Kavalam M. Panikkar's search for India

The intellectual journey of an Indian intellectual during the late colonial era and the early years of independence

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1. Introduction

In India, the last five decades of the freedom struggle and the first fifteen years of independence were an extraordinary period of resurgence; a people who were in a state of colonial servitude came to liberate themselves and strived to build a new nation committed to escaping economic underdevelopment and eliminating the social discriminations that had hitherto characterized Indian society. It was a gigantic effort, which brought about substantial although mixed results, and which, not surprisingly, has been under the lens of historical research since it first began. The main political leaders of that historical phase and the social movements and parties of which they were expression and which they organized and led have been exhaustively studied. Nonetheless, much less attention has been given to two other classes of people who played conspicuous roles in those years. They were, on the one hand, the second rank political leaders and the party cadres, and, on the other, those intellectuals who, through their intellectual work, powerfully contributed to the organization of the Indian movements and parties and the elaboration of the policies followed by their leaders.

They were two sets of people that sometimes overlapped. A typical representative of this overlapping was Kavalam Madhava Panikkar (1896-1963),[1] a brilliant intellectual and a remarkable historian who was proactively engaged in both defining the idea of India, through his intellectual work, and building the new Indian nation, through his participation in Indian politics.

[1] There are two versions of the transcription of this name into English: Panikkar and Pannikar. The authors of the monograph here reviewed have adopted the latter, which is the same version adopted, e.g., by one of the most important historians of contemporary India, Ramachandra Guha (2008, *passim*). However, this author has chosen to use the version which is by far the most widespread, namely Panikkar, also adopted by the publishing houses which have printed Panikkar's work.

Panikkar extensively published mainly in English but also in his own native language, Malayalam. Although primarily an historian, Panikkar had also an enduring interest in Malayalam poetry and literature. As remembered by Archishman Raju (2020), Panikkar wrote Malayalam poetry himself, argued in favour of the usage of the Dravidian meter, and authored several literary works in Malayalam. His main literary output, however, was in English and focussed principally on Indian history, the history of Asia in general, and geopolitics. He is the author of some 60 monographs, which, in his times, were widely read not only in the English-speaking world but also elsewhere, as they were translated not only into Indian languages but also into European ones, including Italian.[2] As remembered once again by Archishman Raju, Panikkar was convinced that: "It is not pure researchers who have produced historical literature of high value, but men of affairs who themselves played some part in the life of their country" (Raju 2020). It was a conviction squarely based Panikkar's own record as a man who, during his life, played important political roles first during the last decades of the liberation struggle and then in the first decade of independence. However, in spite of his intellectual and political relevance and the success of his historical work during his lifetime and soon afterwards, Panikkar has remained a little studied political actor, and an intellectual whose massive published output is nowadays mainly out of print and little studied.

Against this backdrop, the intelligently argued and in-depth researched monograph by Mauro Elli and Rita Paolini plays an important and much needed role in rescuing Panikkar's intellectual and political story from an undeserved oblivion, highlighting its enduring relevance. They do so through a text which is the end product of the interaction between three lines of research: the first is focussed on Panikkar's political evolution and career; the second is centred on Panikkar's scholarly production; the third sketches out the political context which frames the previous two developments. These three lines of research are explored by making use of different sources. In the first case, archival sources are used; in the second, the 60 or so texts written by Panikkar are analysed; in the third, a very large collection of secondary sources is put under the lens.

2. Background thesis of the monograph

Panikkar's scientific and political contributions were interlinked by a dialectical relationship and conditioned by the evolving historical-political situation through which Panikkar lived. In fact,

[2] Panikkar's monographs translated into Italian include his most famous work, *Asia and Western Dominance* (Panikkar 1953), which was published with the title *La dominazione europea in Asia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1958; later reprinted several times) and *Common Sense about India* (Panikkar 1960), which was published as *L'India e noi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1961).

according to Elli and Paolini, Panikkar was representative of a generation of Indian politicians and intellectuals, who were committed to and had a proactive role in, first, the liberation of India and, then, the construction of a new nation. Their efforts, nonetheless, were made difficult by the fact that these intellectuals did not have an "unambiguous, clear and common idea of their country" [226]. Each of them, therefore, "had to discover India for themselves and create their own personal way of being 'Indian' in modern times" [226]

In this situation, the authors' aim is precisely to identify the path followed by Panikkar, both politically and culturally, in his own personal search for India. According to the authors, this path—a seemingly "kaleidoscopic" one—in reality was treaded in the pursuit of balance within each of two antinomies; that between the past and modernity—or, to use a term the authors do not use, between tradition and modernity—and that between unity and diversity.

