

Svātmarāṣṭravāda: Ontological Freedom as the Foundation of Nationalist Identity

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Abstract

This essay seeks to address the philosophical problem of how a coherent national identity may be grounded within a context marked by deep cultural and regional plurality. Drawing upon the classical debates within the *Pratyabhijñā* school of Kashmir Shaivism, the analysis focuses on the nature of the Self as articulated by Trika thinkers, situating this discourse within the broader framework of nationalism. By foregrounding the metaphysics of self-recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) and ontological freedom (*svātantrya*), the essay argues that the Trika doctrine of the Self offers a valuable conceptual resource for contemporary nation-building and the cultivation of cultural awareness—thereby fostering a model of national integrity that honours both unity and diversity.

Keywords: Trika, *svātantrya*, *pratyabhijñā*, consciousness, self, nation, unity-in-diversity.

Introduction

The Trika doctrine, which flourished in Kashmir during the early first millennium C.E., significantly contributed to the Indian intellectual tradition while proposing their dynamic doctrine of Self. Crux of this doctrine lies in reconciliation though emphasis on multiplicity without neglecting the underlying unity. This negotiation while may seem explicitly metaphysical, potentially echoes through the socio-cultural fabric of India as a nation. India is marked by a profound cultural and linguistic diversity, the vast expanse of culture, comprising elements that appear to exist in apparent contradiction to one another. While such an appearance can delude the minds, it is to be noted that the deontic reality provides the possibility of such co-existence. Thus, on one hand, if one were to assert only the idea of the nation—as a singular, unified identity—such a stance risks effacing regional particularities and cultural heterogeneity. Conversely, on the other hand, to prioritise diversity without recognising the substratum of unity may lead to disintegration and decentralised fragmentation. Therefore, a proposed approach of synthesis of both is attempted.

This perspective is rooted in the non-duality of *Śiva* (implying the static oneness) and *Śakti* (implying the

dynamic multiplicity), enables a vision wherein unity and diversity are not opposed but mutually implicated, represented by the *yāmala*. Just as the microcosm in Tantra is understood as a reflection of the macrocosm, so too does the Trika view of the Self mirror a philosophical foundation for national cohesion. The debate concerning the nature of the Self in this tradition thus unfolds as a deeper enquiry into the ontological basis of consciousness, unfolding into implications attempted to answer the question as to, how one might conceptualise the integrity of Indian national identity.

Approaching the Problem

The first issue to be addressed here is: what is meant by Consciousness? Taking the definition given by Kṣemarāja, consciousness is necessarily conscious of itself. This self-reflexivity also implies the power of absolute freedom, which underscores the very essential potency of the self. This *svātantrya śakti*, by its very nature, is reflected in the experience of one's absolute bliss—an experience that is nothing other than a relishing of the absolute itself. The consequent volition to reveal oneself, to experience the other as a totality, and to act as the other, are all extensions of this primordial volitional freedom. It should also be noted that the doctrine holds Consciousness as identical with the Self.

Thus, it follows, of the nature of *Being* is *freedom*, then subjugation—whether physical, cultural, or intellectual—is an aberration, a veiling of the self's true nature. To be free, then, is to return to the source of one's being—not only existentially but also intellectually and culturally. In *Swaraj in Ideas*, K.C. Bhattacharya diagnoses a deeper, more insidious form of colonial domination—not over India's land, but over its modes of thinking—what he terms the “*slavery of the spirit*.” Unlike overt political rule, this form of subjugation embeds itself in the very frameworks Indians use to understand the world, as they continue to think through categories imposed by colonial education and European epistemology. Bhattacharya identifies three central consequences of this intellectual colonization: first, the uncritical assimilation of Western thought, where ideas are adopted wholesale without assessing their relevance to Indian realities; second, the emergence of a hybrid intellectual culture that is neither fully Indian nor Western, resulting in a kind of conceptual sterility; and third, the erosion of vernacular vitality, as educated Indians struggle to articulate complex ideas in their native languages, thereby weakening indigenous philosophical expression. For Bhattacharya, political

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independence without the freedom to think independently is hollow; true *Swaraj* lies in reclaiming one's intellectual agency by thinking from within one's own cultural and philosophical traditions. His critique resonates with the idea of *svātantrya śakti*—as it entails that essence of freedom is ontological, not merely political. Decolonization, therefore, becomes the unveiling of Consciousness itself—the reawakening of the volitional force of the self to think, create, and speak from its own centre.

