Humanism in Modern India
An Interview with V. M. Tarkunde

Tariq Ismail

The place and relevance of radical humanism in India today must be seen against the historical background of the development of the Indian nationalist movement and its vehicle, the Indian National Congress (hereafter referred to as the “INC,” or simply “the Congress”). The INC was founded in 1885 by Western-educated liberals like G. K. Gokhale, who were great admirers of British institutions, British ways, and British liberal political thinkers. They were much impressed by Western achievements in science and technology. Politically, they were moderate and hence were tolerated and even encouraged by the British. Being rationalists, they fought against religious superstition, tried to abolish *suttee*, establish widow remarriage, and championed many other liberal causes.

The partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1907 was seen as a slap in the face by many Bengalis, who then flocked to join the Congress. This led to the formation of a radical wing within the INC. With the death of the moderate G. K. Gokhale in 1915, the leadership passed to extremists like B. G. Tilak, who advocated a more militant attitude toward the British government. Tilak (1856-1920), a Maharashtrian Brahmin from Pune, brought a religious element into the Indian nationalist movement (often organizing religious festivals), which he greatly expanded.

At about the same time, Gandhi returned to India from South Africa and was soon organizing mass civil disobedience against the British government. He received the immediate support of thousands in many states, and soon the Congress leadership passed from Tilak to Gandhi. Between them, they transformed the Congress into a party of the people.

Gandhi appealed to the masses because he spoke to them in a language they understood—the traditional language of Hinduism. He championed their causes, was genuine in his desire to eradicate poverty, and strove all his life for cooperation and harmony between workers and landlords and between Muslims and Hindus. He was opposed to the custom of untouchability and later to the entire caste system. Gandhi lived simply and truthfully and, of course, introduced nonviolence as a moral principle into the nationalist movement. His other great contribution to Indian politics was his insistence on political and economic decentralization.

And yet, from the point of view of humanism, Gandhi’s influence was not all positive. “Gandhi disliked modern science, modern civilization, modern industry, modern medicine,” wrote V. M. Tarkunde in *Radical Humanism*. Gandhi brought religion into politics and was not a secularist; nor was he a rationalist in that he never questioned religious orthodoxy and most Hindu traditions—his actions being dictated by an inner voice that he considered to be the voice of God.

Under Gandhi, the nationalist movement remained a negative, anti-British movement with little or no democratic content. “Given the prevailing tradition of blind faith and lack of self-reliance, what the Gandhi-led masses aspired for was Ramraj [benevolent absolute rule] rather than Swaraj [self-rule],” wrote Tarkunde. He continued:

The Indian nationalist movement did little at the last stage to achieve India’s independence. What it achieved was that the power voluntarily surrendered by the British rulers after the Second World War came into the hands of the INC, and that too after the partition of the country and after a fratricidal Communal Carnage in which hundreds of thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs killed each other.

Despite real progress in education and industry under Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s democracy remained unstable and weak. People continued to be ruled by blind faith rather than reason and looked to political saviors rather than themselves for the solution of modern ills.

The shakiness of Indian democracy was illustrated in 1975 by the ease with which Indira Gandhi put opposition leaders in prison, imposed severe press censorship, and proclaimed a national state of emergency. Although Indira Gandhi was defeated in the 1977 general election, she was reelected in 1980, and once again the country drifted toward authoritarianism.

Indian democracy has done little to improve the lives of the majority of the people, who continue to live in extreme poverty. Corruption is rife in Indian political life. The caste system remains as strong as ever and is shamelessly exploited for political reasons. The majority remain untouched by the improvements in higher education. Under such conditions, the possibility of a dictatorship coming to power in India is real. If a real democracy is to be established then we need to spread humanist values among the people and, as Tarkunde said, to develop their “initiative for the formation of suitable organisa-

---

Tariq Ismail teaches English at the University of Toulouse in France. He was born in India to a Muslim family and was educated in England, where he studied European art history, Islamic culture, and philosophy. He is a secular humanist.

