the nature of reality.

Not only is historical perspective lacking, but subaltern and Marxist historians would challenge Brown’s reliance on English-language sources and consequent omission of the voice of ordinary people expressed in local vernaculars. Furthermore, when the Hindu reformers expressed themselves in English, they were often standing up for their faith and their country against foreigners and Christian missionaries—thus Vivekananda could charge Christians and Muslims with belief in a “hideous, cruel and ever-angry God.” Such polemical utterances are not conducive to accurate scholarship.

It is hard to understand why Brown devotes four pages to a discussion of Vivekananda’s rejection of theistic design (p 136–139). There are ten references in the index to either “intelligent design (general concept)” or “Intelligent Design (ID”). I am not certain how he makes this distinction, but the references seem excessive. The International Society
for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) also receives ten mentions, two extensive. But many Hindus in India would not acknowledge ISKON members as fellow Hindus on the grounds that they have not been born into their religion.

Brown might have done better to consider how Hindu scientists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed and sometimes practiced science in the light of their religious beliefs. Most subscribed to Shankara’s advaita Vedânta (partly for political reasons), which enabled them to interpret the progressive coming together of the sciences as evidence of the underlying brahman at the heart of all existence. Thus Jagadish Chandra Bose investigated the possibility of pain in plants, and Satyendranath Bose collaborated with Einstein in his quest for a unified field theory largely because his religious beliefs chimed in with such a unitary worldview. It is at this level that it seems to make sense to explore consonance between science and the Hindu tradition rather than by “cherry picking” at superficial similarities which—at least in the case of science—may disappear as new theories and data emerge.

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