Modern Hindu Reformers' View of Hinduism Reflected in *A Passage to India*: "Caves" as a Symbol of the Universal Formless God, and "Temple" as Idolatry

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Abstract
Although there has been a generally agreed interpretation of both "Caves" and "Temple" as the symbols of Hinduism, the structural relationship between the two symbols has been interpreted differently. This paper aims to elucidate the relationship between "Caves" and "Temple" by exploring how Forster's perception of Hinduism was formed and reflected in the novel, assuming the influence of the monotheistic modern Hindu reformers, the Brahmo Samaj's concept of "Brahman" and Plotinus' concept of "the One" as its Western philosophical counterpart. It is found that "Caves" symbolizes "Nirguna Brahman" (Brahman without attributes), the Universal Formless God, while "Temple" symbolizes "Saguna Brahman" (Brahman with attributes), Krishna, or the eighth avatar of Vishnu. Forster represents the Marabar Caves as the nothingness of "Nirguna Brahman," assuming that "good and evil are the same" in Hinduism, leading Adela and Mrs Moore towards moral nihilism. Forster's representation of the Indian idea of nothingness reflects the nineteenth-century Western philosophers' now out-dated concept of nihilism, which regards Early Buddhism's "nirvana" (developed into "sunyata," and later further into Advaita Vedanta's "maya") as the will for nothingness.

Keywords: *A Passage to India*, Neoplatonism, Brahman, Advaita Vedanta, Hindu Reform Movements

Introduction

While highlighting the problematic ambiguity in E.M. Forster's novels, Virginia Woolf (1942) suggests that "the Marabar caves should appear to us not [as] real caves but, it may be, the soul of India." Similarly, Part II: "Caves" and Part III: "Temple" have been interpreted as a symbol of Hinduism, with critics concurring that the former focuses on the philosophical aspect, the Absolute, while the latter underlines the practical dimension, Gokulashtami, the festival of Krishna's birth. For example, Lakshmi Prakash affirms that "Forster uses the symbol of the caves in the plural to suggest the various off-shoots of Indian thought, echoing the Impersonal Absolute" (1987, 192).

However, critics have interpreted the structural relationship between the two symbols differently. Some argue that "Temple" is a coda to the plot. For instance, Lionel Trilling asserts that "the last part of the story is frankly a coda to the plot [...] it is not to be supposed that Forster finds in Hinduism an answer to the problem of India" (1943, 90). Meanwhile, others maintain that it presents the idea of a synthesis, or that it is the antithesis of the experience of the caves. For example, Prakash mentions that "it is in [...] 'temple' that all the fragments of Forster's experience and memory are brought together" (199–200). Meanwhile, Michael Spencer contends that "the festival is the antithesis [...] the goal is to fuse ourselves with an impersonal God [...] in contrast with the type of life suggested by the caves [...] of Eastern asceticism" (1968, 285).

This disparate confusion in their interpretations can be attributed to the diversity of Hinduism, as Gavin Flood indicates: "some might claim [...] there is 'no such thing as Hinduism', while others might claim that [...] there is an 'essence' which structures or patterns its manifestations" (1996, 5). Forster seems to be aware of this diversity and represents it as "muddle" in *A Passage to India*:

> The fissures in the Indian soil are infinite: Hinduism, so solid from a distance, is riven into sects and clans, which radiate and join, and change their names according to the aspect from which they are approached. Study it for years with the best teachers, and when you raise your head, nothing they have told you quite fits. (1924, 288)

> They sang not even to the God who confronted them, but to a saint; they did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form. (1924, 28)

Unlike monotheistic religions[1] such as Judeo-Christianity and Islam, Hinduism offers three ways[2] to attain spiritual liberation (i. e., moksa, the release from the cycle of rebirth), thus "providing suitable spiritualities for persons of different temperaments or proclivities" (Muesse 2007, 87). To further complicate matters, there are local deities, as well as the pan-Hindu deities, both of which are identified as manifestations (avatars) of each other, or are married to each other, "demonstrating the striking fluidity of the Hindu pantheon" (Frazier and Flood 2011, 306).

Through a monotheistic perspective, this individual and regional diversity of worship is nothing but idolatry, or "muddle." To analyze Forster's intention behind the symbolization of Hinduism as "Caves," we need to determine how he conceptualizes Hinduism: which individual or regional worship style he follows. This study aims to elucidate disparate interpretations of the relationship between "Caves" and "Temple," by exploring the formation of Forster's perspective on Hinduism, assuming that he was influenced by modern Hindu reformers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Annie Besant.[3]

The Hindu Reform Movements

Under the British colonial rule in the nineteenth century, Hinduism was compelled to reassess its traditions, facing an encounter with Western values, especially Christianity. According to Hayden Bellenoit, after Christian missionaries were allowed into the East India Company's territories in 1813, their impact was tremendous. They criticized Indian customs and religions "to a degree never before seen in the country's history"

[1] Monotheism is defined as "the belief in one god." However, a "strict definition [...] has proved elusive, since religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism do not readily conform to either monotheistic or polytheistic criteria [...] even [...] Christianity, leave room for competing or secondary deities" (*Dictionary of the Social Sciences* 2002).

[2] According to Muesse (2011, 101), the three ways (Trimarga) are the way of action (Karma-marga), the way of knowledge (jnana-marga) and the way of devotion (bhakti-marga).