---

Summer 1986
tions and the adoption of appropriate action for a radical transformation of the existing political, economic and social institutions.”  

Radical humanism in India was founded by the brilliant thinker and activist M. N. Roy (1887-1954). Roy was born in 1887 to a Brahmin family in Bengal. The early part of his life was spent in the Indian nationalist cause. In 1916, Roy left India in search of arms for the nationalist cause and did not return until 1930. It was during his years abroad, in the United States, Mexico, Germany, the U.S.S.R., and France, that Roy became a full-fledged communist. He became a well-known figure in international communist circles and by 1926 was elected a member of all four official policy-making bodies of the Communist International—the Praesidium, the Political Secretariat, the Executive Committee, and the World Congress. Soon afterward, Roy clashed with Stalin and was expelled from the party. As Roy himself said, his main offense was his “claim to the right of independent thinking.”

Roy returned to India in December 1930. He was arrested in Bombay in July 1931 and remained in jail until 1936. After his release, Roy campaigned on behalf of the INC. At the same time, he sought to strengthen the movement with democratization and radicalization, working from the bottom up in the organization. To this end, he initiated a program that was based on the radical demands of the peasants and workers. It was not liked by the majority of the Congress leaders. Roy’s reaction was to organize an alternative revolutionary leadership, for which purpose the League of Radical Congressmen was founded. The outbreak of World War II led Roy to part company with the INC. Unlike the INC, Roy was totally opposed to fascism. “If fascism succeeds in establishing its domination over the whole of Europe,” he wrote, “then goodbye to revolution and goodbye to Indian freedom as well.” Moreover, Roy correctly predicted that the “defeat of Fascism will weaken imperialism,” and would bring India nearer to the goal of democratic freedom.

The Indian people, being anti-British and unaware of the dangers of international fascism, welcomed the prospect of a Nazi victory. Roy, being a man of principles and courage, was undeterred and advocated a program of support for the British. However, Congress leaders were unwilling to unconditionally support the British government and insisted that it first agree to set up an Indian national government with full autonomy over defense and foreign affairs. But Roy argued that, if the defeat of fascism was necessary for Indian democracy, it was wrong to put conditions on the offer of help. Nevertheless, Congress leaders banned the anti-fascist meetings of the League of Radical Congressmen. This led Roy and his followers to leave the Congress in December 1940 and to found the Radical Democratic Party (RDP).

An RDP study camp in May 1946 marked the beginning of Roy’s radical humanism and his complete rejection of communism. At this camp, Roy pointed out that “Communism was no longer an unrealized utopia, that its clay feet were visible in what was happening in Soviet Russia, and that a liberating revolution could no longer take place under the discredited flag of Communism and that we should work for a higher ideal, the ideal of achieving human freedom.”

At the All India Conference of the RDP in Bombay in December 1946, Roy prepared what came to be known as the twenty-two theses of radical humanism. These principles included the ideas of individual freedom—which was not to be sacrificed in the name of a collective ego—rationalism, democracy organized from the lower rungs of society, and the importance of education in eliminating exploitation of the masses and poverty. At his colleagues’ request, Roy prepared a manifesto that was published in May 1947 under the title “New Humanism—A Manifesto.” The manifesto dealt with the inadequacy of contemporary ideologies and the degeneration of communist theory and practice, and presented the outline of the philosophy of a new humanism.

Roy finally came to the conclusion that political parties were inconsistent with the ideal of democracy and that they encouraged power struggles. He was of the opinion that political power in a democracy should reside in organizations of the people and should not be usurped by any political party. These ideas inevitably led to the dissolution of the Radical Democratic Party in December 1948. Roy’s followers then launched the Indian Radical Humanist Movement, which later became the Radical Humanist Association.

