Organised Atheism in India: An Overview

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ABSTRACT This article provides an overview of the history and the aims and activities of organised atheism in India. Most of the contemporary atheist, rationalist, and humanist groups form part of a larger movement, despite the different labels used. Most of the groups have direct forebears in nineteenth-century England and in the social and religious reform movements of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India. Drawing on a year of ethnographic fieldwork and using the example of the Atheist Centre in Andhra Pradesh, I compare the current aims and activities of atheistic groups in India with those of like-minded groups in the West. I argue that the distinguishing characteristic of the Indian atheist movement is its strong engagement with social and political activism.

Introduction: Atheism in India

For over four millennia, there has not only been a large variety of beliefs and practices generally labelled ‘religious’ from a contemporary perspective in South Asia, but there have also been various forms of criticism of religion. In fact, some people argue that the world’s first atheists were not located in Europe but on the ‘Indian’ sub-continent (Narisetti; Hiorth, Introduction to Atheism; Minois; Laure; Cooke, Dictionary; Flynn). At the same time, it is frequently argued that atheism, as it is understood today, has its roots in Western modernity (Berman; Hyman). With respect to the nāstika (non-Vedic, heterodox) streams of Indian philosophy (dārsānas), which include not only Buddhism and Jainism but also the Loka¯yata (or Cārvāka) tradition, it is debated whether it is an anachronism or a category-mistake to speak of ancient Indian atheism. Loka¯yata is generally described as ‘materialistic’ because of various claims; for example, that the world and humans consist of four elements, that perception is the only means of gaining knowledge, and that there is no life after death. Recent scholarship argues, however, that there is no evidence of a coherent materialistic philosophical system in India before the sixth century (Franco). This article bypasses the complex debates as to whether nāstika schools of thought in general, or early Indian materialism in particular, should be understood as precursors of contemporary atheism in India, given the sparse historical data and the contemporary focus of this journal. Instead, I discuss Indian groups that call themselves atheist today and their recent histories relating to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The topic of (organised) atheism in India has hardly been addressed in academic writing. Stephen Bullivant (363) correctly remarks that the “general dearth of sociological research of atheism” is well documented.
The work by the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), as presented in this special issue, and other publications (e.g. Zuckerman; Amarasingam) indicate that this situation has been changing in recent years with respect to Europe and North America. However, India largely remains the quintessential land of religion and spirituality. The few scholars who focus on the a- or anti-religious traditions in India have argued that selective inattention has produced a substantial bias in the interpretation of Indian thought (see Sen 25). An important exception is Finngeir Hiorth. Other writers on this subject include Ramendra Nath, a lecturer of philosophy at Patna University, who wrote *Rationalism, Humanism and Atheism in Twentieth Century Indian Thought* in collaboration with his wife Kawaljeet. Both are leading members of the Bihar Rationalist Organisation.4 Innaiah Narisetti, the chair of the Indian branch of the US-based Centre for Inquiry, published articles on unbelief and secularity in India ("Atheism", "Unbelief").5 An independent and comprehensive scholarly work is the book *Anti-religiöse Bewegungen im modernen Südinien* by historian of religion Hans-Joachim Klimkeit.

Using these studies and my own work, which is based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork (published as *Disenchanting India: Organized Rationalism and Criticism of Religion in India*), I provide an analysis of contemporary active atheist and rationalists groups in India. As an illustration of the various Indian groups, I provide a description of the Atheist Centre in Andhra Pradesh and the writings of its founder Vikas Gora. The main aim of this article is to highlight the characteristics of contemporary organised atheism in India in comparison with like-minded groups in Western countries.

Before I outline the recent history of atheism in India, some explanatory comments on terminology are needed. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the term ‘free-thinker’ was widely used for self-identification. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first ‘rationalist’ societies were founded. The latter term is the most common label applied in contemporary India. Labels, such as ‘atheist’, ‘rationalist’, ‘(secular) humanist’, ‘secularist’, ‘free-thinker’, and ‘sceptic’, are now used interchangeably. The majority of the groups are part of the umbrella organisation of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA). Similar observations were made by other scholars in India and elsewhere. Hiorth (v), for example, states that, "atheism" is used in "a broad sense and comprises subjects which are also referred to with terms like agnosticism, freethought, naturalism, rationalism, secular humanism, or secularism" (see also Baggini 77, 109; for an historical perspective, see Budd 8–9). According to Goparaju Vijayam, the head of the Atheist Centre (described below), each country tends to favour a particular term, but all terms more or less refer to the same thing:

One should look at all of this as one movement. Otherwise we make the mistake you will find in the caste system where one sub-caste is fighting the other. Our enemies want to split us up. It is one movement and should encompass all of these groups. United we stand, divided we fall. (Vijayawada, 14 November 2007)

In line with these statements I see Indian atheist, rationalist, and humanist groups and organisations as part of the same movement, also because individuals are also often members of different organisations within this movement. They all
seek to spread a scientific worldview (‘scientific temper’) in order to limit the influence of ‘superstitious’ beliefs and practices and religion(s) in general.