[3] Eric Sharpe acknowledges the role of Annie Besant in the Hindu reform movements: "The early Hindu reform movements [...] shared the same characteristics: small-scale and elitist [...] The Brāhma Samāj [...] never succeeded in achieving popularity [...] The Theosophical Society had very much the same character, being eclectic and eccentric: so too were its leaders, of whom Annie Besant was the most important" (1975, 56).

(2017, 138). Christian evangelical missionaries denounced the use of idols, caste discrimination, and the traditions of widow burning and child marriage (218–19).

In the region of Bengal, where the Indian independence movement emerged later, some upper caste intellectuals attempted to reform Hindu traditions and practices through an accommodative approach to Western values and Christianity to "restore the perceived greatness of Hinduism's ancient past" (Flood 1996, 250). These Hindu reform movements were referred to as the Hindu Renaissance, which was characterized by features such as "an emphasis on reason to establish the truth of the Veda," "the rejection of icon worship, regarded as idolatry," and "the construction of Hinduism as an ethical spirituality, equal, or superior, to Christianity and Islam" (250–51).

The Hindu Renaissance was in line with European romanticists' quest to discover the ancient sources of Western civilization in India; it was a positive outcome of the contact between sympathetic Orientalists and Western-educated Bengali elites, who were influenced by their "romantic idealized representations of India" (Altglas 2014, 26). These movements led to the nationalization of Hinduism: the reconceptualization of religious traditions as "the anchor of Indian nationhood under British colonial rule" (Bellenoit 2017, 218).

There were three significant reform movements: (1) the Brahmo Samaj (the Society of Believers in Brahman), which took a liberal approach to Hinduism (Muesse 2003, 164); (2) the Arya Samaj (the Society of Nobles), which took a fundamentalist approach to Hinduism, considering "the Veda as the only authoritative Hindu text" (Muesse 2003, 164); and (3) the Theosophical Society, a Western esoteric movement influenced by orientalism. Following the death of its founder, Helena Blavatsky, the society split into two groups and Annie Besant, a British social reformer and theosophist, became the president of the society in Adyar, India in 1907.

Among the modern Hindu reformers, the Brahmo Samaj was a forerunner; it was founded in 1828 by Ram Mohan Roy, who is considered to be the father of the Indian Renaissance, and Debendranath Tagore, a Hindu philosopher and the father of Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel laureate in literature. Forster met Rabindranath Tagore in 1912 and reviewed two of his books (Ganguly 1990, 26). He also reviewed Devendranath Tagore's autobiography (Tagore et al. 1914) and learned about Brahmoism, or the modern Hindu reform movement. This experience appears to have significantly influenced Forster's concept of Hinduism.

Roy worked for the East India Company, learned English and became familiar with the works of European Orientalists. He realized that, although European perceived

Vedantic monism with fascination, Vedic polytheism was seen with abhorrence: his belief in strict monotheism deepened. He attempted to prove that Hindu "textual references to polytheism [...] were purely allegorical whereas references to an overarching Supreme Deity were the essential nexus of Hinduism" (Doniger 2015, 18), and subsequently, he formulated a universal monotheistic religion, extracting monistic elements from Islam, Hinduism, and Christian Unitarianism (18).

Roy was inspired by Advaita Vedanta, the philosophy of absolute non-dualism; it was the first school of Vedanta philosophy rooted in the Vedas, and especially the Upanishads. Its greatest exponent was Adi Shankara in the eighth century (Grimes 2009, 31–32, 333). Shankara's philosophy was deduced from the text of the Chandogya Upanishad: "In the beginning, dear boy, this was Being alone, one only, without a second" (Swahananda 2016, 21). It assumes three basic perspectives: (1) the non-duality of Brahman (the Ultimate Reality); (2) the non-reality of the empirical world; and (3) the non-difference between atman (the individual soul) and Brahman. Brahman stands beyond any attributes or representation. Undoubtedly, it would be easier for ordinary people to understand the Absolute through attributes like creator, preserver, and destroyer. Shankara, therefore, "makes concession to the idea of devotion (bhakti) to a personal Lord (Isvara) as a lower level of knowledge" (Flood 1996, 242). He explains that "God with attributes" (Saguna Brahman) is only a manifestation of "Brahman without attributes" (Nirguna Brahman).

Roy's new Hinduism appears to be based on cherry-picking from the selected sources of Shankara's philosophy, holding "Nirguna Brahman as supreme" on the one hand, while discarding "Saguna Brahman as idolatry" on the other. The Brahmo Samaj was supported by lower-class Brahmans and the emerging urban middle classes. However, it was not supported by ordinary villagers, who followed the way of ritual and devotion to deities (Flood, 253–54). Orthodox Hindus, who disliked their westernized interpretation of the tradition, criticized it as well (Altglas 2014, 28).

