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Author
Bevir, Mark

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THEOSOPHY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

By

Mark Bevir

Department of Political Science

University of California, Berkeley

Berkeley

CA 94720

USA

[E-mail: mbevir@socrates.berkeley.edu]

ABSTRACT

A study of the role of theosophy in the formation of the Indian National Congress enhances our understanding of the relationship between neo-Hinduism and political nationalism. Theosophy, and neo-Hinduism more generally, provided western-educated Hindus with a discourse within which to develop their political aspirations in a way that met western notions of legitimacy. It gave them confidence in themselves, experience of organisation, and clear intellectual commitments, and it brought them together with liberal Britons within an all-India framework. It provided the background against which A. O. Hume worked with younger nationalists to found the Congress.

KEYWORDS: Blavatsky, Hinduism, A. O. Hume, India, nationalism, theosophy.

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THEOSOPHY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS[1]

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885. Throughout much of the preceding century, a variety of organisations had striven to initiate reform among the religions of the sub-continent. The Brahmo Sabha, the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical Society, and other groups, had developed broadly similar doctrines and practices which can be described as neo-Hinduism (Bharati 1970; Jones 1989). What was the relationship of this neo-Hinduism to political nationalism? I want to explore this question by focusing on the role played by one expression of neo-Hinduism, namely theosophy, in the formation of the Indian National Congress. In doing so, I hope to highlight a neglected aspect of the role of western concepts of eastern societies within eastern societies themselves. Recent studies of indology emphasise the way western conceptualisations of India undermined the ability of Indians to govern themselves by ascribing reason and authority to their colonial rulers (Inden 1990). However, in so far as indology legitimised British rule by ascribing certain characteristics to the west, it also made it possible for Indians to legitimise their political aspirations by ascribing these characteristics to themselves. Western-educated Indians were not slow to represent classical Hinduism and traditional Indian society as rational, scientific, and moral, even as having a desirable spiritual dimension the west lacked (Bharati 1970; Killingley 1995). Moreover, a number of western occultists and radicals adopted a similar view of the superiority of ancient India as a critique of their religious and social traditions.[2] Crucially, both western-educated Indians and western occultists sometimes used their vision of ancient India, and the organisations through which they promoted it, to advance the political cause of Indian nationalism.[3]

In what follows, therefore, I will explore the appeal of theosophy both to British people who were discontented with their civilisation, and to western-educated Indians looking for a way of legitimising their culture in the face of the challenge of the west. Moreover, when exploring its appeal to western-educated Indians, I also will argue its doctrines and the nature of its appeal give us good reason to regard it as

part of the broader neo-Hindu movement. Having thus established that theosophy was a part of the neo-Hindu movement, I will go on to use a study of theosophy to illustrate the contribution of neo-Hinduism to Indian nationalism. I will explore the way in which British and Indian theosophists were able to use theosophy both indirectly and directly to promote the formation of the Indian National Congress.

The Appeal of Theosophy

To begin, therefore, we need to understand what theosophy was, and why it appealed to some Britons in India, including A. O. Hume. We need to do so because later we will find theosophy's contribution to Indian nationalism arose out of the way it brought Indians together with such Britons to promote confidence, experience of organisation, and shared intellectual commitments. Madame Blavatsky (nee. Hahn) provided the inspiration for the Theosophical Society, formed in 1875 (Campbell 1980). She was born into an aristocratic Russian family, but at the age of seventeen, after three months of an unhappy marriage, she ran away and entered the world of the occult (Fuller 1988; Williams 1946). By 1875 she occupied a prominent place in the American spiritualist movement: she wrote articles defending the authenticity of spiritualist happenings, and was herself credited with causing spiritualist phenomena. When she went to investigate spirits that allegedly had materialised in Vermont, she met Henry Olcott, a veteran of the Civil War, who was reporting on the phenomena for The Sunday Chronicle (Olcott 1875). Soon afterwards, Olcott became the first President of the Theosophical Society, although Blavatsky remained its prophet and also the power behind the throne. The theosophists adopted three basic aims: to promote the brotherhood of man, to investigate the hidden powers of life and matter, and to encourage the study of comparative religion.