The History of Atheism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In general, scholars must not only acknowledge that the British Raj brought about an ‘epistemic rupture’ in India (Kaviraj; Pollock), but also that contemporary India cannot simply be explained by an ‘impact–response schema’ which reduces all phenomena to the Western influence exerted upon them. On the one hand, organised atheist groups have their roots in the various religious and social reform movements of nineteenth-century India (see also below). On the other hand, magazines and books published by atheists in England document the direct influence of Western atheism on the intellectual life of colonial India (see Royle, *Victorian* 171–2), in addition to influential individuals, such as Robert Green Ingersoll (see Klimkeit 70, 82; Rajannan), Charles Bradlaugh (Jahagirdar, *Bradlaugh*; Royle, *Victorian* 171–2), and Annie Wood Besant (see Royle, “Besant”).

There are some groups that vie with each other for being considered the first atheist organisation in India. In South India, the Free Thought Tract Society and the Hindu Free-thought Union were founded at the end of the nineteenth century. Their first major magazines were the *Philosophic Inquirer* and *Thinker*. In Bengal, the Young Bengal Group and its journal *Athenaeum* should be noted. This group formed around the teacher and poet Derozio who was influenced by the French philosopher Auguste Comte and by Francis Bacon, David Hume, and Thomas Paine (Banerjee 23).6

Two further examples of such groups will indicate how certain aspects of the intellectual climate and socio-political reform activities of the time fed into various points of criticism regarding religion across India and significantly

![Rationalist Conference at Palanpur, Gujarat, 24–25 November 2007. (Photograph by Johannes Quack)](image_url)
influenced contemporary atheist groups. The first example is the Gujarat Vernacular Society (which became Gujarat Vidya Sabha) which was founded in 1844 and which opened the first girls’ school in Ahmadabad in 1849. It published a magazine entitled *Buddhi Prakash* (‘Light of Reason’) from 1850 until at least the end of the 1970s. By 1878, this Society had published some 81 books and awarded ‘Prize Essays’ on topics such as witchcraft, ghosts, the caste system, and child marriage, thereby raising issues which remain important for atheists in India to this day (see Chavda 212).7

The second group, the Dev Samaj (‘Society of Excellence’),8 also emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, having been founded as a society in 1887 by Satya Nand Agnihotri (1850–1929) who was influenced by the religious, social, and educational reform movement Brahmo Samaj. Bill Cooke (*Dictionary* 146) notes that “by 1895, having read the works of Herbert Spencer, Spencer’s American populariser John Fiske (1842–1901), and Henry Drummond, Agnihotri gave up theism altogether”. The Dev Samaj became an ‘atheist organisation’ and, from 1905, published a journal called *Science-Grounded Religion*. According to Cooke, “this magazine, the oldest atheistic journal in India, is still in print” (146).9 In recent times, the best known spokesperson of the Deva Dharmis has been S. P. Kanal, a philosopher at Delhi University. In one of his publications he describes the Dev Samaj as rooted in the ancient forms of Indian atheism and materialism mentioned above (Kanal, *Atheism*) and notes that “it is our contention that Hindu genius, as represented by Schools of Indian Philosophy, is essentially atheistic and therefore Deva Darsana is not alone in the world of *Indian Philosophy* in denying the existence of God” (3, emphasis in original). According to Agehananda Bharati (319), the “movement has hardly any organised followers today, but its general theme is quite typical of modern Hindu unbelief”.

Most of the individuals involved in the emerging rationalist and atheist movement in twentieth-century India were well educated Indian intellectuals who had strong affinities with Western education and culture, but some had direct connections with the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) in London (see Cooke, *Blasphemy* 281). Throughout their histories, the Indian groups maintained links with like-minded groups in the West, especially the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Most of the contemporary Indian rationalist and atheist groups are connected through the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA) which was founded by the Keralan rationalist Basava Premanand (1930–2009) in 1997 and which is affiliated with the IHEU. Premanand was also the formal spokesperson of the Indian CSICOP, based in Tamil Nadu, the offspring of the US-based ‘Committee for Skeptical Inquiry’ (CSI), formerly known as the ‘Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal’ (CSICOP). This article introduces the work, writings, and legacy of Gora, the founder of the Atheist Centre, as an example of a contemporary Indian atheist group.