The Formation of Forster's Perception of Hinduism

Considering the Brahmo Samaj's religious and historical role, we will now explore how Forster's perception of Hinduism has been represented in *A Passage to India* by examining his writings and related documents. Devendranath Tagore's autobiography reveals how Devendranath, or the Brahmo Samaj, wished to realize the doctrine of Nirguna Brahman (Brahman without attributes):

> During my travels, how often have I prayed to my God with tears in my eyes for the day when idolatrous ceremonies would be abolished from our house, and the adoration of the Infinite commence in their stead. (Tagore et al. 1914, 18)

The Brahmo Samaj split into three groups in 1878. When some members deplored the internal dissension, Max Muller, a distinguished Sanskrit philologist at Oxford, expressed a positive view to encourage the movement to create a universal formless God:

> They are all doing, I believe, unmixed good, in helping to realise the dream of a new religion for India, it may be for the whole world—a religion free from many corruptions of the past [...] and firmly founded on a belief in the One God, the same in the Vedas [...] the Old [...] the New Testament [...] the Koran, the same also in the hearts of those who have no longer Vedas or Upanishads or any sacred Books (Tagore et al. 1914, 25)

Forster was a conscientious objector during the First World War and stayed in Alexandria as a volunteer for the British Red Cross (1915–1918). He seems to have been aware of the similarity between the ancient Indian philosophy and Plotinus' philosophy. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Forster's mentor at Cambridge, specialized in Neoplatonism and the Far East Civilization. Their friendship must have influenced the formation of Forster's perspective on Neoplatonism and Hinduism, leading him to develop an enhanced interest in the Indian Vedantic philosophy. Forster compares Plotinus' philosophy with Christianity in *Alexandria: A History and Guid*e:

> the vision of oneself and the vision of God are really the same [...] and here is the great difference between Plotinus and Christianity. The Christian promise is that a man shall see God, the Neo-Platonic—like the Indian—that he shall be God. Perhaps, on the quays of Alexandria, Plotinus talked with Hindu merchants who came to the town. At all events, his system can be paralleled in the religious writings of India. He comes nearer than any other Greek philosopher to the thought of the East. (1922, 83)

Plotinus' concept of the One in *The Enneads* is very similar to Advaita Vedanta's concept of Nirguna Brahman. Plotinus' spirituality is based on "the desire for ultimate unity [...] with the One" (Cary 1999, 22). It is a religious concept with regard to the origin of the world, wherein everything is derived from emanations stemming from the One.

According to Cary (1999, 22, 25), Plotinus organized the world into four levels: (1) the One or the Good, like the sun emanating light and colour; (2) the divine Mind or the intelligible world, which contains all the Forms; (3) the Soul, which includes both the World-Soul and human souls; and (4) the visible or material world.

Meanwhile, for Advaita Vedanta, the world is maya, or "an illusory appearance in Brahman just as the snake in the rope, when mistaken, has the appearance of a snake" (Dhavamony 1999, 21). In other words, the world is only an illusion, and Brahman alone is real. That is, the world is Brahman itself. Hence, Advaita Vedanta logically accepts neither the "ex nihilo" creation that God formed the world out of nothing (Michael 1992, 281) nor the "emanation" whereby the world emerged from the One.

To illustrate the difference between Plotinus' the One and Advaita Vedanta's Brahman, let us examine how Indian philosophers[4] in medieval India conceived the ontological structure of the world. They contended that the world is composed of various factors, and that the relationship between them can be described "in terms of the dharma-dharmin relation" (Tachikawa 1981, 6). Dharma implies "the basis of all order, whether social or moral" (Grimes 2009, 143), while dharmin signifies the "bearer of any characteristic mark or attribute" (Narayanaswami and Glashoff 2016). The term dharma is a key concept of Indian philosophy, but is used in diverse ways in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In this context, dharma implies a property or attribute of an entity, and dharmin refers to the entity that possesses the property, or the substratum of attributes (Tachikawa 1981, 4, 10).

For example, when considering the image of "a fire on a mountain," Indian philosophers perceive the fire as the dharma (property), and the mountain as the dharmin (the possessor of the fire). In terms of "a blue pot," they see the colour blue as the dharma (property) and the pot as the dharmin (the possessor of the colour blue). Accordingly, if they were to look at a piece of "white paper," they would conceive of it as follows: there is the property of the colour "white" (dharma) in the "paper" (dharmin). The model diagram in Figure 1 illustrates this dharma-dharmin relationship.

[4] Indian philosophy is defined as "the systems of thought and reflection that were developed by the civilisations of the Indian subcontinent," including both orthodox systems, such as the Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva-Mimamsa, and Vedanta, and unorthodox systems, such as Buddhism and Jainism (Mohanty n.d.).

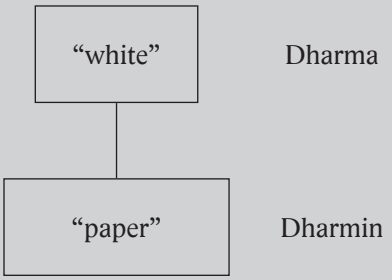

Figure 1
The dharma—dharmin relation in Hindu realism (Adapted from Figure 1 in Tachikawa 2003, 39)

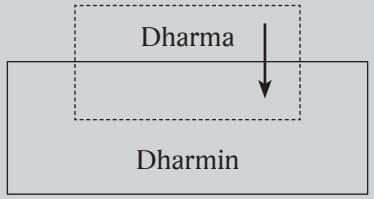

Figure 2
The dharma—dharmin relation in Hindu realism (Adapted from Figure 4 in Tachikawa 2003, 43)

If we were to apply this dharma-dharmin relationship to the ontological structure of the world from the perspective of the Hindu orthodox schools, which accept the Vedas' authority, dharmin is Brahman and dharma is the world. Among the orthodox schools, the realists hold the view that the world is real; thus, there is a distinction between the two entities: dharma (the world) and dharmin (Brahman). This divergence is in line with the difference between the two concepts of Brahman: Saguna Brahman (attributes) and Nirguna Brahman (the substratum of attributes).