The doctrine Blavatsky gave to the Society derived from the western occult tradition (Ellwood 1979). She argued that occultism related to spiritualism "as the infinite to the finite, as the cause to the effect, or as the unity to multifariousness," and so she wanted to shift attention from the spiritualist movement towards the occult

tradition with its cosmologies, magicians, and mystics (1977: I,101-2). The whole universe, she argued, emanates from an infinite being infusing all things (Blavatsky 1888). It evolves through a plethora of cycles, moving out from the infinite and becoming increasingly physical, until, at last, it reaches a turning point, after which it retraces its route, finally being reabsorbed into the infinite being from which it first arose. Here Blavatsky defended mystical experience by reference to the infinite in us all. She argued that we can come into contact with the divine spark inside us by adopting an appropriate set of ascetic practices: mystics purify themselves in order to have unmediated experience of their true unity with God. Behind the visible physical realm there lies a spiritual one that corresponds exactly to it and gives it life, and beyond both of these realms there lies the eternal infinite being, the source of all things. Here Blavatsky defended the possibility of natural magic by reference to the spiritual realm. She argued that spirit links all the objects of our physical world in a single set of mutual sympathies; and because magicians know the nature of these sympathies, they can act on one physical object so as to influence the spiritual realm and thus bring about a desired effect on another physical object that stands in a sympathetic relationship to the first one. The most advanced portion of humanity already have become highly spiritual beings. They are on the return road to the divine. Nonetheless, some of them have chosen to watch over our progress, and, when necessary, to aid us by their interventions in the physical and spiritual realms. These Masters constitute the Great White Brotherhood of Mahatmas who live in the Himalayas. Blavatsky claimed this Brotherhood gave her her orders: it was they who instructed her to form the Theosophical Society, and to write the works in which she expounded her doctrines (Johnson 1994).

In 1879, Blavatsky and Olcott travelled to London, where they met the members of the British Theosophical Society, formed on 27 June 1878 under the leadership of Charles Massey, a barrister. The most immediate appeal of theosophy to people such as Massey lay in its development of spiritualism.[4] Spiritualism attracted great interest in British Society: the patrons of the Society for Psychical Research

included powerful figures such as the Balfours and the Gladstones as well as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Oppenheim 1985; Podmore 1902). The Theosophical Society capitalised on this interest by winning converts from organisations such as the British National Association of Spiritualists. Blavatsky argued that spiritualism would fall before its detractors unless it expanded to embrace occult philosophy. In a way she was right, for the interest in spiritualism owed at least as much to broader shifts in the intellectual life of the country as to a specific interest in raps and other phenomena. The fundamental appeal of theosophy lay, therefore, in the response it offered to the various dilemmas that constituted the Victorian crisis of faith. In the minds of many Victorians, geological discoveries and evolutionary theory had combined to pitch science against Christianity. Theosophy offered them a religious faith that appeared to embrace these discoveries whilst also sustaining a spiritual interpretation of life. Blavatsky assured her readers the occultists had anticipated modern science, and her cosmology certainly occupies a geological timescale and portrays the history of the universe as an evolutionary process. Thus she could claim her doctrines provided "the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology" (1972: I,VII). In addition, the expansion of the British Empire, the discovery of alternative cultures with a long and impressive past, and the development of cheap and popular forms of communication; all these things combined to give many Victorians a taste for the exotic as illustrated by the fashionable interest in the artefacts and beliefs of other peoples. Theosophy offered Victorians an exotic faith allegedly derived from Masters from Tibet. It did so at a time when people experienced cultural and geographic distances as long enough for the Great White Brotherhood to sound plausible, but short enough for this plausibility to be alluring.

After visiting Britain, Blavatsky and Olcott travelled on to India, where they landed at Bombay in January 1879. Here too they attracted support from within the British community. The appeal of theosophy to Britons in India was, of course, much the same as to people such as Massey. Blavatsky and Olcott obtained their entry into the British community, for example, largely through the good offices of A. P. Sinnett,

whose interest in them extended a prior involvement with spiritualism (Sinnett 1986). Sinnett edited the Allahabad Pioneer, and his coverage of Blavatsky was so extensive and favourable that he lost his job. Hume met Blavatsky and Olcott at Allahabad, and, after spending some time with them, concluded most of the phenomena linked with her, about which Sinnett wrote a book, were genuine (Sinnett 1881). Hume, the son of Joseph Hume, a Radical social reformer who had been active in the movement to repeal the Corn Laws, joined the East India Company in 1849 and rose to a high position in the Indian Civil Service, though he never got the seat on the Viceroy's Council for which he hoped (Wedderburn 1913). It is possible that one of the reasons he failed to attain the highest offices was his clear commitment to social and political reform in India. In 1882 he retired to Simla, where he became a confident of the new Viceroy, Lord Ripon.[5] Hume joined the Theosophical Society in 1880, became the President of the Simla Branch in 1881, and seems to have provided the financial backing that enabled Blavatsky to begin publishing The Theosophist.