A major weapon against this is colonising the minds though disassociating oneself through space and time. The temporal disassociation is by rejecting the possibility of re-experiencing the history, as redundant, and seeing oneself segregated from the past. While the spatial diassociation is done by regionalising identity, and excuding the integrated non-duality of identity, which is the nation. Thus, both of these are addressed through an examination of *smṛti* and *apohana*.

Unifying through Time

The crucial concern that underlies both metaphysical and cultural reflection is the question of memory and its ontological presuppositions: does memory entail a persisting, unchanging self that endures through time, or can it be sufficiently accounted for by a stream of causally connected, momentary mental events? At stake here is not merely an epistemological issue, but the very condition for cultural self-awareness and continuity.

If memory presupposes a stable subject—an “I” who remembers past experiences as its own—then the hypothesis of a permanent self appears indispensable. On this account, recollection would involve not merely the reactivation of past impressions (*saṃskāras*), but their reintegration within a continuous subjectivity. This view, articulated most clearly within the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* tradition, holds that memory is a property of the self (*ātman*), which is distinct from both mind (*manas*) and the senses. Here, the self serves as the enduring locus of awareness, and mnemonic dispositions are retained within the self-mind complex. Recognition (*pratyabhijñā*), such as in the judgement “This is the same pot I saw yesterday,” is rendered intelligible only if the same self is present to both experiences. Thus, for *Nyāya*, memory is not simply a mechanical re-arising of latent traces but an intentional act of a unified self reappropriating its own past.

Yet this position, while ontologically robust, comes at the cost of postulating a substantial self. In contrast, the Buddhist *Abhidharma* schools propose a radically different account. They analyse mental phenomena as momentary dharmas that arise and perish in quick succession, with no enduring substratum.

Memory, in this model, is the result of causal continuity among dharmas, where present cognitions are conditioned by past impressions but are not unified by a single metaphysical subject. The sense of “I remember” (*asmīti*) is explained through reflexive awareness (*svaśamvedana*) within the stream of consciousness (*vijñāna*), not through reference to a permanent self.

Yogācāra developments of this view, particularly in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* and *Viṃśikā*, locate these impressions within the storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), where karmic seeds are preserved and re-emerge as recollective experience. However, even here, there is no self qua enduring identity—only the dynamic play of conditioned patterns. While this model retains explanatory economy, it ultimately evacuates memory of any grounding in a unitary subject, thereby raising serious questions about the continuity of identity, both individual and cultural.

This metaphysical debate has deep implications when extrapolated into the cultural and civilisational register. A nation, much like an individual, requires a coherent narrative of its past in order to sustain its sense of identity. If the collective memory of a civilisation is fragmented—reduced to isolated moments without a binding sense of continuity—then its cultural consciousness becomes reactive rather than reflective. The Buddhist denial of a metaphysical self, while internally coherent, risks undermining the possibility of a nation sustaining a unified narrative across temporal distance. If no enduring subject underwrites the memory of past struggles, cultural trauma, or civilisational achievements, then the very notion of cultural survival loses its ontological anchor.

Thus, to sever memory from the self, or to reduce the self to a succession of mental events, is to risk cultural amnesia. It is to render the remembrance of independence, the memory of survival, and the ongoing narrative of identity fundamentally incoherent. A culture that loses the thread of its own self-recollection is no longer a living tradition but a disconnected sequence of reactions. In light of this, any attempt to theorise national identity must resist both the dualistic fragmentation of self and memory, and the Buddhist rejection of self altogether. What is needed, rather, is a metaphysics that affirms the enduring self not as an immutable substance, but as the dynamic ground of memory—a self that remembers, and in remembering, reclaims its being across time.

In this regard, the Trika tradition offers a valuable alternative. Rather than collapsing into either substantialist realism or reductive stream-theories, Trika posits a non-dual consciousness (*cit*) which is both the ground of multiplicity and its integrating principle.

