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## Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have argued for a fundamental shift in the way we conceptualize the nature of the “modern” in South Asia, and the processes that led to its emergence. Common understandings of modernization in South Asia tend to be structured by a series of linked pairs of opposed concepts: colonial centers versus periphery; the agency of Western culture and its local proxies versus a characterization of non-cosmopolitan actors as passive recipients of change; modernity as a force or pattern that is essentially opposed to and by tradition; and, in the case of India, a Hinduism shaped by reform versus other minority strands of the complex fabric of Indian religiosity. I have proposed, instead, that important projects of modernity were pursued on the periphery by actors deeply embedded in tradition and deploying all its resources as the key means for change, using texts and languages not associated with centralized power or national or global discourses.

My study has implications reaching considerably beyond the local context of its case study, and even beyond India and South Asia. Despite his peripheral location and deep roots in living tradition, Ramalinga, I have argued, was as modern as the protagonists who dominate the drama as it is usually rehearsed. In so doing, I have advanced a broader, less Eurocentric notion of modernity, one which is flexible enough to accommodate a wider range of cases; is not beholden to Western origins or a list of Western-derived characteristics; and does not conform to a narrative of rationalization, Westernization, or even nationalization. I have defined modern actors as those who were aware of the unique challenges of their present, willing to innovate in response to those challenges, and oriented their actions in anticipation of future trends. This broader view has allowed me to highlight the transformative, modernizing capacities of tradition and develop new ways of doing scholarly

work that more accurately reflect diverse ways of being modern, and the agency of a greater range of actors, not just for the case of Hindus but for colonized people throughout the world.

I have achieved these goals through a microhistorical approach, focusing on Ramalinga and the projects, writings, and conflicts that marked the last ten years of his life. This case study has been ideal to address the larger questions outlined above. Working in a provincial town in central Tamil Nadu, Ramalinga developed influential and novel ideologies and institutions, finding inspiration in Hindu traditions rather than in Western ideas and models. He drew on Shaiva traditions to develop innovative responses to some of the most pressing concerns in his contemporary world: hunger, caste, ritual exclusion, and poverty. He responded with a new ideology to feed the poor, a new community that cut across distinctions of caste and class, and promises of powers and immortality to ordinary householders. For Ramalinga, Shaiva tradition did not limit the possibilities of innovation, but it expanded them. He saw things that we might associate with tradition—texts, rituals, myths—not as fixtures of the past, but as living presences that “spoke” to him and provided inspiration for new ideas about ritual and community. He worked within Hindu traditions to formulate teachings that were innovative, critical, and responded to the most crucial challenges of his day.

Ramalinga did not engage directly with Western ideas or colonial institutions, but he was, I have argued, as modern as those who did. I have focused on Ramalinga’s teachings to demonstrate two things. First, his innovations were at the forefront of Hindu change. He used print technology to promote his messages; he extended charity to the poor; he criticized caste hierarchies; he encouraged the democratization of knowledge and the accessibility of ritual; he wrote devotional poems in everyday language; he argued for the centrality of the charismatic leader/guru; and he offered ordinary Hindus the highest achievements of yoga. Second, his inspiration for these innovations came from Hindu traditions, and from institutions and ideas with varied, “entangled” histories. I have presented a more complex model of Hindu modernization than those that emphasize idioms of dialogue or encounter between Indians and Westerners. In these concluding pages I discuss the broader implications of my study for reconceptualizing modernity and tradition.

#### MODERN HINDUISM IN THE PROVINCES

The case of Ramalinga provides a vantage point from which I have described an alternate genealogy for modern Hinduism. Ramalinga’s teachings do not pursue a Protestant rationality, but they build on the importance of hagiography, the miraculous, the guru, divine authority, and poetry that makes the heart melt. He was inspired by populist strands of Shaiva traditions, and powerful Shaiva institutions

were his primary foil. We can at times catch glimpses of the impact of Western discourses and institutions, but these are through lines of influence that were mediated by Indian agents and institutions. On the margins of colonialism, the model of a European-Indian encounter breaks down, and we need to view processes of cultural interaction in much more messy, complicated, and entangled ways.

One might speak of Ramalinga as marginal in two senses. First, he was marginal to the centers of colonial power, establishing his center in a provincial town and never directly engaging with European ideas and discourses. Second, he was marginal to the centers of institutional Shaivism. He worked outside the authority of the powerful non-brahman monasteries of Tamil Shaivism, and he was attacked by institutional stalwarts like Arumuga Navalar. However, to speak of him only as marginal perpetuates a discourse that relegates him, and figures like him, to the periphery of all power, relevance, and even modernity. In his writings, Ramalinga certainly did not view himself in that way. He described himself as Shiva's representative and as the legitimate leader of a new movement. He spoke of Vadalur and its surrounds as a center, the site of new forms of charity to the poor, of new ways of worshipping Shiva, of a new community that would usher in an age of unity, of a set of institutions including a temple and an almshouse, and of Shiva's imminent appearance. For his followers, this was indeed a center, and it continues to be so today for the many who carry on Ramalinga's legacy. The case of Ramalinga reminds us that marginality can encompass different definitions and always depends on one's point of view.