Before long, Sinnett and Hume began to send letters to, and supposedly receive letters from, two of the Great White Brotherhood - Koot Hoomi and Morya.[6] The process of communication depended on the role as an intermediary of Blavatsky, whose authority over the Theosophical Society rested largely on her unique ability supposedly to communicate with the Mahatmas. Hume and Sinnett wrote their letters and gave them to Blavatsky who placed them in a wooden box, from where they dematerialised, supposedly having been called away by the Mahatmas. The replies from the Mahatmas apparently precipitated from nowhere, they were found sitting in the shrine, they fell from the ceiling, or they dropped on to a pillow. Understandably Hume became a bit discouraged by this indirect form of communication, and so he began to try to exercise his own occult powers in the hope of developing an ability to communicate directly with the Mahatmas. Eventually, in 1883, he broke with Blavatsky and resigned his post in the Simla Branch of the Society. He did so just before the now notorious Coulomb Affair. (When Blavatsky and Olcott returned to London early in 1884, they left Monsieur and Madame Coulomb in charge of the

Theosophical Society's headquarters at Adyar; the Coulombs then made a number of allegations about the fraudulent ways Blavatsky produced the phenomena associated with her, and an investigation of the shrine in her room lent support to what they had said.) Hume, however, continued to believe in the existence of the Mahatmas and their mission despite both the Coulomb Affair and his personal disagreements with Blavatsky (Ripon Papers). Certainly he thought that the Mahatmas guided not only his spiritual growth, but also, as we will see, his political work.

Theosophy obviously would not have had much impact on Indian nationalism had its appeal been restricted to Britons such as Hume and Sinnett. Next, therefore, we need to understand why it appealed to western-educated Indians, and how it came to be part of a broader neo-Hindu culture. Blavatsky and Olcott had set sail for India in 1879 largely on the strength of their relationship with Dayananda Sarasvati and his Arya Samaj. A chance meeting in 1878 between Olcott and Moolji Thackeray, a member of the Arya Samaj of Bombay, led to a cordial correspondence with both organisations somewhat over-estimating the similarity of their aims. The Council of the Theosophical Society voted in favour of a merger with the Arya Samaj, and, in May 1878, even changed its name to the Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj. When Blavatsky and Olcott landed in Bombay, they were helped by the head of the local Arya Samaj. Although a miss-understanding led him to assume they had more wealth than they did and so overdo the lavishness of his arrangements, and although this caused them to have some doubts about his honesty, the underlying warmth of their feeling for the Arya Samaj remained unaffected at this time. Moreover, after their arrival in India, they attracted supporters from within the Indian community, including prominent men such as Subramanian Aiyar, B. M. Malabari, Raganath Rao, Nurendranath Sen, and Kashinath Telang.[7] To understand both the attraction of the Arya Samaj to theosophists and the attraction of theosophy to some Indians, we need to recognise that although Blavatsky's doctrines derived from the occult tradition, she made a crucial change to that tradition. She located the source of the ancient wisdom in India, not Egypt. She said, "it has been discovered that the very same ideas [as

those the occultists had traced back to ancient Egypt] . . . may be read in Buddhistic and Brahmanical literature" (1972: I,626). The immediate source of the appeal of theosophy to its Indian followers was, of course, just this emphasis on the historical importance and epistemic validity of their Hindu tradition. If we are to understand why this emphasis had the appeal it did, however, we must consider why a number of Indians were ready to welcome a reformulation of their religious heritage. We need to understand how Indians adapted theosophical beliefs for their own purposes. Almost all the Indians who joined the Theosophical Society came from the western-educated elite. The British adopted a policy - most famously expounded by Macaulay - of educating an Indian elite in a western manner with the intention that this elite then would stand between the colonial rulers and the rest of the Indian people. The tension between the indigenous background of this elite and the worldview they encountered during their education left many of them with a sense of cultural crisis. This crisis consisted primarily of a perceived conflict between the Hinduism in which they had been raised and the scientific rationalism of the west; although there was, in addition, a perceived conflict between the social practices of Hinduism and the moral and political values associated with western rationalism and also with Christianity. It was this cultural crisis that provided the background to the neo-Hinduism of the Brahmo Sabha, the Arya Samaj, and also the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society.