Memory, in this context, is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a mode of self-recollection—an act of consciousness recognising its own temporal unfoldings. Cultural awareness, then, must be understood as the reawakening of this unified consciousness to its own manifestations—diverse, localised, even contradictory, but rooted in a deeper ontological unity. However, to establish this first, we must clarify how memory (*smṛti*) relates to perception (*pratyakṣa*). The crucial claim is that memory presupposes a prior perceptual event, and thus the two cannot be wholly severed. To maintain that each cognition arises in isolation—and perishes instantaneously without leaving any continuity—flies in the face of the simple fact that one cannot remember an object unless a preceding perception has impressed a *saṃskāra*. Were perception entirely fleeting and disconnected from what follows, recollection of past experience would be impossible.

Moreover, memory does more than reproduce what was perceived; it enables recognition (*pratyabhijñā*), whereby one discerns ‘this is that which was before’. Such recognition unites past and present cognitions within a single field of awareness, and therefore presupposes an enduring self capable of holding both. If the self were truly momentary, no act of recognition could occur, since the subject of the earlier perception would no longer exist to apprehend the present one. Thus, the very act of remembering testifies to a stable, temporally extended subjectivity. By analogy, when a nation recalls its history, it does not forge an identity of a single instant but rather sustains a continuous stream of collective being that transcends any one temporal fragment.

Both memory and perception share the same essential feature—consciousness (*cit*)—which illumines past and present alike; their sole difference lies in temporal orientation. Perception illuminates the immediate ‘now’, memory the past ‘then’. Should *cit* itself be momentary, every cognition would appear as utterly isolated, and no continuity between past and present could obtain. Furthermore, memory is not a passive replay of earlier perceptions but a dynamic function that integrates and synthesises prior experiences into the present consciousness. The capacity to recall and recognise is not mechanical; it stems from the self’s inherent power to grasp temporal continuity. Consequently, the identity of a nation—or an individual—is not a passive receptacle of discrete moments but an active agent (*kartr*), unifying past, present and future. To urge that we simply ‘move on’ from history and dwell only in the present is thus self-contradictory, for dissociation from our own memory undermines the very possibility of

coherent identity.

Unifying through Space

The other problem at hand is regarding spatial dissasociation. Here the central problem lies on whether identity is constituted by differentiation and exclusion (*apohā*) or by direct recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of non-duality. The Buddhist *apohā* theory maintains that words do not denote intrinsic universals (*jāti*) but function by negating everything that falls outside a given class. Thus, upon hearing “cow,” one does not grasp a *sui generis* “cow-ness” but rather excludes non-cows (horses, goats, etc.). If universals existed independently of cognition, Buddhists argue, they would persist even in the absence of minds to apprehend them—a conclusion at odds with the contextual emergence of meaning. Recognition, then, is understood not as a passive reception of a pre-existing universal but as an active process of conceptual exclusion.

Yet this exclusionary model falters on several fronts when applied to questions of regional or national identity. First, if understanding any culture requires negating an infinite set of “non-that” alternatives, one is confronted by an infinite regress: each act of exclusion presupposes prior awareness of what must be excluded. No finite subject could complete such a process, rendering knowledge impractical. Second, genuine recognition of a region or tradition inevitably invokes past experience not by systematically rejecting all other events but by directly identifying a continuity within a broader whole. This presupposes that some self-revealing basis of identity must already be in place—an integrative awareness that cannot itself be derived by exclusion.

By contrast, the *Pratyabhijñā* approach asserts that identity is grasped through direct recognition: *cit* apprehends its own prior manifestations as expressions of a unified ground. In every act of exclusion, a flash of recognition in forms of- “this was known before” and “This too is a part of the whole”, revealing that the self-same consciousness underwrites both differentiation and unity. Exclusion thus proves superfluous, for identity is not a secondary construction born of negation but a primary revelation of awareness—and of a nation’s enduring, composite being. Thus, the fundamental question of national and regional identity turns on *pratyabhijñā*—the immediate recognition that “we, as a nation or region, are the very community that participated in those historical events.” That this recognition endures despite shifting borders, evolving customs and linguistic plurality demonstrates that such diversity of experience does not fracture the collective *cit*, but merely expresses its manifold self-manifestations (*saṃskāras*). Only by

affirming a single, continuous consciousness can we explain how cultural memory (*smṛti*) rebinds past and present into a coherent communal identity, transcending any momentary fragment of history.