When we shift our focus from the colonial to the provincial center, we are compelled to expand our view of what constituted modernity in the nineteenth century. This move requires us to do away with the usual measure of modernity, that is, the list of characteristics of Western modernity. I have instead characterized the modern in more general terms, including the sense of the uniqueness of the present; the strategic pursuit of innovation in response to challenges of the present; the rethinking of community; and the anticipation of future developments. Ramalinga's modernity is validated by the success of his vision, not only in drawing followers in his day but also because his innovations were part of larger transformations that continue to shape Hindu traditions.

If the case of Ramalinga inspires us to rethink modernity, it also compels us to reconceptualize tradition. Prevalent notions of tradition as static, past-oriented, homogenous, enchanted, and resistant to innovation emerged in the nineteenth century, a product of linked discourses of modernity and tradition. These "antinomies of modernity," as described by Saurabh Dube, consign India to "tradition" and reward the West with "modernity." India becomes a "'never, never land' of endless tradition."<sup>1</sup> We have seen this play out as reform leaders began to conceive of Hindu tradition as a coherent entity grounded in an ancient, glorious, and textual past. Ironically, this new notion of tradition was modern in the sense that I have talked about modernity: it was innovative, strategic, addressed present challenges, and anticipated future trends.

One might suggest that Ramalinga's traditional orientation was a *reaction* to this coproduction of tradition and Western modernity, that is, that he developed his ideas in opposition to the cosmopolitan discourses of Hindu reform. If this were the case, then Western ideas played a far more important role in his projects than I have recognized, even if they functioned primarily as foils against which Ramalinga developed his new ideologies and institutions. Was he carefully and deliberately presenting himself as a traditional figure, distancing himself from explicit statements that would reveal his debt to Western ideas? Was his emphasis on miracles meant as a pointed critique of the Protestant rejection of the possibility of modern miracles, mediated through cosmopolitan Hinduism? Was his attack on the Vedas a response to the textual fetishism of Hindu reformers? Did he neglect to acknowledge Western influences or sources because such acknowledgment would compromise his status as a traditional Shaiva leader?

Although it is impossible to answer these questions with certainty, the evidence presented in his writings does not support the view that his teachings were a reactionary, traditionalist response to cosmopolitan notions of rationality, tradition, and canon. Hindu leaders in Ramalinga's time certainly articulated such traditionalist accounts. These were, however, framed according to Western discourses and therefore very different in their presumptions and content than Ramalinga's orientation to the past.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Ramalinga explicitly refers to his foils, which were not Western or Hindu reform traditions, but established Hindu traditions that upheld caste hierarchies and exclusionary ritual practices. He never explicitly expresses antipathy toward the cosmopolitan discourses of Hindu reform. The ways that his position ended up opposing those new discourses seem almost accidental, drawing him in as a reluctant participant in debates that were not his primary focus.

Ramalinga's sense of tradition was different from both Hindu reform conceptions of traditions and the traditionalist conceptions that emerged in opposition to Hindu reform. For Ramalinga, tradition, in the sense of the literary, ritual, and theological legacy of Shaivism, was not primarily an orientation toward the past or a coherent entity that valued stasis. Rather, he viewed Shaiva tradition as had many Shaivas before him: as a framework for moral action, ritual practice, and theological understanding, and as a basis for innovation. He neither masked change in the garb of newly conceived "tradition" nor did he view his project as one of recuperation of an idealized past. He embraced innovation and change, and he saw the world around him to be demanding such change. Ramalinga did not need Western modernity to imagine and implement influential and novel expressions of ethics, revelation, and community, because inspiration and the potential for creative change were inscribed into Shaivism.

This does not mean that he worked within a pure Shaiva tradition. Ramalinga himself would agree, I think, that Shaivism always responded to local material and social processes. Ramalinga's innovations addressed the social, economic, material, and technological challenges around him and contributed to debates about

egalitarianism, the accessibility of ritual, and the possibility of modern miracles. These precipitants of change were not “external” to his Shaiva tradition. Rather, Ramalinga experienced, and responded to, those changes through Shaiva tradition, advancing novel projects with Shiva’s direction that addressed the variety of ills that he saw around him: poverty, malnourishment, elitism, caste, neglect of the poor, religious division, and conflict. Tradition was not a withdrawal into an idealized past but the basis for present action.