From the attempt to find a balance inside the first antinomy derived Panikkar's constant search for a reconciliation between the importance and positive value of tradition (as opposed to Western culture) and the need for even radical reforms, ultimately inspired by and modelled on those in force in the West. From the attempt to find a balance inside the second antinomy comes Panikkar's attempt to reconcile local history with national history. As highlighted by the authors, the balance-point within these two antinomies varied over time, depending on Panikkar's personal experiences. Or, to use the expression used by the authors, the shifting balance-point within these two antinomies was determined by the response "to the feedback given by the historical becoming of which Pannikar was a protagonist" [227].

3. The four stages of Panikkar's life and intellectual evolution

It is clear from reading Elli and Paolini's text, though not necessarily from its organization into chapters and sections, that Panikkar's life and intellectual evolution can be divided into four phases.

The first is the formative phase (up to 1927). Panikkar was born in a princely state of Kerala, where he spent his adolescence. He was a Nair, namely he belonged to a high caste, with special characteristics (it was matrilinear), which was going through a phase of transformation and crisis. After an indifferent student career in India, Panikkar went on to successfully study at Oxford. There he came into contact with Indian nationalist circles active in England, being deeply influenced by them. Not surprisingly, his return home coincided with his decision to enter politics within the Indian National Congress. Eventually, he was handpicked by Gandhi to act as a Congress agent in the Punjab, where he dealt with the Sikh question. This experience was crucial in bringing the young nationalist in contact with communalism, namely community-based conflict within Indian society, and realizing its importance.

The second phase of Panikkar's life was characterized by his collaboration with Indian princes (1927-1948). He served first the Maharaja of Kashmir, then the Maharaja of Patiala (Punjab), and finally the Maharaja of Bikaner and his successor (Rajasthan). As a respected and influential advisor of the princes, Panikkar, in his role as their representative, interacted with the top echelons of colonial power. From 1930, he earnestly participated in the federation project, trying to persuade the princes to take an active part in it, but failing to do so. In the latter part of this phase, he became energetically engaged in promoting the modernization and democratization of Bikaner.

The third phase of Panikkar's life (1948-1956) was characterized by being handpicked by Nehru as ambassador first to China and then to Egypt. This was a period when, because of his privileged relationship with Nehru, Panikkar directly influenced the formulation of India's neutralist policy and China policy.

The fourth phase of Panikkar's life (1956-1963) was one in which he no longer exercised a major political role (although in the years 1956-1959 he held the prestigious position of ambassador in Paris). These were years in which Panikkar devoted himself mainly to scholarly work, in essence confirming or reinforcing a number of positions he had previously arrived at.

4. Panikkar's political role and his record

It is especially in the analysis of the second phase of Panikkar's life (the period of collaboration with the princes) and in that of the third phase (the years when Panikkar was ambassador to China and Egypt) that the authors' work is of remarkable originality. It is through time-consuming and exhaustive archival work that Elli and Paolini shed light on as yet little-studied aspects of recent Indian history, highlighting the role Panikkar played in it himself. The authors emphasize the importance of this role although somewhat refraining from taking stock of its results. Or, rather, they do so implicitly, and, as a consequence, a balance sheet can be made, based on the data they present. Here the discourse is different for the phase of collaboration with the princes and for the successive phase, in which Panikkar directly influenced the formulation of India's foreign policy.

Panikkar had a positive view of the princes, whom he regarded as guardians of a traditional India, which he valued, and living examples of the fact that Indians were capable of governing themselves. Panikkar, nonetheless, was also a nationalist who, while defending the prerogatives of the princes vis-à-vis colonial power, was aware of the need for the power of the princes to be tempered by the evolution of their states towards a democratic direction and, above all, by the integration of their states into the future independent India, within the framework of a federation.

Panikkar spent himself to achieve both goals, but his attempt ended in failure. Obviously, the responsibility for this failure lay more with the princes, who demonstrated poor skills and even poorer political realism, than with Panikkar. As is evident from Elli and Paolini's analysis, there was also some bad faith on the part of the Congress leadership, in particular, Nehru, toward them.

It is worth pointing out that, ex post, one may get the impression that the attempt pursued by Panikkar to integrate the princes and their states within an independent federal India was doomed to inevitable and aprioristic failure. This, however, is not entirely true. We have the example of Malaysia, like India a former British colony, where a process such as that vainly pursued by Panikkar succeeded. So much so that today's Malaysia is both a democracy and a monarchy, where the monarch (or Yang di-Pertuan Agong, i.e., "He Who is Made Lord") is elected every five years by the Conference of Rulers, which comprises the Malay princes. Each of the Malay princes, albeit with powers that are largely symbolic, is head of state and Islamic religious leader in his own principality.