The Brahmo Sabha, the Arya Samaj, and the Theosophical Society all reinterpreted Hinduism to bring it more into line with western science and ethics, thereby helping to resolve the cultural crisis described above; and, moreover, they did so in very similar ways. Although there were differences between the three groups, the differences should not obscure the basic similarity of their doctrines. The Brahmo Sabha was formed in 1828 by Rammohun Roy (Kopf 1979). Roy, heavily indebted to Unitarianism, adopted a universalist perspective, according to which all the religions of the world had a shared core dictated by a pure reason; but he also drew on themes found in western indology to argue Vedic Hinduism came nearer to the true universal religion than did Christianity. Thus, Roy called on Hindus to reform their religion so

as to return to the pure Vedanta. It was from this perspective that he condemned the contemporary practices of a corrupt Hinduism, speaking out in favour of widows remarrying, and against both child marriage and sati. Although Dayananda came from Gujurat, and although he formed the first Arya Samaj in Bombay, the Arya Samaj soon came to represent a sort of Punjabi response to Brahmoism, which itself was very much a product of Bengal (Jones 1976; Jordens 1978). Dayananda too called for a return to the pure Vedic faith. He too sought to reform not only strictly religious practices such as idol worship, but also social ones such as child marriage. However, Dayananda rejected Roy's universalism in favour of a militant assertion of Hindu superiority - he even maintained a doctrine of Vedic infallibility, according to which the ancient rishis had grasped all the truths of modern science, including the theory of evolution. The important thing for us to note, however, is the extent to which theosophy embraced core doctrines shared by the Brahmo Sabha and the Arya Samaj. Like Roy and Dayananda, Blavatsky reasserted the validity of Indian culture, especially Hinduism, in the face of the attacks on it by some Christian missionaries. Again like Roy and Dayananda, she did so by appealing to a pure Vedic faith that had become corrupted, where this pure Vedic faith more than met the stringent requirements of a properly defined rationalism. And finally like Roy and Dayananda, she went on to champion various religious and social reforms as necessary to purge Hinduism of its corrupt elements and thereby return it to pure Vedanta. It was with these general doctrines that western-educated Indians, from within the Brahmo Sabha, the Arya Samaj, and also the Theosophical Society, responded to the cultural crisis that then confronted them.[8] We can conclude, therefore, first, that theosophy was part of a broader neo-Hinduism characterised by specific intellectual commitments, and, second, that the attraction of theosophy to a section of Indian society can be explained in much the same way as can that of other neo-Hindu organisations. Although there were differences between neo-Hindu organisations, differences which appear, for example, in the later disagreement between the theosophists and Dayananda, they still

shared various core doctrines in common. Because theosophy incorporated these core doctrines, it came to occupy a place within the neo-Hindu movement.

The Background to Indian Nationalism

So far we have seen why theosophy appealed to both Britons such as Hume and Indians such as Subramanian Aiyar. Moreover, when examining theosophy's appeal to the latter, we saw that theosophy constituted an integral part of a broader neo-Hindu culture; despite its origins in the western occult tradition, its identification of Brahmanism as the ideal source of all religion, and its creative interpretation of Brahmanism as including the scientific and moral doctrines of western rationalism, meant that it shared the characteristic ideas of neo-Hinduism. Having thus grasped the appeal of theosophy, we can turn now to consider its role in relation to the nationalist movement. When we do so, we will treat theosophy as representative of the way neo-Hinduism as a whole fed into the nationalist movement, as well as going on to look at the specific contribution of theosophy itself.

Blavatsky and Olcott were kept under police surveillance for much of the time they were in India. The colonial authorities feared that they might destabilise British rule as a result of their praise of local religions; besides, Blavatsky was a Russian national and the British were concerned about the stability of the Northwestern Frontier in the face of the Russian threat. When Olcott complained about the police surveillance, he elicited a reply in which the authorities said the police would stop bothering the theosophists provided the theosophists agreed to restrict themselves to philosophy and science, avoiding politics (Olcott 1972-75: I,254-57). Although Blavatsky and Olcott agreed to avoid politics, and duly did so, theosophy still had both a diffuse and a specific impact on Indian nationalism. Hume and some western-educated Indians used theosophy to advance political nationalism. Indeed, theosophy provided part of the framework of action of several of those who founded the Indian National Congress.