Conversely, the idealist schools deny the reality of the world (dharma), and hence reject the clear distinction between dharma and dharmin (Tachikawa 1981, 9–10; 2003, 40). In particular, Advaita Vedanta emphasizes that the world (dharma) is illusory, and Brahman (dharmin) alone is real. Their conception of "the world as Brahman itself" necessarily blurs the distinction between dharma and dharmin (as displayed in Figure 2). Therefore, they hold that only Nirguna Brahman exists, and Saguna Brahman is a mere manifestation of Nirguna Brahman.

Forster is fully cognizant of the difference between Nirguna Brahman, "an impersonal, Absolute God without form" (Ramos 2017, 10) and Saguna Brahman, "a personal god with form." In describing Gokul Ashtami, a festival to celebrate Krishna's birth at Dewas, he observes the locals' religious practice:

> I enjoyed the walk, for the preacher (an Indore man) was well educated and explained what the various groups were singing—some praised God without attributes, others

> with attributes: the same mixture of fatuity and philosophy that ran through the whole festival. (1953, 111)

As for the Hindu festival's idolatrous aspects, Forster is ambivalent: he has a negative impression about the festival's decoration and ornaments, whereas he appreciates the people's bhakti (devotional love) for Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu (Saguna Brahman):

> There is no dignity, no taste, no form, and though I am dressed as a Hindu I shall never become one. I don't think one ought to be irritated with Idolatry because one can see from the faces of the people that it touches something very deep in their hearts. But it is natural that Missionaries [...] should lose their tempers. ("Letters of 1921" cited in Forster 1953, 107)

> What troubles me is that every detail, almost without exception, is fatuous and in bad taste. The altar is a mess of little objects [...] the walls are hung with deplorable oleographs, the chandeliers, draperies—everything bad. Only one thing is beautiful—the expression on the faces of the people as they bow to the shrine. ("Letters of 1921" cited in Forster 1953, 106)

G.K. Das emphasizes that, in his early writings, Forster has "curious impressions of the temples of Khajuraho" and declares his "conflicting reactions to Hindu architecture in general" (1977, 147):

> The general deportment of the Temple is odious. It is unaccommodating, it rejects every human grace, its jokes are ill-bred, its fair ladies are fat, it ministers neither to the sense of beauty nor to the sense of time, and it is discontented with its own material. No one could love such a building. Yet no one can forget it. It remains in the mind when fairer types have faded, and sometimes seems to be the only type that has any significance. When we are tired of being pleased and of being improved, and of the other gymnastics of the West, and care, or think we care, for Truth alone; then the Indian Temple exerts its power, and beckons down absurd or detestable vistas to an exit unknown to the Parthenon. (*The Athenaeum*, 26 September 1919, 947 cited in Das 1977, 147–148)

As Forster becomes aware of the Hindu philosophical perspective that underlies the arrangement of the temple building's structure, he tries to identify the positive aspects of the allegedly idolatrous architecture:

> I became easier with the Indian temple as soon as I realised [...] that there often exists inside its complexity a tiny cavity, a central cell, where the individual may be alone with his god [...] The exterior of each temple respresents [original] the world mountain, the Himalayas [...] round its flanks run all the complexity of life [...] The interior is small, simple. It is only a cell where the worshipper can for a moment face what he believes. He worships at the heart of the world-mountain, inside the exterior complexity. (*Listener,* 10 September 1953, 420 cited in Das 1977, 112)

Forster visited Kandariya Mahadeva Temple in Khajuraho in 1912 and again in 1921. Kandara means "cave" in Sanskrit and Mahadeva means "great God, a name for Lord Siva" (Grimes 2009, 219). Kandariya Mahadeva Temple is, therefore, the temple of the Great God of the Cave. It symbolizes "Mount Kailasa, the abode of Shiva, or Mount Meru" (Desai 2000, 25). While stating that "the exterior of each temple represents [...] the Himalayas", Forster understands that Mount Meru corresponds to the Himalayas in the present day and that the "tiny cavity" inside the temple embodies the cave in the world mountain, which is considered the centre of the universe. This Hindu philosophical symbolization of the connection linking the universe to the world mountain and its cave must have inspired Forster's mystical story of the fictional Marabar Caves, where Siva (Saguna Brahman) in the Temple's sanctum, is replaced with the Brahmo Samaj's Universal Formless God (Nirguna Brahman).