**Gora, the Atheist Centre, and the Meaning of Atheism in India**

In 1940, Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (1902–1975), who was known by his nickname ‘Gora’, founded the Atheist Centre in Mudnur village in Andhra Pradesh. In 1947, on the eve of Indian Independence, the Centre moved to
Vijayawada, the third largest town in Andhra Pradesh. Throughout the 1940s, Gora had links to Mahatma Gandhi whom he met several times and about whom he wrote in his *An Atheist with Gandhi*. In 2002, the Government of India issued a postage stamp commemorating the centenary of his birth. His wife Saraswathi Gora (1912–2006) shared his atheistic views and joined him in 1927 in his lifelong struggle. Since his death in 1975, she has directed the Atheist Centre and expanded its activities (see Shet for a biography of Gora).

The Atheist Centre is not only an organisation, it also owns and runs a campus which includes guest houses, lecture halls, and a hospital as well as an impressive (albeit disorganised) library with collections of atheist literature and magazines from all over the world. As most of Gora’s nine children continue to live in the Centre, it has taken on aspects of a family enterprise. The Centre is famous for its criticism of the caste system and thus promotes inter-caste marriages and organises ‘cosmopolitan beef and pork dinner functions’ to challenge both Hindu and Muslim beliefs (through ‘inter-dining’). It also seeks to promote literacy and education in secular and humanist issues. Since it views atheism as closely linked to ‘scientific temper’, there are regular science exhibitions and stage science exhibitions, apparently even autopsies, for the interested public. The Centre’s activities range more widely than its focus on atheism and rationalism suggests. It is also active, for example, in the realm of promoting environmental consciousness and ecological awareness; it collaborates with socio-psychological rehabilitation centres for former criminals, promotes sex education, health education, birth control, and family planning, and supports other areas of social work. Finally, the Atheist Centre also launched what it calls “comprehensive rural development programmes”, some of which I visited in 2007, such as its work with a weavers’ community close to Vijayawada.

Tamil Nadu. Further, the Centre hosts many representatives of like-minded organisations in India, Europe, North America, and Australia (see also below). Throughout the year, it welcomes visitors from all over the world. The Centre publishes books and journals in English and Telugu. The monthly magazine *Atheist* has been published since 1969, alongside a number of books written by Gora (see references).

**Contextualising Organised Atheism in India**

Given the continuous exchange between Indian and Western atheist groups and individuals, it is not surprising to observe that there are many similarities between them. There are obvious commonalities in the formal structures and activities. The meetings are strikingly similar, not only regarding their social function in providing self-affirmation, but also regarding the atmosphere and content of the speeches. Presentations are marked by a rhetoric of ridicule, conviction, and ‘pride’ (which critics describe as ‘presumptuousness’). Some meetings feature the performance of ‘miracles’ to show that what appears to be miraculous and supernatural can be explained by scientific means.

Another obvious similarity is that most of the larger rationalist organisations across the world advertise a ‘challenge’: they will reward anybody who can prove to have supernatural powers under conditions specified by the respective groups with a large amount of money. A further important similarity is the unequal
representation of the sexes. Roughly, active women constitute less than a quarter of the groups’ membership (see Anderson 51 qtd in Hess 109, see also 112–13; Budd 181; Campbell; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 25; Quack, Disenchanting 133–5, 158, 291–3).12

If one focuses on the philosophical understandings of atheism, the Indian atheists’ discourse shows distinct overlap with that of Western atheist groups. The books by Gora, together with the writings of many other Indian atheists and rationalists, provide valuable insight into the way atheism is understood and appropriated in India. Atheism, rationalism, and naturalism are seen as feeding into one another and they underpin the rejection of everything supernatural (Bandiste, Humanist 11–17). In this view, the ‘supernatural’ includes virtually all beliefs and practices roughly labelled ‘religious’, ranging from the cosmologies of Brahmanical Hinduism, possession experiences, and witchcraft accusations to the adjustment of daily life to astrological prognosis, even though these beliefs and practices might be seen as quite ‘natural’ by those who embrace them. For most Indian and Western atheists, the structure of underlying religion(s) is the same everywhere and they understand atheism as a rejection of this underlying structure, as opposed to the rejection of theism in general or of Christianity in particular. Gora sees his position as firmly rooted in the early formulations of Indian atheism and argues that, for the Indian atheists, ‘theism’ refers to all systems of belief that go beyond the limits of human beings and nature and is not at all limited to a Christian God: it “means believing that the universe and human life along with it are both governed by something transcendent” (Atheism 17). Further, “The depictions of god vary from [taking the form of] the wind, the rain, the sun, the moon, an extraordinarily courageous man, love, a personification of peace, to being the ultimate cause of the universe” (ibid 37).