The western-educated elite in India faced a political crisis as well as a cultural one. Many of them had trained as lawyers, and quite a few had gone to London to do so. Their legal education, especially their encounter with the history and law of the British constitution, often left them with an admiration for British liberty and justice. On the one hand, their respect for the British constitution often reinforced a sense of the virtues of Imperial rule: British rule appeared to be a blessing, a period of tutelage during which the Indian people could learn how to govern themselves in a liberal manner. On the other hand, however, the principles of liberty and justice acted as standards by which they could judge the government of India, and, more often than not, find it wanting: they demanded respect and opportunities from the British; they wanted a place in the structure of government, and they wanted to see progress towards genuine liberty for India. The neo-Hinduism of the nineteenth-century fed this nascent political movement by giving the western-educated elite confidence in themselves, experience of organisation, and clear intellectual commitments. The Theosophical Society provided a vital contribution to each of these areas, adding things not readily available from groups such as the Brahmo Sabha and the Arya Samaj.

The first general contribution of neo-Hinduism to Indian nationalism was the confidence it gave the western-educated elite in their heritage and themselves. The cultural revival in nineteenth-century India brought a new appreciation of Indian civilisation, its values, practices, and institutions. Certainly the theosophists' belief in Indian religion spilled over to a concern with Indian medicine, Indian diet, and other such things. Blavatsky argued that Ayurvedic medicine worked by means of occult laws based on the principle of action at a distance through a knowledge of the sympathies existing between things. She argued that the Indian diet, and especially its emphasis on vegetarianism, aided the development of a mystical spirituality - meat is a heavy food that ties one to the physical realm. The theosophists worked alongside other neo-Hindus to preserve ancient manuscripts, to defend vernacular languages, and to promote Indian dress. The interest and respect thus accorded to Indian

civilisation provided the western-educated elite with resources on which they could draw as they forged a new identity for themselves. The special contribution of theosophy to this growth of confidence lay in the fact that its leaders came from the west. When Olcott disembarked at Bombay in 1879, the first thing he did was to "stoop down and kiss the granite step" in an "instinctive act of 'pooja'" (Olcott 1972-75: 2,213-14). Having arrived at Bombay, Blavatsky and Olcott then went to live in the Indian quarters of the city, not with other members of the European community. More generally, they compared Christianity unfavourably with the religions of India, arguing that the true source of all religions is the Vedic faith, of which Christianity is a notably corrupt form. The theosophists thought of India as a sacred land, so they showed it and its people a respect and admiration that verged on worship.

The second general contribution of neo-Hinduism to Indian nationalism was the experience of organisation it gave to some of the western-educated elite. The Indian people had no real experience of modern politics with its emphasis on popular participation and radical forms of agitation. Indeed, India remained, in many ways, a divided society with few co-operative lines of communication running between the different castes and classes.[9] The organisations of the cultural revival did much to change this. Dayananda initially set out to reform Hinduism by converting his fellow Brahmins: he conveyed his message in Sanskrit and retained many traditions of the sannyasi (Jordens 1978). Later, however, and largely under the influence of the Brahmo Samaj, he turned to the Hindu faithful as a whole: he adopted Hindi instead of Sanskrit and dropped most of the practices of the sannyasi. Many neo-Hindu organisations provided Indians with some experience of agitation among an extended community. The special contribution of theosophy to this experience of organisation lay in the very diversity of those whom it brought together. Where the Brahmo Sabha had little impact beyond Bengali Hindus, and the Arya Samaj beyond Punjabi Hindus, the Theosophical Society was more of an all-India organisation. Its members came from all over the sub-continent. It attracted Parsees, Christians, Sikhs, and even some Muslims, as well as Hindus. And it brought some of the western-educated elite in

Indian society into close contact with liberal members of the British community. The Society began to hold annual conventions as early as December 1881, and these gatherings provided a diverse group of sympathetic people with opportunities to come together to discuss the past, present, and future of India. Links were formed, an understanding of how to deal with others was gained, and a growing sense of a common identity and a common purpose was promoted.