The Marabar Caves as Nirguna Brahman

Part II: "Caves" commences with a description of the Ganges and the Himalayas, referring to the creation myth of Vishnu and Siva (Saguna Brahman), while emphasizing that "the high places of Dravidia" are older than them and therefore "older than anything in the world." Forster suggests that in the oldest known places (i.e., the Marabar Hills and Caves), there is something much higher than the gods and goddesses (Saguna Brahman), and something related to the world's beginning:

> The Ganges, though flowing from the foot of Vishnu and through Siva's hair, is not an ancient stream. Geology, looking further than religion, knows of a time when neither the river nor the Himalayas that nourished it existed [...] The mountains rose, their debris silted up the ocean, the gods took their seats on them and contrived the river [...] In the days of the prehistoric ocean the southern part of the peninsula already existed, and the high places of Dravidia have been land since land began [...] They are older than anything in the world. (1924, 123)

As Aziz and Adela approach the caves, they experience something both Hindu and mystic. They see maya, an illusionary appearance of the "breasts of the goddess Parvati" and "a snake" in Nirguna Brahman, a key concept of Advaita Vedanta: this implies they are encountering the Vedantic world:

> As the elephant moved towards the hills [...] a new quality occurred, a spiritual silence which invaded more senses than the ear [...] Everything seemed cut off at its root, and therefore infected with illusion [...] there were some mounds by the edge of the track, low, serrated, and touched with whitewash. What were these mounds – graves, breasts of the goddess Parvati? The villagers beneath gave both replies [...] Miss Quested saw a thin, dark object reared on end at the farther side of a watercourse, and said, "A snake!" [...] But when she looked through Ronny's field-glasses, she found it wasn't a snake, but the withered and twisted stump of a toddy-palm [...] Aziz admitted that it looked like a tree through the glasses, but insisted that it was a black cobra really [...] Nothing was explained, and yet there was no romance. (139)

The Marabar Caves have been described as extraordinary, of complete renunciation, and without attributes: "nothing" is Forster's interpretation of the Brahmo Samaj's concept of Nirguna Brahman. However, ordinary Hindu followers maintain a certain distance from them:

> Hinduism has scratched and plastered a few rocks, but the shrines are unfrequented, as if pilgrims, who generally seek the extraordinary, had here found too much of it. Some saddhus did once settle in a cave, but they were smoked out, and even Buddha, who must have passed this way down to the Bo Tree of Gya, shunned a renunciation more complete than his own, and has left no legend of struggle or victory in the Marabar. (123–124)

Forster wrote a review of Edward O. Martin's *The Gods of India* (1914) in *The New Weekly* in 1914 (Das 1977, 151). Martin quotes Max Muller's translation of Buddhist literature, *the Lalitavistara* ("Detailed Narration of the Sport of the Buddha" in Sanskrit) to explain the legendary life of Gautama Buddha. Forster, thereby, must have learned about the Buddha's doctrine of the Middle Way, which rejects the two extremes of traditional Hindu practices: the habitual practice of the pleasures of sense; and "the habitual practice [...] of self-mortification (a practice painful, unworthy and of no abiding profit)" (148–149). Forster seems to have incorporated this episode and the doctrine into the novel. Not surprisingly, as a founder of a non-Vedic school that rejects the authority of Brahman, Buddha showed no interest in a complete "renunciation" in the Marabar Caves.

Now, let us examine Godbole's conception of the Marabar Caves. The name "Godbole" was taken from somebody real whom Forster met in Lahore when he was invited to a reception by the Brahmo Samaj. He was a Brahmin (a Hindu priest) and sang to Forster in a garden just as the fictional Godbole did so at Fielding's tea party (Sarker 2007, 363–364). However, as critics claim, the character of the fictional Godbole was modelled on the Maharajah of Dewas (Forster 1953, 9), as well as on the Maharajah of Chhatarpur, who insistently longed for the union with Krishna (Lewis 1979, 46). The fictional Godbole can therefore be considered a Vaishnava Brahmin, or a worshipper of Vishnu (Saguna Brahman). This is also apparent in his song about Krishna and the milkmaids and his religious practice during Gokulashtami. As an orthodox Brahmin who is embarrassed by the Brahmo Samaj's westernized interpretation of Brahman, Godbole hesitates to explain the Marabar Caves to Adela and Aziz:

> 'Do describe them, Professor Godbole.'
> 'It will be a great honour.' He drew up his chair and an expression of tension came over his face [...] 'There is an entrance in the rock which you enter, and through the entrance is the cave.'
> 'Something like the caves at Elephanta?'
> 'Oh, no, not at all; at Elephanta there are sculptures of Siva and Parvati. There are no sculptures at Marabar.'
> 'They are immensely holy, no doubt,' said Aziz, to help on the narrative.
> 'Oh no, oh no.'
> 'Still they are ornamented in some way.'
> 'Oh no.' (Forster 1924, 73)

Forster visited the Barabar Caves on 28 January and the Ellora Caves on 1 April1913 (Lewis 1979, 126). He remarked that in the Barabar Caves "there was not much to see except highly polished granite walls and not much to do except to try to wake the echo" (Beauman 1994, 275). As for the Ellora Caves, which encompass magnificent rock-cut temples decorated with elaborate frescoes, which are now designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Forster did not seem very impressed with them either. He might have perceived the Ellora Caves' stunning decorative art and architecture as idolatry. However, in looking for something mystic that could be used as the material for his novel on India, which focusses on "God without attributes," he must have found the "Caves with less attributes" much more convenient for his purpose.

According to Robin J. Lewis (1979, 78), Forster stated explicitly that the Marabar Caves are based on the Barabar Caves. More precisely, however, as Wertenbruch suggests, "Forster seems to have combined the Barabar and the close Nagarjuni Hills in order to create his Marabar Caves" (2011, 62). In other words, although the name of the Marabar Caves is derived from the Barabar Caves, Forster's description of "polished granite wall" and "echo" seems to be modelled on the nearby Nagarjuni Caves, the oldest surviving rock-cut caves in India, situated among the twin hills of Barabar and Nagarjuni. Forster may have intentionally chosen the term "Barabar," perhaps knowing that "Nagarjuni" comes from the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna.