As Elli and Paolini show, eventually Panikkar himself took note of the impossibility to realize the design to have the princes as a constituent part of independent India. So much so, that, as a member of the Constituent Assembly, tasked to give independent India his constitution, Panikkar proactively fought for a strongly centralised state. However—as highlighted again by Elli and Paolini—Panikkar never disavowed his past action in favour of the princes, as evidenced by the enduring positive judgment he continued to give about them in his historical works.

More complex is the judgment to be made—again on the basis of Elli and Paolini's analysis—of Panikkar's work in influencing the formulation of the foreign policy of independent India. Panikkar realized that China's communist regime was not a transient phenomenon but would endure. Therefore, realistically, he recommended its recognition. Panikkar was also convinced that the new Chinese regime had two components—the communist and the nationalist/anticolonial—and he believed that the latter was the prevailing one. Panikkar, moreover, was persuaded of the progressive character of the Chinese communist revolution at the social level, and emphasized the historical ties that he said had existed since time immemorial between India and China. Hence a certain sympathy of Panikkar for the new regime. As argued by Elli and Paolini, there is no doubt that it was also due to Panikkar's influence that India recognized Communist China almost immediately (on 30 December 1949). This, nonetheless, as stressed by Elli and Paolini, does not detract from the fact that Panikkar was always far from appreciating the illiberal aspects of China's communist regime.

As pointed out, once again, by Elli and Paolini, Panikkar's political analyses in the late 1940s and early 1950s stressed that China, far from being a pawn of the USSR, was acting as an anti-imperialist power against what the Chinese leadership perceived as the resurgence of Western imperialism in Asia.

No doubt, these analyses played a role in pushing India to take a mediating position between China and the Western powers during the Korean war. Elli and Paolini, however, convincingly refute the vulgate that Panikkar misled Nehru about China, leading him to fail to realize its potential danger. In reality, Panikkar, who had a deep understanding of the laws of geopolitics, was aware of the danger posed by the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which had brought China into direct contact with India, in a situation, moreover, of border uncertainty. Hence, Panikkar's recommendation to proceed to ensure effective military control of the area south of the McMahon Line in an anti-Chinese function.

The China policy proposed by Panikkar, and actually followed by India as long as Panikkar had any influence on its formulation, was one of prudent realism, free from any prejudicially hostile attitude toward China, aware of the limits of India's military power, but concerned with the defence of national interests. This was a line that, when Panikkar's influence on Nehru waned, was abandoned by the latter, leading to the catastrophic India-China war of 1962. But, from Elli and Paolini's reconstruction, it is clear that the China policy advocated by Panikkar was correct and that the ultimate failure of Nehru's China policy was the result of his deviation from it.

5. Panikkar's cultural production

One of the strengths of Elli and Paolini's monograph is the analysis of a series of Panikkar's academic texts and their highlighting of the dialectical relationship that existed between Panikkar's intellectual production and his political role. Thus, e.g., as the two authors recall, it was the publication of *An Introduction to the Study of the Relations of Indian States with the Government of India* (Panikkar 1927)—where a positive view of Indian states was given, to be later reproposed, albeit modified, in later works—that opened up the possibility for Panikkar to collaborate with the princes in apex positions.

Also, Panikkar's action on behalf of the princes vis-à-vis the colonial power and the parallel action to push the princes to a more realistic attitude towards the nationalist movement and the future independent India were accompanied by the production of a series of monographs and an article in the influential 'Foreign Affairs.'[3] These analyses had undoubtedly political purposes. In some cases, they were intended to promote and legitimise the position of the princes; in others they aimed to persuade the princes to more realistic attitudes towards democratisation and accession to an Indian federation. In all cases, however, the works in which Panikkar argued these theses were far from being propaganda;

[3] Panikkar (1943). For a list of the relevant monographs, see the volume under review, pages 240-241.

on the contrary, they were serious analyses with a strong scientific character, based on careful research work.

As argued by Elli and Paolini, each of these works can also be seen as a sort of snapshot of the evolution of Panikkar's thought on the topics discussed. This series of photos is used by the two authors to highlight the evolution of Panikkar's political thought, as far as the two antinomies mentioned above —past/modernity and unity/diversity—are concerned. It was an evolution that saw the gradual strengthening of the importance Panikkar recognised to modernity and unity.