The third general contribution of neo-Hinduism to Indian nationalism was the clear set of intellectual commitments it gave to the western-educated elite in Indian society. As we have seen, the Brahmo Sabha, Arya Samaj, and Theosophical Society espoused a number of common doctrines. They began to describe India as a unity with a common heritage, facing a common set of problems, requiring an all-India solution. Their view of the past centred on a golden age when India had been a paradise free from all the spiritual and social problems of modernity (Bharati 1970). India, they said, was the cradle of all the religions and civilisations of the world. Even today, they argued, the basic strength of India remained its religiosity. India still had a valuable understanding of matters of the spirit that was absent from the west, and without which the west could not for long avert disaster. Unfortunately, however, a number of corruptions had crept into Indian spirituality and thereby undermined the golden age. Blavatsky equated these corruptions with passages she thought the Brahmins had added to the sacred texts to justify a distasteful version of the caste system. It was these corruptions that had left India vulnerable to the British, and arguably even in need of British rule to provide an impetus to real reform. Thus, the Brahmo Sabha, Arya Samaj, and Theosophical Society all called for religious and social reforms to overturn corruptions within Hinduism. The process of reform, they implied, would enable India to recover her lost greatness. The nationalist significance of these neo-Hindu doctrines is indicated by their later appearance as the core ideas of Gandhi's classic work, Hind Swaraj (1938).

The special contribution of theosophy to the intellectual commitments promoted by neo-Hinduism lay in the way it combined praise of India's heritage with a

syncretic openness. Where the Brahmo Sabha and its offshoots often drifted too far from Hinduism towards Unitarianism, and where the Arya Samaj's militant Hinduism put off people from other faiths, the Theosophical Society generally managed to steer a course between these two extremes. On the one hand, Olcott spoke in his inaugural address of "the Vedas" being "the primeval source of all religions": he appealed to Hindus by defending their faith against that of the colonial power (The Theosophist, August 1932). On the other hand, the theosophists insisted that the ancient wisdom was taught by all the religions of the world provided one concentrated on their true esoteric message: they extended their message to appeal to Parsees, Christians, and, in principle, Muslims. The theosophists rejected the militancy of the Arya Samaj with its reconversions and societies for the protection of cows; indeed, they did their best to avoid issues of dogma that divided different faiths. Thus, the Theosophical Society provided a set of beliefs that encouraged Hindus to commit themselves to certain political values, whilst also leaving them room to co-operate with Parsees, Muslims, and also liberal Britons with Christian backgrounds.

The British often argued that India could not be united and independent because the Indian people did not constitute a nation. The Indian people, they said, belonged to diverse regions, faiths, castes, and the like, each of which had its own special identity. Neo-Hinduism, as exemplified by the Theosophical Society, gave nationalists a suitable response to this argument. Nationalists could say not only that India had been a nation in a past golden age, but also that it rapidly was becoming one once again. They could point to objective factors that promoted a sense of national identity: there was British rule over the whole of the sub-continent, and a growth of economic links between the regions. And they could point to the emergence of a subjective awareness of a national identity: there was the sense of a common past and a common predicament, as well as the growth of various all-India organisations for reform. The Indian nation, they could say, was waking up from its long slumber.

The Origins of the Indian National Congress

Neo-Hinduism provided Indian nationalists with confidence, experience of organisation, and the beginnings of an ideology. The importance of neo-Hinduism appears in the way the Theosophical Society provided the framework for action within which some of its Indian and British members worked to form the Indian National Congress.[10] From 1875 through to 1885 a number of young Indian nationalists became increasingly unhappy with their older leaders. Their opposition first became apparent in 1876 when Surendranath Banerjea led a group of young Bengalis in the formation of the Indian Association of Calcutta (Banerjea 1925). These young nationalists broke with the established British Indian Association of Bengal because they thought that it had become tied to the zamindars who showed little - if any - desire to end British rule. Sen, the editor of the Indian Daily Mirror, was a prominent member not just of the Theosophical Society, but also of the Indian Association of Calcutta. Early in 1885, he drew up a proposal for an all-India nationalist association, and then, together with Banerjea and the rest of the Indian Association of Calcutta, he began to organise a conference for the following December to form just such an all-India body. The inspiration for Sen's proposal might well have come from Madras, the venue for the 1884 annual convention of the Theosophical Society. At this convention, Rao argued that the Society should start formally to discuss the political situation in India as well as more strictly religious matters. Although Rao did not get his way, he did arrange a meeting of sympathetic theosophists to be held at his home. Those who attended this meeting included Aiyar, Ananda Charlu, and M. Viraraghavachariar, as well, of course, as Rao himself. They formed the Madras Mahajana Sabha, arguing that the established Madras Native Association had ceased to be of any value to the nationalist cause. Sen had attended some of the meetings leading up to the formation of the Madras Mahajana Sabha, and he must have had some knowledge of its plan to establish an all-India organisation. The Madras Mahajana Sabha planned to arrange a meeting to coincide with the next annual convention of the Theosophical Society. This meeting would promote their idea of an all-India body. Later in 1885, Malabari, Telang and other nationalists, such as