Nonetheless, the two groups of caves should be distinguished. Both, the Barabar and Nagarjuni Caves, have inscriptions engraved on their entrance walls (Lauren 2019). They are both "quite unadorned" and "the inner walls [...] are finely polished" (Sarker 2007, 409). The two caves were donated to the Ajivikas (one of the non-Vedic schools that rejected the authority of Brahman) by Emperor Asoka and by his grandson, Dasaratha, respectively. The Barabar Caves have more "ornately carved and beautiful" entranceways, while the walls of the Nagarjuni Caves are flatter and highly polished (Lauren 2019). Being aware of this difference, Forster must have fictionalized the Nagarjuni Caves as the Marabar Caves, or the imaginary "Vedic Caves without attributes." He only focuses on the highly polished walls and the peculiar echo, completely ignoring the "non-Vedic inscriptions," in order to emphasize the nothingness of the Caves. Forster portrays the Marabar Caves as follows:

> The caves are readily described [...] the pattern never varies, and no carving [...] Nothing, nothing attaches to them [...] They are dark caves [...] until the visitor arrives [...] and strikes a match. Immediately another flame rises in the depths of the

> rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned spirit: the walls of the circular chamber have been most marvellously polished. (1924, 124)
>
> The sides of the tunnel are left rough, they impinge as an afterthought upon the internal perfection [...] Nothing is inside them, they were sealed up before the creation of pestilence or treasure; if mankind grew curious and excavated, nothing, nothing would be added to the sum of good or evil. (125)

The problem here is that Forster seems to interpret "Brahman" based on Plotinus' concept of "the One," which is identified with the Form of the Good in Western philosophy. According to Maria M. Brito-Martins, in arguing about the problem of evil, Plotinus adopts Aristotle's definition of the Good as the principle of all existence, and comes to believe that "beings that emanate from the first emanatory are, in their essence, good," thus, "evil cannot take form among beings [...] Evil can only belong to the non-being" (2014, 3). When we explore the formation and characteristics of Forster's concept of "Brahman," we need to consider that the Indian philosophical traditions are not as concerned with the problem of evil as the Western philosophy is. That is, Indian thinkers conceive of Brahman in a very different way from Greek or Christian intellectuals. As Mark Muesse indicates, "Brahman encompasses all that is good and all that is evil, and yet, transcends good and evil [...] beyond morality altogether [...] transcends all human categories and images [...] is nirguna [...] without qualities" (2003,109).

Indian scholars do not perceive evil in the same way as Western philosophers of theodicy do. Instead, they focus on each person's moral action (karma) and its consequences. Accordingly, "good karma counts toward a favourable rebirth," while "bad karma counts toward an unfavourable rebirth" (Muesse 2003, 46). Whitley Kaufman asserts that "the doctrine of karma and rebirth represents perhaps the most striking difference between Western [...] religious thought and the great Indian religious traditions" and that "Indian thought is able to endorse a complete and consistent retributive explanation of evil: all suffering can be explained by the wrongdoing of the sufferer" (2005, 15). Arthur Herman maintains that "since the rebirth solution is adequate for solving the theological problem of evil, this undoubtedly explains why the problem was never of much concern to the classical Indian" (1976, 288). According to Muesse, "Karma is a principle of justice" and "in most of the Hindu traditions, there is no god or divine being meting out justice" (2011, 70). Even the gods (Saguna Brahman) are subject to the law of karma.

In brief, Nirguna Brahman (dharmin), or "Brahman without attributes," transcends good and evil. The world is its attributes (dharma), where people seek a spiritual path to liberation from suffering by trying to achieve good karma and to avoid bad karma. The doctrine of karma and rebirth functions as an ethical system in India; therefore, the nothingness of Nirguna Brahman does not lead people towards nihilism, as interpreted by nineteenth century European philosophers. Forster, nevertheless, seems to understand the Indian idea of nothingness as nihilistic[5]:

> No, she did not wish to repeat that experience [...] the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same – "ou-bourn." (1924, 147)

Brahman without attributes is represented here as the nothingness of the Marabar Caves, which is reinforced by the echo of "Bourn," "bou-ourn" or "ou-boum." The strange echo is assumed to be modelled on the most famous Vedic mantra (a sacred verbal formula) "om"; it is "revered as the sound of the absolute which manifests the cosmos, the essence of the Veda" (Flood 1996, 222). As a narrator, Forster understands that good and evil are both aspects of Godbole's Lord, or Krishna (Saguna Brahman). Yet, it is not certain whether he is aware that Nirguna Brahman transcends each of them: the One has no attributes, neither good nor evil. Just after the cave event, Fielding and Godbole argue about good and evil at the college. Fielding becomes frustrated because Godbole's response does not seem to recognize the difference between good and evil, as Westerners do:

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[5] Forster presupposes that Indian philosophy holds that "evil and good are the same" (1924, 175) and that it clashes with the Western philosophical Idea of the Good, leading Westerners towards nihilism. "Moral nihilism rejects the possibility of absolute moral or ethical values [...] good and evil are nebulous" (*The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, n.d., s.v. "nihilism"). Advaita Vedanta's "maya" was built upon Mahayana Buddhism's "sunyata," which was conceptualized from Early Buddhism's "nirvana," the cessation of suffering and its causes (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* online, n.d., s.v. "nirvana," "sunyata" and "Advaita"). Nietzsche's "passive nihilism" reflects Early Buddhism's "Four Noble Truths," regarding the attainment of "nirvana" as the fulfilment of the instinct of self-destruction, the will for nothingness (Morrison 1997, 30).