However, the position of many Indian atheists comprises more than the rejection of any supernatural reference or relevance. Following individuals like Gora, they stress that “in an atheistic outlook, man assumes responsibility for his whole way of life” (Gora, Atheism 109) and for the lives of others. The comprehensive understanding of atheism as a ‘way of life’ (see also Quack, Disenchanting ch. 14) mirrors understandings of South Asia’s major religious traditions as “totalizing in character, claiming all of a follower’s life, so that religion is constitutive of society” (Madan 302). It is often argued that distinctions between religious and non-religious cultural practices are harder to draw in societies which are dominated by religions “that emphasize practice rather than belief”, such as Indian society, “where religious and cultural practice is more or less indistinguishable” (Bhargava, “What is Secularism for?” 6). In most Western societies, which are characterised by a more rigorous separation of the religious sphere and by understandings of religion as a ‘private’ matter, critics of religion might not feel the need to establish atheism as a comprehensive alternative way of life. Gora, however, proposes “atheism as a constructive way of life” which influences “the political, economic, social, moral, scientific, cultural, technological and other areas of our life” (Atheism 114–15). An activist from Hyderabad made a similar point in a more personal way:

Religion, instead of promoting universal brotherhood, is creating a wide gulf between man and man. Religion is not congenial to human progress. Religions
are supporting reactionary political forces. Religion has become a political weapon. Religion teaches people to hate. Religion is claiming human blood. Religion reduces itself to superstition. There is nothing that a man has to learn in religion. There is nothing in religion that equips us with a knowledge of the surroundings. There is nothing that makes you suited to advancement. It is in no way helpful to man in any manner. Religion spoils our brain. It spoils our knowledge of nature. It endangers prosperity. It stands in the way of our progress. Religion has made our people reactionaries. Religion is disgusting. (Rao 2)

These lines are not motivated by logical problems in proving the existence of God, the ultimate source of morality or the inconsistencies between theories of biological evolution and the book of Genesis. Instead, they indicate deep dismay, negative personal experiences, and political and social concerns. Again, one has to understand such statements and the larger contemporary Indian atheist movement against the wider cultural and religious background. The most important point here is the religious legitimisation of the caste system in India. I spoke to many atheists who had joined the local organisation primarily because of their criticism of the caste system. Atheists in India are, of course, not the only group opposed to the caste structure, but they make it clear that they object to any way in which humanity can be divided, whether along caste, creed, tradition, ethnic or class lines. Although the caste system is officially abolished in India, it is perpetuated through the control of exchanges of ‘polluting’ substances, such as food, and through marriage within particular castes or communities (jati). Therefore, atheist groups not only promote secular but also inter-caste and inter-religious marriage and organise ‘inter-dining events’ as an active challenge of the foundations of ‘castism’.

The removal of caste discrimination was a central concern for the social and religious reform movements of the nineteenth century. Further concerns were issues related to widows re-marrying, the lack of female education, animal sacrifice, ‘idol’ worship, ‘witch hunts’, and other forms of social discrimination. Several of these issues remain on the Indian atheists’ agenda today, along with more recent topics, such as corruption, the killing of female foetuses, suicides among farmers or the exploitative economic system in general. Issues which are of concern to Western groups, for example, the ‘church tax’ in Germany or the right to abortion in the United States, are hardly addressed in India. The latter’s closeness to the history of socialist and Marxist ideas, groups, movements, and parties in India, especially in the south and east of the country, is a further contrast to the way atheist groups in the West have developed. Although atheist and rationalist groups in India debate the importance of Marxism (Quack, Disenchanting 76–7), the groups and individuals who are critical of such ideologies often have their roots in socialist movements.