Dynamic Non-dualism

The other challenge lies in an monolithic static doctrine, where essential unity effaces regional and cultural particularities, treating diversity as illusory (*mithyā*) and subordinating all modes of life to a singular ideal. K. C. Bhattacharya diagnoses this tendency in *Svarāj in Ideas* as “cultural subjection”: the uncritical suppression of vernacular thought by an alien intellectual cast, a “slavery of the spirit” that deepens when resistance ceases. He warns that political freedom without the emancipation of native modes of thinking yields only a hollow sovereignty, for a nation that neglects its plural traditions forfeits the creative vitality that sustains its collective self-understanding.

Thus, denying the richness of particulars in favour of an undifferentiated whole is like beholding pure gold while overlooking the delicate craftsmanship of its jewellery, or staring at a blank screen without perceiving the myriad images it projects. Such reductionism amounts to the negation of aesthetic bliss (*rasa*), for self-experience is inherently *rasa*-laden: *rasa* theory teaches that aesthetic flavour arises from the interplay of *bhāva* and *rasa* in performance arts, transporting the spectator into an experiential reflection of universal emotional tones. While all the dynamic interplay ultimately finds their *viśrānti* in *śāntarasa*. This is the supreme tranquillity that underlies and unifies all other *rasas*—much like a non-dual ground that sustains diverse regional identities, which finds its resort in acknowledgement of the diaspora of diversity. The freedom to experience oneself as a particular individual—what Trika terms *svātantrya*—is essential to agency, for *svātantrya* is the sovereign will-force by which consciousness (*cit*) self-reflects (*vimarśa*) and manifests in manifold forms in its own mirror. Denying this freedom not only robs the individual of autonomous self-expression but also undermines the collective agency of a nation, which can neither flourish as a mere uniformity nor survive as a reactive collage of isolated fragments.

Advaita Vedānta's model of an inert, undifferentiated Brahman reduces multiplicity to mere illusion, effacing local traditions under a single monolithic identity, while Yogācāra's doctrine of momentary cognitions fragments identity into a series of discrete events, precluding any enduring subject of memory. K. C. Bhattacharya's *Svarāj in Ideas* diagnoses the resulting “slavery of the spirit” as the unconscious supplanting of native frameworks by alien thought-forms, a cultural subjection that negates both regional

particularities and genuine self-rule. True *Svarāj* demands the restoration of *svātantrya* in the intellectual and aesthetic realms: the right to savour and self-reflexively re-recognise one's own traditions in all their nuance, rather than exclude or homogenise them. Trika's non-dual synthesis—where *prakāśa* (illumination) interpenetrates with *vimarśa* (self-awareness) and powers of divine will (*cikīrṣā*)—provides the philosophical blueprint for this emancipation: national identity is neither imposed unity nor mere negation, but collective *pratyabhijñā*—shared acts of recognition by which a continuous, self-aware consciousness manifests through myriad local expressions.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has traced the contours of a deep philosophical debate—between those who affirm only the unity of Brahman or a flux of discrete cognitions, and those who insist on the primacy of regional particularities through exclusion. We have seen that Advaita's static, inactive consciousness renders agency and self-recognition inexplicable, while momentarist doctrines fracture both personal and collective identity into isolated instants. Equally, strategies of *apohā*—defining communities by negation—lead to endless regress and fail to account for the felt unity with one's own traditions. By contrast, the Trika synthesis posits a non-dual *cit* that self-reflects (*vimarśa*) and enacts its own freedom (*svātantrya-śakti*), enabling memory (*smṛti*) and perception (*pratyakṣa*) to serve not as rival modes but as complementary expressions of a single, continuous consciousness. In this framework, each regional custom, linguistic nuance or historical narrative is neither suppressed nor opposed but embraced as a self-manifestation of the national Self—just as the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm in Tantra. K. C. Bhattacharya's plea for “intellectual *Svarāj*” finds its philosophical foundation here: true decolonisation of the mind entails reclaiming the *svātantrya* of *cit* to think, create and remember from one's own centre. Only within such a framework—honouring both unity and diversity—can a nation genuinely claim *Svarāj in Ideas*, reclaiming its agency through the freedom to experience and remember itself.

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