Pherozeshah Mehta and Dadabhai Naoroji, organised the Bombay Presidency Association as a radical alternative to the older Bombay Association. Throughout India, therefore, theosophists were joining with other young nationalists to advance a more radical agenda, at the very heart of which lay the idea of an all-India organisation.

Hume was probably the single most important individual for the formation of the Indian National Congress. He said that in 1878 he read various documents that convinced him large sections of the Indian population violently opposed British rule, and some even plotted rebellion (Wedderburn 1913: 78-83).[11] These documents were communications he had received supposedly from the Mahatmas - Koot Hoomi and Morya. In one of the letters the Mahatmas supposedly sent Sinnett, they explained how the Great White Brotherhood successfully had controlled the Indian masses in the Rebellion of 1857 so as to preserve Imperial rule, which apparently was necessary to bring India to its allotted place in a new world order (Morya 1923: 324). Now the Mahatmas seemed to be directing Hume to maintain the correct balance between east and west (Ripon Papers). Certainly Hume thought the Mahatmas were superhuman beings with a special interest in the welfare of India. He believed their occult powers meant they possessed an unquestionable knowledge of Indian affairs; and, of course, their intense spirituality meant they were undeniably trustworthy. From their exalted position, the Mahatmas saw India was in danger, and, knowing of Hume's interest in the East and his political contacts, they had come to him to avert the danger. They had decided to reveal some of their wisdom to him so he could do what was necessary to forestall chaos. Even after Hume had turned against Blavatsky, he continued to believe in the Great White Brotherhood, their powers and their mission. Now he thought the Mahatmas, with their impeccable credentials, had chosen to pass some of their understanding on to him so he might act accordingly. They had warned him of an impending catastrophe so he might ward-off the disaster of which they wrote. His desire to do so now informed his political work. Hume tried to influence politics in two ways. First, he tried to convince Ripon to reform the administration of India so as

to make it more responsive to the Indian people (Ripon Papers). Second, he tried to promote an all-India organisation so as to give voice to the concerns and aspirations of the Indians themselves (Wedderburn 1913).

Early in 1885, Hume helped to bring about the formation of the Bombay Presidency Association. Really, however, he wanted to create an all-India body, and he immediately used the Bombay group as a springboard from which to advance his idea of an Indian National Union. Soon he acquired the backing of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, as well as the Bombay group, for a proposal to schedule an all-India political conference to be held in Poona during December 1885. His quarrel with Blavatsky meant, however, that he had to work hard to win over the theosophists of the Madras Mahajana Sabha and the Indian Association of Calcutta. By May, he had visited Madras not only to discuss his proposals for the Poona conference with the members of the Mahajana Sabha, but also to put forward his views on the way the Theosophical Society should revive itself in the wake of the Coulomb fiasco. He did enough to convince the local leaders to fall in with his plans for an Indian National Union. Next Hume travelled to Calcutta where he seems to have contacted several prominent members of the Indian Association. Although Sen decided to give his backing to Hume, many of the others did not, preferring instead to go ahead under Banerjea's leadership with their alternative conference. An outbreak of cholera in Poona forced Hume to change the venue of his proposed conference, but, finally, in December 1885, the Indian National Union convened in Bombay (Indian National Congress 1885). Those present immediately renamed themselves the Indian National Congress, and when the Congress next met in December 1886, it did so in Calcutta, thus ensuring the adherence of Banerjea's alternative National Conference (Indian National Congress 1886).