So-called ‘communal violence’, primarily between Hindus and Muslims, is a further reason for many Indians to promote secularism, to challenge the public influence of religion, and to promote a non-religious way of life. For Indian atheists, this entails an ongoing campaign for a wider and more thorough application of secularity in India (Jahagirdar, Secularism). During the sixth FIRA conference in April 2007, a major point of debate was the bill which proposed a greater separation of religion and politics in India. The ruling on Ayodhya
Academics have long and lively debates on the question whether different forms of secularism restrain or provoke communal violence (Bhargava, *Secularism* 1–4; Needam and Rajan 3), with some agreeing and others rejecting the rationalists’ position (Quack, “Ignore” 303–08).

In order to understand the specific aims and activities of Indian atheist organisations, the nature and role of religious beliefs, practices, and authorities in people’s everyday lives must be taken into account. For Indian atheist groups, a major concern is the great influence of local religious healers, shrines, and therapies.

A member of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti or ANiS (‘Organisation for the Eradication of Superstition’) told me that his brother had died of a snake bite, after having been treated by a local healer. This young man consequently joined ANiS to campaign against such ‘quacks’. Healing and other kinds of promises in the name of religion are found at the local level but are also often organised at the state or even national level. For many Indian atheists, secular social work entails not only talking or writing against the influence of religion(s) in such matters, but also challenging religious beliefs and practices as well as ‘godmen’ and ‘quacks’ publicly and involving the police or legal authorities if criminality is suspected.

Some organisations therefore initiated bills, such as the Anti-Superstition Bill in Maharashtra (Quack, “Law”), to ban religious healing practices. Rich temple trusts and religious organisations not only run temples but also big hospitals in September 2010 by the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court that there be a three-way division of the disputed land points to the continuing relevance of such debates.13
and schools. Some ‘godmen’ are multi-millionaires, wielding great influence in various spheres of Indian society, especially in politics. The Indian atheist movement has a long history of challenging the claims of Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) whose large following includes Indian politicians and celebrities as well as Westerners. The press often covers activities against such ‘godmen’, which stimulates public interest and debate. The most well known public challenges were launched by various representatives of the Indian atheist movement, such as Basava Premanand\textsuperscript{14} and Dr H. Narasimhaiah\textsuperscript{15} after Abraham Kovoor started to criticise the ‘godmen’.\textsuperscript{16} Ever since Kovoor engaged in three ‘National Divine Miracle Exposure Campaigns’ (see the publications by the Indian Rationalist Association), all the major Indian atheist and rationalist organisations have been active in exposing alleged miracles and countering the influence of the so-called ‘godmen’. However, their campaigns have not focused on high-profile figures like Sathya Sai Baba, but on controversial religious authorities who have less influence and who are active at the local or regional level. During my fieldwork on organised rationalism in India, I attended many ANiS programmes when activists sought to raise awareness of the general public about ‘evil practices’ and ‘exploitation’ carried out in the name of religion. With the help of ‘science vans’, ANiS volunteers visit villages, schools, and colleges in different parts of Maharashtra to give lectures, to spread ‘scientific temper’ and a ‘spirit of inquiry’, and to ‘eradicate superstition’, for example, the belief in supernatural entities such as ghosts and their ability to ‘possess’ people.

Figure 5. Large ‘science van’ of ANiS in a school close to Nanded, Maharashtra. (Photograph by Johannes Quack)
During their programmes which involve ‘science vans’, ANiS activists also address issues such as sex education, environmental concerns, gender equality, and problems of alcohol addiction and make statements about ‘consumerism’. Once again this underlines that the spectrum of concerns of atheists and rationalist groups in India does not just cover religious questions in the strict sense, but also encompasses aspects of everyday life. Organised atheism in India cannot be reduced to debates about the role of religion(s) in the public sphere. Besides making public statements, influencing policy, challenging ‘godmen’, propagating science-awareness programmes, and writing articles and pamphlets, members of the atheist movement in India influence people’s private lives in many ways. The decision not only to subscribe formally to atheism but also to draw the personal consequences when following this worldview can ultimately lead to problems within individuals’ families and the wider community in which they live. Besides questions of how to raise their children, they have to make important decisions about, for example, how to mark the life-cycle rituals of birth, marriage, and death. Practically all the larger Indian atheist and rationalist organisations now have instruction booklets which describe how to perform secular funerals and inter-caste, inter-religious, and secular marriage ceremonies. Since a detailed description and analysis of this is provided elsewhere (Quack, Disenchanting ch. 14), it will suffice to recall Klimkeit’s assessment, which refers to a radical break with the prevailing religious traditions (71), and the statement by V. K. Sinha, a leading member of the Indian rationalist movement: “The tests for atheism are the three big transformations in life: birth, marriage, death. If we succeed and the people do not perform rituals, then we have true atheists.”