> 'You're preaching that evil and good are the same.'
> 'Oh, no, excuse me once again. Good and evil are different as their names imply. But, in my own humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my Lord. He is present in the one, absent in the other, and the difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, "Come, come, come, come."' (175)

According to Nirmala Sharma (2016, 148), in the review of E.O. Martin's *The Gods of India* (1914), Forster (1914) writes that good and evil are obscure in Hinduism. Martin was a Christian missionary, but in his book, he says "I have honestly striven to be impartial," arguing that "the stories of the Hindu deities need neither denunciation nor condemnation from my pen" (viii). Nevertheless, he still seems embarrassed by the Hindu deity's immoral, licentious behaviour towards milkmaids:

> We might pass on to other well-known incidents in Krishna's life, e.g. his stealing the clothes of the milkmaids of Vraj when they were bathing, and dancing with them in the famous circular dance. (137)

> The most popular picture of Krishna – the one in which he is depicted sitting on the clothes of the milkmaids – is so indecent in character that it cannot be presented to English eyes, yet it is to be found in nearly every bazaar. (142)

Martin explains in his book that "the Supreme Spirit Brahman" is "Nirguna, or destitute of qualities" and takes "various forms, all of which may be worshipped," and that only the "deepest thinkers look beyond the personal God to impersonal Spirit" (78). However, he fails to understand that the personal God or Goddess (Saguna Brahman) is not like God in the Christian sense, or "an eternal [...] being of immense power, knowledge, and goodness" (Wierenga 1995, 240). He goes so far as to claim that "Hinduism is God without morality" (150). Therefore, he is baffled by the twofold manifestations of the Hindu Goddess: benevolent, gentle, and life-giving "cool goddesses" compared with malevolent, terrifying, and lustful "hot goddesses" (Muesse 2011, 158):

> As Parvati she is beautiful, gentle, faithful, and full of womanly qualities. But alas! when she appears as Durga and Kali she exhibits a very different spirit. Nothing is

> sadder in Hinduism than the transformation of the gentle Uma and Parvati into the cruel, bloodthirsty Durga and Kali. (180)

According to Muesse, all individual goddesses are forms of Mahadevi (the great Goddess), and different gods represent Mahadeva (the great God). Likewise, both Mahadevi and Mahadeva ultimately symbolize and reveal Nirguna Brahman (2011, 156–7). Parvati is a beneficent goddess, and her influence on the fierce and evil-minded Siva is always for the good (E.O. Martin 1914, 182). Durga is a goddess of war and protects the cosmos against demons. Kali is a destroyer of evil forces and "represents the ferocious or destructive aspect of the phenomenal universe" (Grimes 2009, 193). The point here is that both Durga and Kali are considered to be different manifestations of Mahadevi, or Parvati.

Sharma maintains that it is the "dancing Shiva, the representation of the creation and dissolution myth" that Forster depicts in the Marabar Caves. Further, she asserts that he "does not represent it in its totality," distorting other symbols as well as the philosophical implication (2016, 78). Her understanding is that, in Hinduism, "life is both good and evil." Life "is evil because it is unreal, transitory"; and "it is good because every moment of experience is suffused with a deep Dionysian joy" (84–85). She, therefore, criticizes Forster for portraying "the caves as a main spring of evil" (78), only focusing on one part of the philosophical dichotomies.

Sharma, however, overlooks the fact that Forster (1924, 73) designates the Elephanta Caves as a place where Siva and Parvati (Saguna Brahman) are represented as idols, stressing the difference from the Marabar Caves (Nirguna Brahman) where there is no sculpture, no holiness, and no ornament. It is from Plotinus' perspective of evil that Forster describes the nothingness of the Marabar Caves. For Plotinus, the One is good; hence, "evil can only belong to the non-being" (Brito-Martins 2014, 3). Yet, in Hinduism, the One (Nirguna Brahman) transcends both good and evil. In Christianity, God is good, and therefore, Mrs Moore is overwhelmed by the echo of the "ou-boum" (Vedic mantra), which illustrates the "muddle" of India. For Westerners, in Hinduism, good and evil are the same; this perspective leads Mrs Moore towards moral nihilism. Reuben A. Brower explains her state of mind in the following way: "All distinctions of feeling and of moral value have become confused and meaningless" and "the doctrines of Western religious faith become equally empty" (1951, 119).

There is a more extreme interpretation of the echo as evil. From the perspective of Jungian psychology, Cumhur Y. Madran contends that "the universal archetype

evil which emanates from the Marabar Caves moves through the echo over the whole universe"; and "the echoing nothingness, meaninglessness, emptiness penetrates the universe" (2010, 85). Madran fails to comprehend Forster's efforts to incorporate Hindus doctrines into the story. That is, the Marabar Caves typify "the soul of India" (Woolf 1942), and the echo symbolizes a sacred Vedic mantra.