Vithal Mahadev Tarkunde was born on July 3, 1909, at Saswad, a village in the Pune district. Following his studies at Bombay University, the Agricultural College at Pune, and the London School of Economics, Tarkunde began his career as a barrister. Like many politically active and educated lawyers, he joined the INC. In 1935, Tarkunde joined the Congress Socialist Party and was a secretary of the Maharashtra branch. He met M. N. Roy in 1936, and, in 1942, decided to devote all his energies to working for the Radical Democratic Party, of which he was general secretary from 1944 to 1948.

Tarkunde resumed his legal practice in 1948 and became a judge in the Bombay High Court in 1957. He retired from the bench in 1969 and began work as a senior advocate of the Supreme Court in Delhi. Since that time Tarkunde has increasingly devoted himself to the cause of maintaining and preserving civil liberties. The Radical Humanist Association was formed in the same year, and Tarkunde served as its president until 1980. Since 1970 he has been editor of the Radical Humanist, a monthly journal published in New Delhi.

In April 1974, along with Jayaprakash Narayan, Tarkunde founded Citizens for Democracy, expressly to defend and strengthen democracy in India. In September 1976, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights (PUCL) was formed with Narayan as president and Tarkunde as acting president. To quote his friend Nani Palkhivala: “During the dark days of the Emergency Tarkunde was in the forefront of the movement to prevent India from being rolled up into authoritarianism and from sliding into conformist darkness.”

Tarkunde is also chairman of the Indian Renaissance Institute, a research society founded by M. N. Roy that produced a plan of economic development called “People’s Plan II.” Tarkunde was also chairman of several committees investigating alleged killings and the convenor of two committees appointed to investigate the Emergency.
by the Citizens for Democracy to foster electoral reforms.

In recognition of his contribution to the defense of human rights, Tarkunde was given the 1978 International Humanist Award by the International Humanist and Ethical Union. The Academy of Humanism in the United States elected Tarkunde as a Humanist Laureate in 1984 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the principles of humanism, rationalism, and free inquiry.

The following interview was conducted in New Delhi in September 1985.

Ismail: Where did you grow up?
Tarkunde: Initially I lived in a village and then at Pune [Poona]. I moved from my village when I was about eleven years old. I was in Pune for quite some time. At the age of twenty, I went to England. I was there for three years as a student, and studied law at the London School of Economics. I returned to India in 1932 at the age of twenty-three.

Ismail: Did you grow up in a religious atmosphere?
Tarkunde: Well, it was a reformist religious atmosphere. My father was inclined to be very sympathetic toward the lowest caste—the Harijan, the untouchables. In fact, he was excommunicated from the Brahmin community because he had started a small-scale industry to give some additional income to the untouchables. He always associated with non-Brahmins—in that way he was a very progressive person. But he was a religious person in the sense that he believed in God and believed in several tenets of Hinduism, but not in an orthodox way.

Ismail: Was there any particular writer or thinker who was influential in your intellectual development?
Tarkunde: In my early years, there was a strong reformist school. Its members were rationalists, and they could be called the early Indian humanists. They wanted Indian society to shed many of its negative customs. They were strongly influenced by British liberal thought. Then there was a very important writer, G. K. Agarkar, who was a well-known reformist in Maharashtra. Raja Rammohan Roy and his activities in Bengal also influenced me. There was a similar movement in Maharaashtra. It was represented by people like Jotiba Phule, who was very forward looking. He disliked Brahmins and Banias [merchants]. But I was mainly influenced by Agarkar and to some extent by M. G. Ranade, who was in fact a high court judge.

I became a rationalist very early in life, from the age of twelve, at least. I wanted to know the answer to everything. In fact, I wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi asking why one should pray and how God could answer prayers if God is just? How could God not help those who deserved help but did not pray and yet help those who prayed but did not deserve that help?

Ismail: Did he reply?
Tarkunde: Yes. Gandhi personally wrote a postcard, saying that prayer is good for you because it gives peace of mind. I wrote him a second letter saying that you can’t have peace of mind unless you believe in the efficacy of prayer; and, since I do not believe in the efficacy of prayer, what can I do? He did not reply to that. I was twelve years old at that time.