**Atheism and Social Progress**

Indian rationalists see both approaches—the criticism of religion as irrational and the practical and social question of how to create a more just and ‘progressive’ society—as intermingled. In their view, any criticism of religion must lead to social reform. Conversely, there can be no far-reaching social reform without challenging the influence of religion(s). There is thus a close link between rationalism and social justice. Religion is seen as a central force that upholds and legitimises injustice; atheism means and entails social activism. However, there are Indian atheists who do not engage in social activism at all, but instead criticise religion at an abstract a-theological level. An example of this exceptional position is Ramendra Nath, a philosopher from Patna, who told me that “I am not fighting godmen, I am fighting God!”, meaning that he considers intellectual, philosophical, and abstract thought to be more important than engaged social activism. At the same time, Western atheism also includes social concerns, given Thomas Paine’s political reasons for criticising Christianity (Williams) or Robert Owen’s commitment to creating better working and living conditions for his workers. Yet, there are important differences in context, quality, and quantity when compared to the Indian movement. The main aims of organisations, such as the Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften (GWUP) in Germany, the British Humanist Association in the UK, the Skeptics Society and the Center for Inquiry in the United States,
are not to promote social work and grassroots activities relating to questions of injustice, inequality, and exploitation in the everyday lives of their fellow citizens. Instead, they debate issues, such as the alleged rise of Muslim fundamentalism, creationism in schools, the role of God in the European constitution, the link between religious affiliation and public positions, the legitimacy of church tax or the support for secular ceremonies. In their study of active atheists—one of the first of such studies in the United States, Hunsberger and Altemeyer argue that most people joined the atheist movement because they found so many religious claims to be unbelievable: “It was all too flawed, too self-contradictory, too unsupported, too illogical, they said” (55). They state that organised atheists are concerned with cerebral issues, such as God’s existence, creation vs. evolution or contradictory teachings in the Bible. Organised atheists are described as objecting to religion because it “discouraged inquiry” not because it produced injustice (39) and as choosing “unbelief” over “belief, “for intellectual, not emotional or personal reasons” (54; see also Mastiaux).

Useful venues for comparing differing understandings and applications of atheism are international atheist conferences which host representatives from India and Western countries. It is no surprise, for example, that the World Atheist Conferences organised by the Atheist Centre feature titles such as “Atheism and Social Progress”. In the foreword of the ‘souvenir’ programme (a booklet that features contributions by the guests at the conference and reprints of related texts), editors Goparaju Vijayam and Vikas Gora (d) summarise their understanding of atheism and a “non-religious alternate way of life” as follows:

Depletion of ecology and environment, emergence of the multi-nationals as key players in the international arena, dehumanization in economic and social fields, shift from labour intensive to mechanization and growing disparities of income and livelihood options for people in particular the developing countries needed a new perspective with human concern based on democracy, equality, freedom and social justice.

The articles which the representatives of Western atheist groups contributed to the souvenir programme hardly address the conference topic. Levi Fragell, the former president of the IHEU, a Norwegian, is one of the few who engages with ‘social progress’ in stressing the exemplary approach of Indian atheists in this respect. He writes that the “international freethought movements—atheist, rationalist, secular or humanist—need the Atheist Centre to prove that we do not have to be religious believers to dedicate our lives to the betterment of the poor, suppressed and sick fellow humans” and hopes “that our national groups around the world will be inspired by this [the Indian Atheists’] example” (1–2).

Roy Brown, the IHEU representative at the United Nations in Geneva, explains the reluctance of Western atheists to engage with social and political work by observing that “fighting isn’t something that comes naturally to all of us. Philosophy is more in our line.” (7) Others who address the theme of the conference more implicitly do not refer to their own societies but to the general need for social progress in the non-Western world (Rookledge; Clifford). The contributions by the representatives of Indian atheist groups are, in comparison, far more concrete and down to earth in articulating social concerns: D. D. Bandiste, a former professor of philosophy, analyses the way
Indian rationalists have confronted Hindu and Muslim scholars on television (Bandiste, “Superstitions”); Gogineni Babu, executive director of the IHEU, discusses the ‘milk-drinking miracle’ and fraudulent sales of industrial petrol as herbal petrol; Innaiah Narisetti’s topic is child abuse by religion; Vikas Gora outlines various aspects of secular social work; Umesh Patri addresses the contribution of positive atheism to help the poor through social reforms.

