Yoga, Eugenics, and Spiritual Darwinism in the Early Twentieth Century

Mark Singleton

Put briefly: perhaps the entire evolution of the spirit is a question of the body; it is the history of the development of a higher body that emerges into our sensibility. The organic is rising to yet higher levels. Our lust for knowledge of nature is a means through which the body desires to perfect itself. Or rather: hundreds of thousands of experiments are made to change the nourishment, the mode of living and of dwelling in the body; consciousness and evaluations in the body, all kinds of pleasure and displeasure, are signs of these changes and experiments. In the long run, it is not a question of man at all: he is to be overcome (Nietzsche 1967: 358).

This paper is part of a project to map a diffuse, but clearly discernible, modern preoccupation with engineering a new and better kind of human being. This impulse often finds expression through what Joseph Alter has described as “the political prose of physiology” (2004a: 19), a vast and ongoing modern genre concerned with the manipulation of the body to often nationalistic ends. My main focus here is a cluster of interlinked scientific, philosophical, and social ideologies which came into being in mid-nineteenth-century Europe and flourished worldwide over the succeeding hundred years: evolutionary theory in its various guises, Social Darwinism, Eugenics, and the Nietzsche cult. These highly malleable cultural ideologies were intertwined in popular thought and practice and called into the service of sharply divergent social and political enterprises, from Fabianism to (notoriously) Fascism. It is their transferability as ideological items, indeed, that interests me here and not questions of whether such populist expressions represent departures from or perversions of the original founding doctrines. Social Darwinism, evolutionism, and the eugenic fervor took an unprecedented grip on the Western psyche in the early twentieth century and quickly spread beyond the boundaries of Europe. As Carey Watt has noted, “The discourse of the period was in fact rife with references to race, eugenics and a type of international Darwinism which saw relentless competition between communities, nations or races” (1997: 340)—and India was no exception to
this trend. This paper is an exploration of several intersections of such discourses within the early twentieth-century Indian Yoga renaissance. In adducing a range of examples from several key architects of this eclectic endeavor, my main aim is to illustrate the extent to which such discourses articulate pressing and pervasive contemporary concerns which in turn alter the perceived quarry of traditional spiritual practice. Certain varieties of neo-Yoga were conceived, I argue, as a transgenerational fast track to genetic and spiritual perfection—a vision which generally usurped perhaps more traditional otherworldly connotations of Yoga as a technique of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. This occurred through the “indigenization” and naturalization of a number of late nineteenth-century social ideologies within the landscape of Indian neo-Yoga, including Social Darwinism and Eugenics. This article attempts to situate modern Yoga within this larger history.

I begin by considering the main tenets and assumptions underpinning the European efflorescence of eugenic evolutionism. Popular Social Darwinism, usually combined with the Nietzsche cult, promoted the notion that human beings could modify their own heredity through programs of selective breeding, hygiene, and physical culture. Instead of the hereditary degeneracy that was perceived to afflict modern nations and races, a new stock of Supermen would emerge as the products of this eugenic religion. These fantasies of voluntary evolution (commonly of a Lamarckian bent) struck a chord with certain sections of the Indian psyche, often via the Āryan supremacy narratives of writers on India such as Arthur Avalon (John Woodroffe). Social Darwinist discourses underpinned the rhetoric of the nascent nationalist movement, and Indian Eugenics societies sprang up from the 1920s onwards in response to the raging sentiment of national degeneration—physical, moral, and spiritual. In the second part of the study, I consider the degree to which these ideas passed into modern Yoga through organizations such as the Theosophical Society. Evolutionism infiltrated Yoga writing to the extent that it became naturalized as its transhistorical rationale. That is to say, through figures like Annie Besant and Aurobindo Ghose, the Nietzschean faith was transplanted into “Eastern” philosophy and made to seem like its truest expression. A transmogrified Sāmkhya provided the rationale for various experiments in Yoga and, in combination with the eugenically inclined physical culture movement, gave to Yoga many of the popular postural forms we know today. I consider briefly one character in whom these trends culminate most clearly: the self-proclaimed innovator of the “Yoga renaissance,” Śrī Yogendra (1897–1989).

Social Darwinism, Nietzsche, Eugenics

During the early twentieth century, notions of Social Darwinism held considerable sway over the popular European psyche, and apparently benign “eugenicist” ideas met with a generalized approbation. Such ideologies have been perhaps indelibly tainted by a hundred years of racial hatred, genocide, and holocaust in their name. But as Gregory Claeys has demonstrated, by about 1900 Social Darwinist ideas of