The Indian National Congress was formed by nationalists from all over India together with a retired British official. Hume worked alongside some of the people he had met at the annual conventions of the Theosophical Society - Malabari, Rao, and Sen - in order to arrange the founding conference of Congress. The Theosophical

Society made it possible for someone like Hume to work in the way he did alongside Indian nationalists, and if he had not done so, it would have been, at the very least, more difficult to found an all-India political body. "No Indian could have started the Indian National Congress," G. K. Gokhale later wrote: "if the founder of the Congress had not been a great Englishman and a distinguished ex-official, such was the distrust of political agitation in those days that the authorities would have at once found some way or other to suppress the movement" (Wedderburn 1913: 63-4).

Conclusion

No doubt the western conceptualisation of the east generally served to subjugate the Indians to their colonial rulers, but it also provided a set of beliefs to which disgruntled western occultists and radicals, and also western-educated Indians, could appeal in order to defend the dignity and worth of Indian religion and Indian society. No doubt the founding theosophists had no intention of promoting political radicalism on the sub-continent, but the discourse they helped to establish provided others with an instrument they could use for political ends. Indeed, the formation of the Indian National Congress shows how western-educated Indians were able to join with Hume to promote their political ends using the particular advantages that involvement in the Theosophical Society had given them. The founders of the Indian National Congress relied on the contacts and commitments generated within the Society; they relied on a capacity for, and a belief in, co-operation, both at an all-India level and also between Indian nationalists and liberal Britons; and they relied on a background discourse that emphasised the strength and claims of India, its heritage, and its religion.

Although we have focused on the origins of the Indian National Congress, the process we have uncovered continued to operate for much of the nationalist era. Annie Besant, like Hume and Sinnett, used theosophy to resolve the Victorian crisis of faith after she had spent some time investigating spiritualist phenomena, and her theosophy combined with her radicalism to take her into the nationalist movement,

where she became the only western woman ever to be elected as President of the Indian National Congress (Taylor 1992). Gandhi, like Malabari, Rao, and Sen, used theosophy to help restore his pride in his native culture to support his vision of ancient India as a vital, rational, and moral society (Gandhi 1948). British occultists, such as Besant, and western-educated Indians, such as Gandhi, turned to theosophy for different reasons, but once they had done so, they shared practices and intellectual commitments that helped sustain the nationalist movement.

[1] I thank the Leverhulme Trust for awarding me a Travel Abroad Studentship with which to pursue my research.

[2] Although we will focus on the way theosophists used a vision of India as a basis for a critique of western civilisation, the same is true of various other groups, including the American transcendentalists (Christy 1932).

[3] The occult tradition also supported various expressions of nationalism in the west (Webb 1974 & 1976). However, the links between the two were different from those found in the Indian case. Within the west, the occult tradition provided a basis from which to criticise Enlightenment liberalism in a way that could lend support to what were often anti-rationalist forms of nationalism.

[4] Webb (1938) offers an excellent contemporary account of the context of religious concerns and beliefs within which theosophy became so popular.

[5] Throughout this essay the information given about Hume's views derives primarily from his letters to Lord Ripon (Ripon Papers). These letters show Hume to have been genuinely committed to the cause of reform in India rather than a stooge planted among the nationalists by the colonial authorities.

[6] The letters to Sinnett are collected in Morya (1923). On the nature and context of the bizarre claims Blavatsky made about the Mahatmas see Johnson (1994). Our purpose, however, is not to condemn her claims, but rather to explore the role Indian nationalists were able to make of the theosophical discourse in which these claims were embedded.

[7] There is no reliable study of the membership of the Society. The information given here relies on research in the Archives of the Theosophical Society. Most of the information on the activities of the early Theosophists in India comes either from these Archives or The Theosophist.

[8] This, of course, is why these general doctrines have proved so central to modern Hinduism (Bharati 1970; Jones 1989)

[9] That the divisions in Indian society persisted through the nationalist era has been emphasised by the Cambridge school (Seal 1968) and the Subaltern Studies movement (Guha 1982).

[10] On the general background to the Indian National Congress see Mehrotra (1971) and Seal (1968). For developments in the main regions see Banerjea (1925), Johnson (1973) and Suntharalingam (1974).

[11] Wedderburn (1913) somewhat glossed over the place of Theosophy – especially the Mahatmas – in his account of Hume's political work. No doubt he did so because he was a friend of Hume's, and he regarded Hume's attachment to them as superstitious and so disreputable.