Conclusion

This article has shown that most of the contemporary atheist groups in India have direct forebears both in the social and religious reform movements of nineteenth-century India and in Western anti-religious groups. Although atheists in India have, since their formation during the second half of the nineteenth century, collaborated closely with like-minded groups elsewhere, I have argued that there are characteristic differences between the Indian and Western groups. Various factors shape the way atheism is conceptualised and ‘lived’, which makes the Indian examples distinctive. Firstly, if one accepts that religion(s) in India is (are) to be understood as less ‘ideological’ and as more of a ‘way of life’ (Nandy 322, 333; see also Madan), it is plausible that comprehensive criticism of religion(s) seeks to establish an alternative ‘way of life’ in using the labels ‘atheism’ or ‘rationalism’. With regard to the many ways in which religion shapes everyday life in India, the rationalists’ particular focus is a criticism of the caste-system and the influence of ‘godmen’ at the local, regional, and national level. However, atheists in the West do not construct and contest social hierarchy and forms of exploitation along similar lines—the influence of Uri Geller cannot be compared to that of Sathya Sai Baba or figures like him and local ‘godmen’ are less influential in Western countries than they are in India, especially not in public health care. In his introduction to science and religion, Thomas Dixon states that the history of the debate between ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in the West has been merely about “the intellectual compatibility or incompatibility of some particular religious belief with some particular aspect of scientific knowledge” (3–4).¹⁹ For most Indian atheists, the question of ‘intellectual compatibility’ is of far less importance than the questions of injustice and social change. In his Chief Guest’s address to the sixth FIRA conference in Pune, Goparaju Vijayam said that

Unlike in the West, in India there was no apparent conflict between science and religion. In India, we find that the conflict is between religion and social reform. In India, we find philosophical freedom on the one side and social ostracism on the other.

A flyer produced by the Atheist Centre, which introduces its position and activities, starts with the following sentence: “Atheist Centre is a social change institution” and the only sentence in bold letters states that the Atheist Centre is “engaged in the promotion of atheism as a way of life”. The text further states that the Centre’s position is representative of the wider Indian atheist and rationalist movement, as the decision to lead an atheist way of life in India has a number of public and private repercussions and as social
activism and change are generally understood to be constitutive elements of atheism.

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NOTES

1. The article is in TNR; therefore, one word (jyōti-sastra) looks strange because TNR does not feature the letter ‘ś’.
2. The terminology is, of course, older, but in ancient Rome, devout Christians were labelled ‘atheists’, which demonstrates how radically the meaning of the term has changed.
3. Besides Atheism in India, three other books by Hiorth were published by the Indian Secular Society (ISS): Introduction to Atheism, Introduction to Humanism, and Ethics for Atheists. Hiorth’s Naturalismus was published in German.
4. Ramendra Nath is the author of Main Hindu Kyon Nahin aur Main Buddhiaadi Kaise Bana (‘Why I am not a Hindu and How I became a Rationalist’, published also as Why I am Not a Hindu) and Kya Ishwar Mar Chuka Hai? (translated as Is God Dead?).
5. There is a brief section on atheism in India in historian Gerald A. Larue’s Freethought across the Centuries and there are entries on Indian atheists and their organisations in the Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism & Humanism (Cooke) and in The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief (Flynn).
6. For details on Derozio, see Thomas Edwards’s classic Henry Derozio, Pallab Senagupta’s Derozio, which focuses on his poetic work, and the chapter on “Derozio and Young Bengal” in Susobhan Sarkar’s On the Bengal Renaissance and on many related groups and organisations (Prakash; Mukherjee).
7. The weekly newspaper *Vartaman*, also known as *Budhavaryun*, was started by Alexander Kinloch Forbes in 1849 in Ahmedabad and had such an impact “that thereafter for quite some time newspapers were called Budhavaryun in Gujarat” (Chavda 211).

8. ‘Dev’ is usually translated as ‘God’, but the society translates it as ‘excellence’.

9. See Hiorth (*Atheism* 5, 257, ch. 3), whose characterisation of the Dev Samaj is primarily based on S. P. Kanal’s *Secular State and Religion* and *Atheism in North India*. The Dictionary of Atheism, *Skepticism & Humanism* (Cooke) also describes the Dev Samaj but seems to draw its information from Hiorth (*Atheism in India* 146). See also Helmuth von Glasenapp *Religiöse Reformbewegungen im heutigen Indien* (‘Religious Reform Movements in India’) and their self-understanding as a “science grounded religion” (see http://devsamaj.net and www.devdharma.com, access date: 18 June 2011).

