

An Interview with V. M. Tarkunde: The Grand Old Man of Indian Humanism

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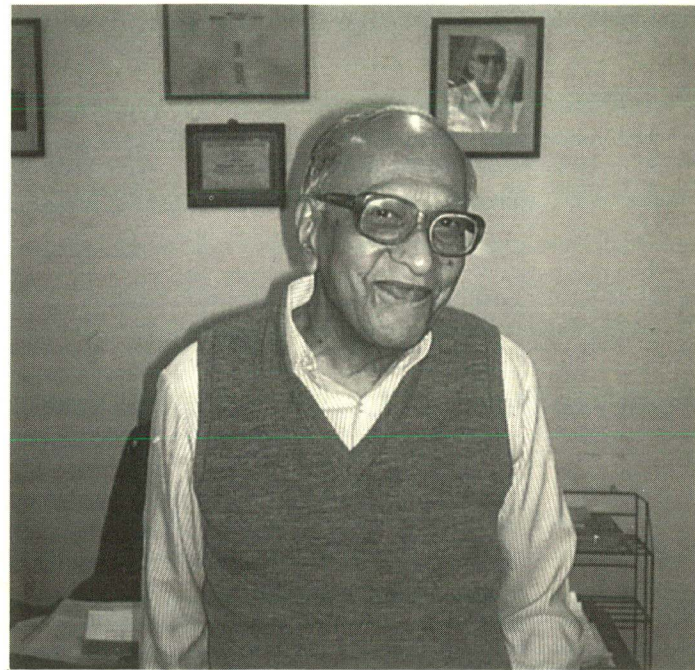
I failed to obtain a visa to India the first time I applied in 1986. Every day for more than a month I called the Indian Embassy to inquire on its status, but there was no answer from Delhi. A formal request from the Foreign Ministry of my native country, Norway, did not help. My plane left without me. No official reason was given, but I was discreetly told by personal connections in the Indian Embassy that the reason for the “delay” was that I had written on my application form that I was going to meet V. M. Tarkunde—the prominent Indian lawyer, civil rights fighter, and humanist leader. He had criticized Indira Gandhi as well as her successor, Rajiv Gandhi, for their anti-democratic policies, and was looked upon as a key person in the movement for true democracy and an end to anti-authoritarian rule in India.

V. M. Tarkunde is now eighty-seven years old and still practicing as a senior advocate at the Supreme Court in New Delhi. He is one of the world’s most prominent humanists. In 1978, he received the International Humanist Award, and, in 1984, he became a member of the Academy of Humanism. Very few humanists have a record like Mr. Tarkunde, from the time he started his career as an idealistic lawyer for poor villagers in the Pune District until, in recent years, he headed committees to investigate police killings of alleged Marxist rebels in suspicious encounters. His book *Radical Humanism* not only presents a philosophical and ethical alternative to religious life-stances, it also contains a program to change Indian society—to abolish repression and poverty and establish true freedom and democracy. His thoughts are inspired by M. N. Roy, who began as an international communist leader and later gave up politics and founded the Radical Humanist movement. V. M. Tarkunde and M. N. Roy worked closely together until Roy died in 1954.

Tarkunde was also the secretary general of the Maharashtra Congress Socialist Party. In 1942 he became a full-time worker and secretary general in the Radical Democratic Party, started by M. N. Roy, serving until the party was dissolved in 1948. Tarkunde then went back to his law practice, became a judge in Bombay High Court, and later a senior advocate in the Supreme Court.

In 1969, Tarkunde became the president of the Indian Radical Humanist Association, a position he held for many years. He is still active within the organization, among other things as editor

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of the magazine *Radical Humanist*. But Indian society will probably first and foremost remember Tarkunde as the leader of organizations and movements defending civil rights and political democracy. For instance, he and Jayaprakash Narayan started an organization called the People’s Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights in 1976 to oppose the Indira Gandhi “emergency,” which suspended civil rights.

The Swedish author Jan Myrdal tells in his book *Indien Ventar* (1980) about a meeting in New Delhi, where Tarkunde was the main speaker. “He has a great moral strength and authority,” Myrdal writes.

To Tarkunde there is no contradiction between being a humanist and a social agitator or even a political activist. On the contrary: “The goal of Indian radical humanists is to bring about a democratic transformation of society,” Tarkunde says. “For this purpose we have to develop a movement based on humanist values by working with the people at the grass-roots level, so that a genuinely democratic state can be created.”

Since 1986, I have visited India eight times—never again mentioning Tarkunde in my visa application! But I have had the privilege to meet him. In his residence, the International Humanist Award plaque has a prominent place.

L EVI FRAGELL: Please describe your background.