Ismail: Do you consider yourself a religious humanist?
Tarkunde: No, I am a thorough atheist. I have written a book on radical humanism in which I explain my position.

Ismail: When did your association with American and European humanists begin?
Tarkunde: Relatively recently. M. N. Roy was one of the vice presidents of the inaugural conference of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), which he could not attend because of an accident. The radical humanist movement has been associated with the IHEU since then. But my personal contacts did not come until 1974, when I attended the IHEU conference in Amsterdam. I met most of the leaders in the international humanist movement, including Jaap van Praag, Howard Radest, and Paul Kurtz. Soon after I was chosen as an associate of the Rationalist Association in England. In 1978, they granted me the International Humanist Award. A little later I was elected a member of the American Academy of Humanism.

Ismail: Popularly in the West, India represents spirituality and mysticism. Indian humanism seems a contradiction.

Tarkunde: Most Indians are not mystics. They are materially oriented. It’s true that a majority of Indians are religious-minded and that religion does occupy an important place in their lives. Nonetheless, for quite a few others, religion plays a minor role. Among Hindus, although most of them are committed to their particular religious tenets, there is a degree of tolerance for persons who do not share their beliefs.

In India, there are a large number of actual and potential humanists. The humanist movement is not very strong, but it is not particularly weak either. Humanists are found in many different organizations, not in just one. The largest and perhaps the most vocal organization is the Radical Humanist Association, of which I am one of the founders. Then there is a smaller body, the Indian Humanist Association. There is also the Rationalist Association of India, which is quite active. Many radical humanists are also members of this association. Then there is the Secular Forum, which is based in Bombay. The leading member of that forum was a radical humanist. He passed away a few years ago. The Secular Forum issues a bimonthly magazine called the Secularist. The Radical Humanist Association publishes the Radical Humanist, a weekly that became a monthly in 1970. I am editor of that journal. The circulation is about two thousand. The subscribers are from all over India—many of them are charter members of the Radical Democratic Party. Between fifty and one hundred copies of the journal are sent abroad.

Ismail: What do you see as the role of humanists in India?
Tarkunde: The Radical Humanist Association is concerned with political, economic, and cultural issues. It is not a political party at all. In fact, it doesn’t believe in political parties. It envisions a renaissance in India and strives to spread the spirit of freedom and secular morality, on the basis of which a genuine democracy can be established. These are the principles of radical humanism. That is why we were very active in opposing the state of emergency declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. I was given the Humanist Award in 1978 for my work during the emergency, defending those who had been jailed or were in so-called preventive deten-
tion and fighting for their rights. We were also fighting for the right of free expression.

Our numbers are small but the movement is well known. We associate with organizations like the People's Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights (PUCL)—the most effective and best-organized body for the protection of civil liberties. I was its president for several years, until 1984. We are also associated with the Citizens for Democracy (CFD), of which I am still president. This organization is mainly concerned with grass-roots democracy. We are trying to develop democratic groups among the people on the basis of the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Our objective is social transformation. It is not possible to be a genuine humanist in India and not be concerned with poverty. That's why radical humanists are so politically involved—not in parties, but in efforts to educate the people in democratic values, self-reliance, and self-discipline.

**Ismail:** Are there any well-known Indian personalities who support you?

**Tarkunde:** Yes, although some of them have recently passed away. But radical humanists in India are quite well known in various fields, such as literature, trade unionism, and law.

**Ismail:** Which figures from Indian history would you consider to be humanists?

**Tarkunde:** If you go by religious humanism, of course, there are many. Akbar, for instance, was not a humanist, but he was a broad-minded religious man and did not believe in religious fanaticism.