10. The notion of ‘scientific temper’ was introduced to Indian public discourse by Jawaharlal Nehru. Under the government of his daughter Indira Gandhi (during the period of Emergency Rule), the Indian Constitution was amended with article 51–A, entitled ‘Fundamental Duties’, of which section 51–A(h) states that all Indian citizens have a duty “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform”, as stated in the Forty-second Amendment Act of 1976.

11. The most well-known challenge of this kind was probably set by James Randy. The James Randy Education Foundation will pay US$1,000,000 to anyone who is able to prove supernatural powers under “satisfying scientific conditions”. The use and value of such challenges is, however, debated within the rationalist and sceptic movement (see Sofka 20–1).

12. A more detailed comparison between Indian rationalist organisations and like-minded groups could address the importance of politics (see Royle, *Victorian* 4), the centrality of the charisma of their leaders (ibid 199, 202), and the importance of the quality of their lectures (ibid 213).

13. Ayodhya is an Indian city which has been famous since 1992 when the Babri Mosque was destroyed by Hindu fundamentalists who claimed that it had been built on the foundations of a temple marking the birthplace of the God Rama. The verdict on 30 September 2010 was controversial because one judge had argued that the disputed land was indeed the birthplace of Lord Ram, as Hindus believe (see e.g. the article in the magazine *Frontline*, “In the Name of Faith” 27.21, 9–22 October 2010: 7–10).

14. Basava Premanand published several books and pamphlets on Sathya Sai Baba, including the voluminous collection of articles and documents in *Murders in Sai Baba’s Bedroom*. (See also “Sai Baba: Special Number” of the Indian Rationalist Association’s magazine *Freethought* and Lawrence Babb’s chapter “Sathya Sai Baba’s Saintly Play” in John Stratton Hawley’s *Saints and Virtues*).

15. In 1976, Hosur Narasimhaiah (40), at the time vice-chancellor of Bangalore University, had founded, with colleagues from the fields of natural sciences and medicine, the ‘Committee to Investigate Miracles and other Verifiable Superstitions’.

16. Abraham Kovoor (1898–1978) was the son of a priest in the Syrian Christian Church in Malabar in Tiruvalla, Kerala. With his wife Jacqueline Kovoor, he founded the Sri Lanka Rationalist Association in 1960, serving as its president until his death. For details about his life, see V. Menon’s foreword to *Begone Godmen*, “Dr. Kovoor—the Militant Iconoclast”; Premanand’s *Dr. Kovoor: Octogenary Souvenir*; Hariharan Poonjar’s foreword to *Gods, Demons and Sprits*, “Dr. Kovoor—a Profile”; Cooke (308); Nath’s chapter on Kovoor. Many of Kovoor’s books appeared in several editions in India (see references).

17. Given the heterogeneity of the atheist, humanist, and free-thinking movements in Western countries and various regional and cultural differences, the comparison proposed in this article has to be understood as illustrative rather than methodological. A methodologically sound comparison would require the study, description, and contextualisation of specific like-minded Western groups in much greater detail in order to make an adequate comparison with the more nuanced, specific data on atheist groups in India.

18. The papers by the other Western atheists either do not address the topic at all or do so in rather abstract terms. Bill Cooke (International Director of the Centre for Inquiry, New Zealand) reflects on the notion of ‘progress’, as well as on the philosophers Schopenhauer and Aristotle; Roy Brown (IHEU, Switzerland) compares different political contexts of secularism and focuses on compassion and the role of doubt in human progress; Keith Cornish (Atheist Foundation of Australia) discusses definitions of atheism, reasons why religion does not ensure ethical
behaviour, and problems within the Australian juridical system; Bobbie Kierkhart (President of Atheist International, USA) describes how the US departed from its secular path; Rene Hartman (IBKA, Germany) takes a global perspective on atheism; Frank R. Zindler (American Atheist Press, USA) writes about a utopian world without religion; Jim Herrick (Literary Editor of the New Humanist, UK) provides a literary review on human suffering; Volker Müller (Germany) writes about Ludwig Feuerbach; Diana Rookledge (British Humanist Association) deals with the status of women in different countries. (The details in brackets refer to the individuals’ positions they held at the time of the conference.)

19. See the two controversial classics: John Draper’s monumental work History of the Conflict between Religion and Science and Andrew White’s History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom.

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