

There was another India, reveals a new database of periodicals published between 1857-1947

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ideasofindia.org



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If you want to resist the will to simplicity, the flattening of public discourse, and the potential slide into barbarism that characterises our times, you could do worse than to turn to an astonishing new resource that has for the first time been made available to the public. Rahul Sagar, an academic at NYU, and his associates have laboriously created the single most comprehensive, and searchable, database of over three lakh articles published in all Indian periodicals published in India between 1857 and 1947. The database is ideasofindia.org. This database is an astonishing act of public service. It conveys the sheer romance of what a love of ideas looks like, and the meticulous care that has to go into preserving access to them. The database is also a reminder of the way in which we have desecrated even our own recent past. Most of the amazing periodicals used in this are not available in India; and most are not accessible. It is almost as if the literal, physical rotting away of our recent heritage, is also a metaphor for the rotting away of our memories and our minds. We are obsessed with history, but not so much to deepen our understanding of how we came to be, but to ransack it for our purposes.

This database will almost certainly transform our understanding of India's past. It is an access to an amazingly vibrant public sphere that is deeply thoughtful and wide ranging. It is contentious but sincere and respectful. It is almost impossible to list the many profound ways in which perusing the lists of articles, let alone digging them up and reading them, will change your perspective on Indian intellectual history. The database is a reminder of the fact that the big contentious debates of Indian spiritual, political, economic and social life are not often accurately reflected in the big, and conventional figures we all study or distilled in books. They surface as powerful undercurrents in a variety of genres and forms. The database will broaden your sense of the ideological perspectives available to Indians, and the idioms in which they were expressed. For example, if you want access to a genuine conservative "Right", you might have to access a periodical called *Hindu Outlook*, *Brahmavadin* or *Arya* rather than *Savarkar* or *Golwalkar*. But your sense of the diversity of Left cultural engagement also will change.

The preoccupations of the Indian public sphere are often surprising. You almost get the sense that India was intellectually far more preoccupied with the world than we had imagined: Indians debating everything from US immigration policy to geopolitics. The prehistories of all our debates, from corruption to representative government, from caste to labour, jump out in ways that suggest that we have made fewer advances in these areas than we think. The preoccupation with gender in these periodicals is truly striking. In short, this database gives you access to a society's process of acquiring self-knowledge in all its variety and sophistication. It was this conversation through which new India was stitched.

There is much to learn from this boundless ocean. But often, the most surprising things are the less known ones. Just two randomly chosen instances. The single best thing ever written on the idea of the university in India is Ashutosh Mukherjee's Convocation Address to Mysore University in 1916, and published in the now inaccessible *Dacca Review* (October 1918). It literally anticipates every single debate we have on the idea of the university — from finance to governance, from pedagogy to the romance of research — but with a rigour, insight and generosity that is a reminder of how small we have become. This should be compulsory reading for everyone concerned with higher education. Nothing written on the subject surpasses these few pages.

You will discover something new about the histories of disciplines in India — the early debates over development, the transformation of both Indian philosophy in India and the reception of Western philosophy, and of course, politics. It made it easier to, for example, follow the modern India debate over Sankara, or the reception of Hegel. You will find religion in the process of transformation.

But there are smaller sidelights. Here is a small vignette. One idiosyncratic figure who I discovered is a gentleman called Vasudeo Metta, an astonishing polymath. I had first been directed to him by Isaiah Berlin's *Personal Impressions*. There is an amusing story there about Berlin applying to Oxford. His admission test required him to write an essay on "Bias in history." Berlin simply says that in his answer he "reproduced" an article with the same title by an Indian that had just been published by T S Eliot in *New Criterion*. It turns out from this archive that Metta wrote powerfully on every subject under the sun from geopolitics to culture, crossing swords with everyone from Eliot to Chesterton (who, in turn, provokes Gandhi). But what strikes you about him is not just his learning, but his confidence in taking on everything from what we now call Orientalism to European history with panache and confidence.

Such an archive is a cautionary tale at so many levels. It will cure you of hubris. Reading through the kinds of debates people were actually having knocks down more preconceptions than you can imagine. Seeing ideas in their full flow will cure you both of nostalgia and despair. Just a search on “corruption” and “communalism”, for example, will remind you that human nature in India did not suddenly transform in 1947. It will remind you of how much subtle counter resistance there was to caste reform even as social reform currents were gathering speed. You see traditions, both Hindu and Islamic, being made and remade in front of your eyes.

At this moment, such an archive is of immense importance. Even amidst the disagreements, you will glimpse a right-wing that even as it is being reactionary, at least has some semblance of an argument; it is still intellectual and learned in the best sense of the term. You will see a Left, instead of rehearsing shibboleths, at least trying to understand what adapting radicalism to India means. And there is a whole mass of people, wrestling with liberal institutionalism — from representation to federalism, in all its complexity. And you will see lots of people defying easy categorisation. But most of all you see an intellectual culture that was far more self-confident, despite labouring under the burden of colonialism. It could openly embrace serious debate and act, as if the whole world was its oyster.

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