The dialectical relationship between the historical events of Panikkar's time and his scholarly production is particularly visible for the period of the Second World War and the years immediately following it. In this phase, Panikkar did not limit himself to historically examine and politically justify the role of princes, but reflected on the Indian geopolitical situation, whose relevance had been highlighted by the events of the war. The result was the publication of two very important works in 1945 and 1947 respectively. The first was Panikkar (1945), a monograph; the second a two-part article (Panikkar 1947a). Very possibly, it was the knowledge of these two works and appreciation for the ideas set forth in them that led Nehru to choose Panikkar as India's ambassador to China.

Panikkar's reflections on the significance of the Chinese revolution for Asia and the world form the basis of two important monographs, the first published under the pseudonym Chanakya. These are Chanakya (1951) and Panikkar (1953).

Indian Revolution (Chanakya 1951), in addition to a reflection on Indian history, is a comparative analysis of the Indian and Chinese revolutions and the potential example that they were offering to Asian peoples. *Asia and Western Dominance* (Panikkar 1953) is his most important and best-known work; Panikkar had been thinking about the possibility to write it since his stay in Lisbon in December 1925; he eventually wrote it during his years in China and published it in 1953. It was an extremely successful work, which had a wide readership not only in the Anglo-Saxon world, but, as already pointed out, also outside it.

The work analyses the history of Asia in the period that Panikkar defines as the era of Vasco da Gama, namely the period in which the European powers, thanks to their control of the seas, imposed their dominance on the Asian continent. Panikkar's approach to the history of Asia was innovative. As noted by the founder of Italian modern and contemporary Asian studies, Giorgio Borsa, it is an approach that was neither that of traditional European historiography, which saw the modern and contemporary history of Asia as the history of European expansion in Asia, nor the Asian nationalist approach, which reversed the European historiographical perspective and saw the period of European hegemony as an age of decadence and crisis, and in whose analysis: "Rebellions became wars of

liberation, villains became heroes and heroes became villains" (Borsa 1977: 9; translation by M. Torri). Rather, Panikkar's approach was what Borsa defined as a "Copernican" one, namely an approach that radically overturned the then existing and specularly identical mainstream approaches. It was characterized by the fact that Asians were seen as agents responding in a new way to the European impact, which had undermined their societies. In fact, Asians read and re-elaborated European ideas and adopted and transformed European institutions in the light of Asian local traditions. In this way, they made of these new ideas and institutions—the end product of a creative intermingling between Western and non-Western traditions—powerful new instruments aimed first at modernizing and rationalizing Asian societies and then getting rid of foreign domination.

6. The limits of Panikkar's cultural production

As is clear from Elli and Paolini's analysis, Panikkar's endless bibliographical production, conditioned to a large extent by the not always successful attempt to resolve the two fundamental antinomies of past/modernity and unity/diversity, aimed at arriving at the formulation of a structured idea of what India was and had been. In a series of works, the most important of which is *A Survey of Indian History* (Panikkar 1947b), Panikkar argued that although Indian civilisation was characterised by the variety and multiplicity of different contributions, its fundamental and unchanging core was Hinduism.

This was an idea which was present both in Panikkar's scholarly production and in his political action. As recalled by Elli and Paolini, as early as the late 1930s, Panikkar was hostile to the Muslim League but, paradoxically, in favour of the creation of Pakistan. This rather counterintuitive position was grounded on Panikkar's conviction that the presence of Muslim-majority provinces in independent India would make the creation of a sufficiently centralised state impossible. This means that, already in the 1930s, in spite of having started his professional career as a teacher of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in the years 1919-1922, and played a role in its transformation into the Aligarh Muslim University, Panikkar regarded Indian Muslims as a foreign body.

As mentioned by Elli and Paolini, the idea presented in *A Survey of Indian History* was reiterated, implicitly or explicitly, in other Panikkar's studies. Particularly significant from this point of view is Panikkar (1962), one of his latest texts, published in 1962, namely the year before Panikkar's death. In Panikkar's analysis, these "determining periods" were three in number; alongside the period 350-250 BC, which saw the rise and fall of the Maurya empire, and the 19th century, which Panikkar rightly characterised as signed by India's encounter/clash with the West, the other "determining period" was indicated in the years 1330-1430. It was a historical phase that, according to Panikkar, was

characterized by the resistance on the part of the Rajput princes and the Vijayanagara empire against the Islamic potentates, which had subjugated a large part of the subcontinent.