Ramalinga viewed Shaivism not as an unchanging reservoir of symbolic and authoritative resources from the past, but as flexible, living texts, ideas, and processes that were open to reinterpretation or even reinvention. That is, he did not draw from the past as a pool of resources, working from a perspective independent of those positions, deciding which to retain and which to reject. Dipesh Chakrabarty calls such a position “decisionism,” according to which “the critic is guided by his or her values to choose the most desirable, sane, and wise future for humanity, and looks to the past as a warehouse of resources on which to draw as needed.”<sup>3</sup> Chakrabarty rightly questions this position, which assumes the “Lockean fable” that “reason is external to history, and its attainment signals a freedom from any political authority of the past.” Avoiding decisionism, we must resist speaking of tradition as a pool of resources that a modern, transcendent actor sifts through and selects from. Tradition is not a resource, any more than modernity is a resource. Yet Chakrabarty also warns against adherence to a strict historicism, such as Marx’s evocative “nightmare” of tradition that prevents the possibility of revolutionary change.<sup>4</sup> Such a modernist view, in which tradition is an irresistible force of inertia, fails to recognize that innovation always occurs within, or out of, the continuities of specific traditions.

Once we recognize that traditions also provide space and tools for innovation, it becomes clear that we do not need to choose between a Lockean fable and a Marxian nightmare. Ramalinga was not picking and choosing from a position that transcended Shaivism, because Shaivism itself supplied the orienting ideologies for his projects. Nor was he, however, a passive and helpless subject of Shaivism. Shaivism has always contained contested elements and debates, and Shaiva actors have always exercised their judgment and a degree of freedom in choosing sides, and in developing new Shaiva ideas and models. Ramalinga’s experiences, moral judgments, social views, and decisions were conditioned by Shaiva traditions, but Shaivism also offered opportunities for debate, resistance, and innovation. Thus, Ramalinga exercised no less agency than those cosmopolitan leaders who formulated new expressions of reform Hinduism according to a colonial, Protestant rationality. Both worked within limitations and spaces for innovation that were presented by diverse traditions.

When we dispense with a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, we need to change the language with which we speak about both. My delineation of the terms demands some overlap. The “modernity” that accompanied British

colonialism was not one of universal, ahistorical rationality but of a very specific historical genealogy with roots in Protestantism. Western modernity was, and indeed remains, a tradition, one whose most uncanny skill is its ability to present itself as universal. Reform Hinduism was, and remains, modern because it is innovative and addresses concerns of the present, but it also draws on traditions of Western modernity, and it maintains continuities with elite Hindu traditions. Thus, reform Hinduism is no less traditional than is Ramalinga's formulation, and no more modern than Ramalinga's modernity.

Does this mean that everything is traditional, and everything is modern? Or as Saurabh Dube asks, "does all this mean that . . . everyone living in the modern age axiomatically counts as a modern?"<sup>5</sup> Perhaps so. Or, perhaps it is closer to the truth to say that nothing is traditional, and nothing is modern, if by those terms we employ a dichotomy between stasis and innovation, between a slavish subjugation to history and a liberating transcendence of history. In my redefinition of these terms, they are not markers that distinguish and order particular actors, movements, ideas, institutions, or practices. Rather, they specify aspects of continuity and change that are shared by actors, movements, et cetera. When we call something traditional, we do not deny it its modernity, because traditions can and do change. Likewise, actors working within traditions innovate, even if they highlight the ideals of continuity or portray their innovations as a return to the past. Modernity is not a decisive shift to objective reason but entails a process in which actors situated in specific traditions develop innovative responses to the conditions that characterize contemporary worlds.

The risk in generalizing too much from the case of Ramalinga is that my view of modernity may be as myopic as those assumed in studies that focus on reform Hinduism, or on instances of clear engagement between Indian and European people and ideas. This is perhaps not a cause for apology, however, since, as Dube points out, modernity is an "idea, ideal, and ideology."<sup>6</sup> That is to say, I hope this book challenges historians of Hinduism to broaden their narratives by including figures like Ramalinga, not as leaders working in a traditional mode that is contrary to modernity, or reacting against modernity, but as innovators who made crucial contributions to modern Hinduism. This shift that I propose does not deny the importance of Europe in thinking about modern Hinduism, but it does question the Eurocentrism that has often defined its narrative. Indeed, there were multiple centers for Hindu innovation, including centers on the margins of colonialism such as that occupied by Ramalinga and his followers. If we accept the heterogeneity of Hinduism in the present, we need to account for this present by documenting and analyzing the diverse histories that have produced it.