Humanism places prime importance on human beings, and a humanist holds the view that man is primarily responsible for his own future. For that reason, I would not call these religious leaders of the past humanists, even though some like Akbar were very tolerant and open-minded. Kabir, the fifteenth-century poet, was even more so.

In India, the true humanists were those who were connected with the reformist movements already mentioned—figures such as Agarkar, Ranade, and Ram Mohan Roy. Then came Gandhi. Gandhi was a religious humanist par excellence. He was not a religious reformer, and in some ways his influence was harmful because he was in many ways very orthodox. But he was also a genuine democrat: He treated people as equals and was genuinely concerned about poverty and other social ills.

Nehru was a liberal-minded person, but he was a politician. He believed in secularism to a large extent, but he compromised with his principles. He was basically a man of democratic impulses. The same was true of Jinnah, but he compromised even more. Jinnah became the leader of the Muslims. But I am sure that he had little faith in religion—no deep faith at all. He became their leader because he was a shrewd person and had leadership qualities.

**Ismail:** Are there at present significant forces of religious fundamentalism in India?

**Tarkunde:** I am afraid that they are growing—it's a surprising fact. It's a world phenomenon. One finds it difficult to understand, what with the increase of industry on the one hand and the advance of science on the other.

In India, it's disappointing that, although industry has grown—and so has education, to a certain extent—religious orthodoxy has not decreased. I think there are two reasons for that. First, uncertainty about the future has increased—unemployment and poverty are up, and there is an increase in population. Thus there is a greater dependence on supernatural support. If you can't face life with your own strength you may need the strength derived from religion. The second reason for the growth of religious fundamentalism is that political parties take advantage of the caste sentiments inherent in society and thereby strengthen them. That's one of the reasons communalism and the caste system have not disappeared, as was expected, with the growth of education.

**Ismail:** What about fundamentalism among the Muslims?

**Tarkunde:** Muslims in India are generally more orthodox; they are a community in which a reformist movement has not grown. Muslim reformism is very limited. We, as members of the Radical Humanist Association and Citizens for Democracy, have been trying to stimulate some reform among the Muslims. We investigated the oppression that the reformist section of a community within the Shia sect called the Bohras has been subjected to by the high priest (Syedna). We prepared a report supporting these reformist groups. There is also the Muslim Satyashodak Samaj, which means "search for truth." It was really the work of my friend A. B. Shah, who died recently, and Hamid Dalwai, a Muslim. We and the Secular Forum people are connected with this movement. We have also formed a committee to investigate Muslim law and suggest reforms to protect the interests of Muslim women in divorce cases. Muslim people deserve much better than what they have. They are kept under the religious domination of the mullahs.

**Ismail:** What about the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)?

**Tarkunde:** The RSS is an organization of Hindu fundamentalists. They deny this, but it's true. The members of the RSS are persons who have a great admiration for the Hindu past, but they admire the wrong things. They don't support the caste system, but to a large extent they support Hindu chauvinism. They are usually directly or indirectly connected with riots between Hindus and Muslims. I am not saying that they generate the riots. Many of them are good people and are my friends. But they are very conscious of their Hinduism and strongly believe in its superiority over other religions. They may not start the Hindu-Muslim riots, but once the riots start they are at the head of the Hindu militants.

**Ismail:** Are there fanatical elements in the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal? Do you think there is a solution to the present Sikh problem without secession?

**Tarkunde:** There is certainly a fanatical wing in the Akali Dal. In my view, the growth of Sikh fanaticism and its culmination in terrorism is a result of the power struggle between the Akali Dal on the one hand and the ruling Congress party on the other. The Akali Dal mixed religion with politics by giving a religious color to the secular demands on which the movement was founded. On the other hand, the ruling Congress party refused to come to an understanding with the Akali Dal in regard to their demands, even though such an understanding could have been easily reached. The ruling Congress party did not want such a compromise because it would have resulted in increasing the popularity of the Akali Dal in Punjab. In the absence of any accord between the two groups, the Akali move-
ment fell into the hands of extremists. If an accord between the two parties had been reached in 1982, Sikh extremism and terrorism would never have occurred. The subsequent accord between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the Akali Dal leader, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, has now eased the situation.