The identification of this period and, more so, the characteristics that, according to Panikkar's analysis, make it one of the decisive periods in Indian history are revealing of the fact that Panikkar rejected the Islamic contribution as a constitutive element of India's cultural-historical tradition. Panikkar, in his historical works, insisted that the Muslim conquerors of the bulk of India—namely the Turks and the Afghans—were, unlike the Arabs, uncultured peoples, and therefore incapable of any worthwhile contribution to Indian culture.

This may well be true for the early years of the Muslim conquest of the Gangetic Valley. But it is a fact that, fairly quickly, the Turk and Afghan conquerors not only lost contact with their original bases, but also developed an autonomous culture, based on the synthesis of Central Asian and indigenous elements. The court of the sultans in Delhi became a cultural centre frequented by historians and poets who, although of Islamic religion, considered India as their homeland. Also, the political-military leadership of the sultanate was firmly in the hands of the Islamic aristocracy, but this Islamic aristocracy cooperated with the great Hindu financiers and a local nobility that was also Hindu. Moreover, although, as just mentioned, the political-military leadership of the sultanate was firmly in the hands of the Islamic aristocracy, in the course of time Indians of recent conversion to Islam not only became part of the political-military ruling class, but ascended to apex positions. The example of Malik Kafur, a former Hindu who, thanks to the favour of the Sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji, became the number two of the sultanate is only the most resounding instance of this process, but in no way it is unique. Finally, from a strictly historical viewpoint, the most significant fact of the period from the 13th to the beginning of the 15th century was far from being the resistance of the Rajput princes and the Vijayanagara empire against the Islamic potentates. Rather, it was the victorious defence of India against the Mongols by the Delhi sultanate and the political-administrative centralisation and economic development that made this resistance possible.[4]

7. Strength and limitations of Elli and Paolini's analysis

Elli and Paolini in their presentation of both Panikkar's political life and cultural production always maintain an empathetic attitude that does not prevent them from pointing out Panikkar's limitations in either field. Regarding Panikkar's political evolution, what is the judgment of the two authors has

[4] This author has extensively dealt with these problems in Torri (2014).

already been said. They acknowledge the eventual failure of Panikkar's action in favour of the princes and highlight his positive role in formulating a sympathetic but realistic China policy. As already noted, it was a policy that, if followed in the late 1950s, would have possibly prevented the disastrous India-China war of 1962 and a negative political heritage which, still nowadays, is besetting the relations between the two Asian giants. With regard to Panikkar's scholarly production, the critical examination Elli and Paolini make in particular of his most important text, *Asia and Western Dominance*, is exemplary. In fact, next to the undeniable strengths of the text, Elli and Paolini point out its limitations, especially with regard to the last two chapters, the one on Russian expansion in Asia and the one on European missionaries. Also, they rightly subject to critical evaluation Panikkar's concept of "Asianism," that is the idea that Asian nations—far from being united only by their struggle against European domination—shared a common civilizational base.

It is in the case of Panikkar's identification of Hinduism as the hard and unchanging core of the cultural-historical tradition of India and, therefore, as the core of the Indian nation, that the critical blade of the two authors dulls somewhat. In fact, Elli and Paolini show the tendency to justify Panikkar's position by insisting that his conception of Hinduism was always—and increasingly became over time—that of a tolerant religion open to outside influences. What Elli and Paolini fail to see is that no religion is in itself tolerant or intolerant, but changes over time, oscillating between one extreme and another. What is always dangerous is to identify the idea of nationhood with membership in a particular religion: the inevitable result, which we have seen manifest many times throughout history and which continues to manifest before our eyes in today's world, is intolerance and persecution of minorities. Exemplary of this is, unfortunately, what has been happening in India, in particular since 2014, during the prime ministership of Narendra Modi. Muslim and Christian minorities have become the object of state discrimination and gang violence by bands of Hindu extremists. These gangs do not hesitate to resort to lynchings and assassinations, confident as they are that they will not be prosecuted by the police and judiciary.

Many of us continue to wonder how it has been possible that from the secular, democratic and tolerant India of Nehru, eventually emerged the Hindu, authoritarian and intolerant India of Narendra Modi. Evidently, powerful regressive forces were already present within Nehru's India. In this respect, the intellectual and political story of an outstanding intellectual like Panikkar is exemplary. Failing to identify this problem clearly is the main limitation of Elli and Paolini's work. A work that, even with this limitation, remains of high intellectual level, of great scholarly depth and of conspicuous importance for the light it sheds on little-known or neglected aspects of the political and cultural

history of contemporary India, through the reconstruction of the making and evolution of a great intellectual, from whom many, including this writer, have learned.

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