V. M. TARKUNDE: My earliest memory is that our family was ex-communicated in the village because my father did not observe untouchability. Actually, my father even helped the so-called Untouchables by purchasing handlooms for them to use so they could get some income. Even though my father came from a very poor family, he had educated himself as a kind of a village lawyer—a so-called pleader. And I succeeded to “stand first” in the matriculation examination at Bombay University. For idealistic reasons I pursued an agricultural education, and thereafter I went to London to study law. Back in India I worked as a lawyer in the villages for seven years.

FRAGELL: Are your ideas and your work inspired by Mahatma Gandhi?

TARKUNDE: Not at all. By the time I became an atheist, in 1929, I had lost my respect for Gandhi. I did not like his extreme orthodoxy. Gandhi’s popularity and appeal was the result of his orthodox views coupled with his dislike of modern civilization. Gandhi was opposed to modern science, modern industry, and even modern medicine; and he preached the virtues of abstinence, celibacy, and devotion to God. On the whole his contribution to the Indian nationalist movement was negative.

FRAGELL: Isn’t it true that India’s independence was won under Gandhi’s leadership?

TARKUNDE: That is a myth. The fact is, the nationalist movement that developed under Gandhi’s leadership was never capable of overthrowing a mighty imperialist power. The Quit India movement started by Gandhi in August 1942 had subsided by November 1942. British imperialism came to an end as a result of Great Britain’s involvement in the Second World War, and the economic and political changes brought about by the war.

FRAGELL: So Gandhi’s example has no value to you?

TARKUNDE: Gandhi’s great merit was to insist that politics must not be divorced from morality. Truth and non-violence were the moral principles he introduced into the Indian nationalist movement. After 1946 or 1947, when Gandhi was no longer concerned with political power, his sterling merit as a moral individual became obvious to me. In my view, the last year of his life was truly glorious.

FRAGELL: One part of radical humanist philosophy is the rejection of the party system in politics. The founder of the movement, M. N. Roy, and yourself have defended the idea that the party system should be replaced by a decentralized democracy—where smaller units of people would have the power to rule their own lives and communities through elected bodies called People’s Committees. Why?

TARKUNDE: The party system is harmful to a genuine democracy in two ways. In the first place it concentrates power in a few hands. Second, in the scramble for power, populist opportunism replaces concern for democratic principles; and morality gets divorced from political practice. But the abolishment of the party system is not a high priority for the Indian Radical Humanist Association.

FRAGELL: In the West, where democracy often is taken for granted, organized humanists have given priority to supporting more private humanist causes, like abortion, euthanasia, and

freedom of sexual expression. Do Indian humanists deal with these kinds of questions?

TARKUNDE: There is not much opposition to abortion in India, and with certain restrictions it is fully legal.

FRAGELL: Doesn’t the Muslim population protest?

TARKUNDE: No, we have no problems with either Hindus or Muslims. It is not at all like the situation in the Christian countries. Euthanasia is not very common in India, but humanists have started some groups to explicitly support euthanasia. They are connected to the International Right to Die Society.

FRAGELL: What about sex?

TARKUNDE: We do not speak very much about it. Extramarital sex is looked down upon, and the female party is publicly condemned. Premarital sex is not accepted by members of the older generation, but more and more young people disagree with their parents.

FRAGELL: What about homosexuality?

TARKUNDE: We have a law against sodomy, but it is not enforced. From my younger days I can remember one single verdict according to this rule, but never since.

FRAGELL: India is a religious country. What do you think of religion yourself?

TARKUNDE: Faith in God and religion is sustained by psychological forces. Humankind has faith in God because men and women lack faith in themselves. The negative role that religion has played can be illustrated by the recent history of any country. That goes also for India. Here religious faith sustained the caste system. A more immoral practice than untouchability can hardly be imagined. Religion also facilitated exploitation of people by rulers. It compelled women to throw themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres, encouraged child marriage, prevented widow remarriage, and opposed the education of girls.

FRAGELL: What about the declining moral standards in countries where religion is losing its power?

TARKUNDE: Religionists attribute this alleged phenomena to the loss of religious faith. The fact, however, is that moral standards have not fallen but have become increasingly inadequate. Modern society is getting more complex with the rapid development of technology, and this requires a corresponding upgrading in moral standards that is not taking place. The remedy is not the recall of religion, but greater recourse to reason.

FRAGELL: I have been told that you want to open up the Radical Humanist Association to religious members. How does this policy correspond with your negative view of religion?

TARKUNDE: In my opinion, a true democrat is also a humanist, even if he may not be an atheist or a scientific humanist. And in India today we need to join all good forces in our struggle for democracy and humanity. The humanist groups are so small, and if we shall have any hope to reach our goals we need new blood in our organizations.

FRAGELL: You are not afraid that religious people will come to dominate your groups and change the profile of organized humanism in India?

TARKUNDE: I believe that we are so strongly committed to rationalism that contact between us and religious humanists is likely to augment their rationalism without affecting ours. •