When reviewing E.O. Martin's *The Gods of India* (1914), Forster is aware that two roads are open to the soul's quest for God (Nirguna Brahman): by worshipping a personal god (Saguna Brahman), or by directly contacting with God (Nirguna Brahman) through the challenging path of knowledge:

> It could either proceed directly by the spinal cord, or indirectly through one of the Hindu deities who were dispersed about the body. When asked which road was the best, the Holy Man replied: "That by the spinal cord is quicker, but those who take it see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing of the world. Whereas those who proceed through some deity can profit by –" he pointed to the river, the temples, the sky, and added, "That is why I worship Siva." But Siva was not the goal. ("The Gods of India," *The New Weekly*, 30 May 1914, quoted in Ganguly 1990, 158)

Adwaita Ganguly suggests that the Holy Man's answer may have influenced Forster's depiction of Mrs Moore's state of mind after the cave experience. He affirms that, while Godbole approaches the Absolute Brahman through his worship of Krishna (1990, 159), Mrs Moore follows the path of knowledge. He explains her state of mind from the viewpoint of yoga practice: her "soul undergoes a negative process, emptying itself of every distinct operation of mind." Nonetheless, she does not reach "complete identity with the Brahman" (the state of Samadhi); and thus has a "double vision" (159).

Meanwhile, from a Western philosophical standpoint, Richard Martin claims that Mrs Moore's double vision "enables her to see evil and good equally," and that "absolute right and absolute wrong come to be meaningless terms" (1974, 172). Both Martin and Forster believe that the Hindu Absolute God or Hinduism embraces both good and evil; this causes Westerners' moral values to collapse, leading them towards nihilism.

Conclusion

We have seen the formation and characteristics of Forster's concept of Hinduism, focusing on the Brahmo Samaj's notion of Nirguna Brahman (the Universal Formless God), which incorporates the Western idea of monotheism into traditional Hinduism, especially Advaita Vedanta. This exploration suggests that Forster perceives Nirguna Brahman through the eyes of Plotinus and that he portrays Nirguna Brahman as embracing both "evil" and "good," which confuses Mrs Moore and Adela, leading them towards nihilism. Forster describes the Marabar Caves as a place where "West meets East": the Western philosophical notion of "the One" (good) in Neoplatonism is overwhelmed and repelled by an encounter with the Indian concept of "the One" (good and evil) in Advaita Vedanta. Since the nineteenth century, Western philosophers have misinterpreted the Indian idea of "nothingness" – such as "nirvana" (literally "blowing out" in Sanskrit, the absence of suffering, bliss) or "sunyata" (emptiness) – as "nihilism," due in part to inappropriate translations and the fact that the "West's negative evaluation just didn't penetrate the Buddha's teaching deep enough to recognise its ultimately optimistic outlook" (Muesse 2007, 191). For example, in *The Gods of India* (1914), for which Forster wrote a review, E.O. Martin perceives Buddhism as "a passionless, hopeless form of atheistic morality – for beyond existence was extinction, and beyond death was Nirvana – Nothingness" (143). His interpretation of nirvana as nothingness must have influenced Forster's representation of the nothingness in the Marabar Caves.

Nonetheless, almost a century later in Britain, Ajahn Sumedho, a practising Theravada Buddhist monk, reinterpreted the traditional Western understanding of nothingness:

> In English, "nothingness" can sound like annihilation, like nihilism. But you can also emphasize the "thingness" so that it becomes "no-thingness." So Nibbana is not a thing that you can find. It is the place of "no-thingness," a place of non-possession, a place of non-attachment. (Ajahn and Ajahn 2009, 16)

Thich Nhat Han, a Zen Buddhist monk, argues that "Western philosophy is preoccupied with questions of being and nonbeing, but Buddhism goes beyond" (2017, 28) this matter. He maintains that "sunyata" (emptiness) means "something is empty of a separate self" and should not be misunderstood as nothingness, or as "a teaching of nihilism" (13). This Buddhist idea of "nothingness" (nirvana or sunyata) affected the

Western concept of "nihilism," as well as Advaita Vedanta's notion of "maya". It was this Buddhist concept of "nothingness" (nirvana or sunyata) that influenced the Western concept of "nihilism," as well as Advaita Vedanta's concept of "maya."

Sunyata is similar to the Indian mathematical concept of zero: the point between non-existence (a negative number) and existence (a positive number). It refers to a mental state far from nihilism, where we can reset ourselves and overcome suffering or mental difficulties, realizing that everything is changing and that nothing remains the same, and feeling as if the world were empty. In order to be fair to Forster, although his understanding of Hinduism is limited within the framework of Western philosophy, we should appreciate that during his time, he was very eager to "see the real India" in his attempts to dismiss the English imagination of India wherein "there was no real religion in the country, no literature, no architecture" (Das 1977, 1). Furthermore, "with the twentieth century begins a new interpretation [...] in religion Mrs. Besant has shown us that Hinduism has a meaning, even for the West [...] in literature India has told her own heart, through the mouth of Rabindranath Tagore" (2). Whether Foster was aware or not – and although they are now out of date – *A Passage to India* reflects the Brahmo Samaj's Hindu reform movements (under the influence of sympathetic Orientalists) and the nineteenth century Western notion of nihilism.

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