The secession of Punjab is simply out of the question. Sikhs in Punjab are 52 percent of the population, while Hindus constitute 48 percent. In view of the opposition to secession by nearly half the Punjab's population, in addition to the opposition in the rest of the country, the formation of a separate Sikh state in Punjab is hardly possible. The remedy lies in effecting cordial relations between the Sikh and Hindu communities in Punjab and isolating the extremists and terrorists.

Ismail: Was the partitioning of India in 1947 a disaster from the point of view of humanism?

Tarkunde: The partitioning of India could have been avoided if the Indian National Congress, which, in effect, represented the Hindu majority, had adopted a broad-minded and liberal attitude toward the natural fear of the Muslim minority of being dominated by the Hindu majority in an independent India. INC did not find it possible to adopt such an attitude toward the Muslim minority, with the result that the partition of the country became inevitable when the British government decided to leave India. Partitioning was certainly a disaster, as it resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of human beings and left a legacy of antipathy and suspicion between India and Pakistan. What humanism requires is to bring about cordial relations between the peoples and, eventually, the governments of the two countries.

Ismail: Could you comment on the political background of the emergency and your work during that time?

Tarkunde: There was no legal justification for the emergency proclaimed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi on June 25, 1975. The proclamation would have been justified in accordance with the Constitution if the security of the country had been threatened by internal dissent. Such a condition did not exist at that time. What had happened was that, in an election petition filed in the Allahabad High Court, the election of Mrs. Gandhi to the Indian Parliament was declared invalid. Mrs. Gandhi had filed an appeal against the decision in the Supreme Court, but she did not think it safe to resign her prime ministership in favor of some other member of her party. There was, on the other hand, a demand by the opposition parties for her resignation. She resolved the problem by proclaiming an emergency in the country, and by arresting all the opposition leaders as well as individuals like Jayaprakash Narayan, who did not belong to any political party, and by enforcing very severe censorship on the press.

My friends and I in the radical humanist movement were very busy during the emergency. We filed a series of habeas corpus petitions for the release of those who had been detained under the law of preventive detention and also for securing certain rights for them, such as having visitors and corresponding with their relatives and friends. We were also engaged in challenging censorship orders issued against various newspapers and periodicals. This work was carried on almost daily throughout the emergency period. We also held conferences and meetings in defense of civil liberties wherever possible, often defying the ban imposed on such meetings on the ground that the ban was not legally justified. Quite a few radical humanists were arrested during the emergency but, for reasons not known to me, I was left free.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 12.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
4. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
6. Raja Rammohan Roy (c. 1772-1833), a Brahmin and the founder of Brahmo Samaj, or the Divine Society, was a remarkable man who, like Akbar and Kabir, worked for interreligious cooperation and radical social reform. He advocated the abolition of suttee and fought for civic and political rights. He firmly believed in reason and the rights of the individual—two principles that he thought were basic to Hindu and Western thought and present, in his view, in the Upanishads.
7. The Muslim emperor Akbar (1542-1605) was a tolerant, open-minded monarch who showed a profound respect for and interest in all religions. He attempted to forge a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam. He made particular efforts to mollify the Hindus, even at great expense to the treasury; for instance, he abolished two much-hated taxes—the pilgrim tax at the holy Hindu city of Mathura, in 1563, and the "jizya," a tax levied on non-Muslims as required by the Koran, in 1564. He also introduced Hindu festivals at Court, and he himself adopted various Hindu customs. He even married Hindu Rajput princesses. Eventually, Akbar developed an ecosystem that was much influenced by Zoroastrianism.
8. Kabir (1435-1518), a Muslim by birth, combined the tenets of Brahminism, Vaishnavism, and Sufism. In his poems he referred to God inter

...more notes...