

Il Novissimo Ramusio



Conferenze ISMEO

3

Voices of Freedom

Society, Culture and Ideas
in the 70th Year of India's Independence

Proceedings of the Seminar Held in Rome, 11 November 2017
Organised by the International Institute of South Asian Studies
(ISAS) and ISMEO – International Association for Mediterranean
and Oriental Studies, under the Auspices of the Embassy of India

edited by Tiziana Lorenzetti



ISMEO

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FOREWORD

We felicitate the publication of the proceedings of the seminar Voices of Freedom: Society, Culture and Ideas in the 70th Year of India's Independence, held on 11 November 2017 on the occasion of celebrations of the 70th year of India's Independence. The seminar, enriched by an impressive photo exhibition, was held in the magnificent Biblioteca Angelica in Rome, one of the oldest Renaissance libraries in Europe, which also holds a rich collection of books on India.

The seminar was an important occasion to listen to a series of interdisciplinary talks regarding the long struggle for India's Independence. Eye-witnesses, academicians, scholars, Italians and of Indian origin, joined in to celebrate 70th year of India's Independence.

We wish to thank the International Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) and the ISMEO - International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies for this initiative.

We are sure readers will enjoy this publication which will give an insight into that special period of Indian history which laid the foundation of present India.

H.E. REENAT SANDHU
Ambassador of India, Rome



TUCCI, ISMEO AND INDIA

Madam Ambassador; Authorities present, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to bring to the participants of the seminar Voices of Freedom. History, Society and Culture on the 70th Anniversary of India's Independence the felicitations of ISMEO – International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, which today comprises 300 scholars, of whom 120 are renowned scholars from abroad, ideally representing over 100 universities, research centres and academic, scientific institutions and museums from all continents.

ISMEO—re-established in Rome five years ago—also seeks to reconnect itself by way of its acronym with the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East), founded in the 1930s by Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Tucci, and many of its members, who had also been members of IsIAO (the historic IsMEO's successor, since 1995), variously expressed interest in what had constituted the principle sheet anchor of that great Italian orientalist institution of the last century, that is the Eurasian world, from prehistoric to present times, in its geographic, political and cultural parameters, a world that owes to its ancient and variegated culture, and to its strategic geopolitical positioning a centrality that acquires a growing sensitivity in the contemporary world.

Our association's ideal reference-points are the works of Giuseppe Tucci and those of his successors Sabatino Moscati (1979) and Gherardo Gnoli (1980-2011). The scope of the Association—whose operational purposes include its incorporation in a Foundation (objective now imminent)—is to undertake programmes of study, formation and research on Asiatic and African cultures and on their interactions with the Mediterranean basin.

Giuseppe Tucci, like other Italians born at the end of the nineteenth century, had a post-Risorgimento formation, devoid of the exasperated nationalism that was to rise a few decades later, the cult of the fatherland and liberation from foreign domination being central to it. Tucci's empathy with India did not rest so much on a generic anti-Britannic worldview as much as on a shared conviction about a people's need for freedom which, to a young scholar's eyes, appeared to be analogous to the nationalistic ideals that had animated the oeuvres of Dante and Manzoni.

Also interpretable in a Risorgimental light is Tucci's general interest in Indian and oriental thought, conceived as an alternative to the monopoly of mass culture, then preponderantly ecclesiastical in character, or to philosophical conceptions that were beginning menacingly to emerge in the twilight of nineteenth century's romantic-nationalist utopias.

We know from a great Indologist, a major pupil of Tucci's, Raniero Gnoli, that interest in Indian culture was alive in Tucci right from the years of the First World War, when he would be reading the Kashmiri chronicle Rājataranginī, in the trenches, and was already working on his treatise Linee di una storia di materialismo indiano (Outline of a history of Indian materialism), which was to see the light of the day in 1923.

The image of the future Indologist, fighting in the war that Italian historiography would deem the last of the wars of independence, evokes the esteem in which Gandhi always held the Italian Risorgimento, in general, and Mazzini, in particular. On the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Giuseppe Mazzini, in Indian Opinion, Gandhi published the article 'Giuseppe Mazzini. Una carriera notevole' (Giuseppe Mazzini. A remarkable career), wherein he drew parallels between India's destiny and Italy's vicissitudes prior to 1870. He highlighted how Mazzini had put himself at the service of the Italian nation, despite considering himself, primarily, a citizen of the world: 'His constant desire was to be able to see every nation united and grand,' wrote the Mahatma.

As others, after me, will better remember, admiration for the Italian Risorgimento was a constant note in many Indian patriots; suffices to think of Ram Mohan, Surendranath Banerjea, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai.

In 1925, the Italian government sent Tucci on a mission to Indian universities, to teach Italian culture, and also to improve his own command of Indian letters and languages. He taught 'Italian Language, Art and Literature' at the Visvabharati International University at Shantiniketan, whose guiding light was Rabindranath Tagore. In 1926, the two greats visited Assam together. Later, Tucci would leave Shantiniketan in

order to teach at the Universities of Dacca, Varanasi and Calcutta. In 1962, at IsMEO, he would dedicate a moving homage to the great Indian poet with the publication of the Centenario di Tagore 1861-1961 (Tagore Centenary, 1861-1961).

Tucci remained in India from 1925 to 1930, and learnt Bengali and Sanskrit so well as to earn 'the esteem and trust even of the pundits least inclined to admit a foreigner into the familial circle.' The command of the languages on the part of the Italian scholar filled with wonder the young Mircea Eliade, who met him in 1929. Eliade writes of Tucci:

He is surprisingly young. He speaks [...] all languages. [...] When I met him, in 1929, he was well known throughout Bengal for his prodigious hard work, for the elegance of his Sanskrit, for his knowledge of languages.

In India, amongst others, Tucci assiduously associated with Surenda Nath Dasgupta, who—as he wrote to Gentile, on 1 Oct. 1929, from Calcutta—was considered 'modern India's most authoritative and genial thinker and one of the greatest interpreters of Indian philosophy.'

With regard to his time in India and his interest for the subcontinent, in the 1933 article 'Carovanieri ed asceti sul Tetto del Mondo' (Caravanners and Ascetics on the Roof of the World), published in L'Illustrazione Italiana (LV, n. 29, 16.7.1933, p. 98), Tucci wrote:

Having stayed in India for six years [...] to exhume the treasures of ancient Indian thought and to penetrate [...] this mysterious soul, which, six centuries before Christ, with the Upaniṣad and the Buddha had risen to the heights of a philosophical speculation that is its lasting glory, I undertook [...] three journeys of scientific exploration in western Tibet and two in Nepal. Geographical investigation was not my only purpose; I wanted, above all, to continue my inquiry into Buddhist religious thought [...]

One must glean direct information about its doctrines and experiences, so different from our own, in the monasteries or from the Tibetan ascetics who, in the boundless solitude of the Himalayas, have, with admirable faithfulness, conserved the spiritual texts of Mahayana Buddhism. One has to go through impregnable passes [...] the Himalayan gorges, [...] travel two or three thousand kilometres on foot or on horseback, over cliffs and deserts, climb up to an altitude of six thousand meters, cross impetuous rivers, trust one's life to insecure bridges [...], defy landslides and avalanches, to then find oneself before the severe and imposing mass of a monastery or the remote cell of a hermit and the nagging doubt as to the practical result of so many hardships.

In 1930, Giuseppe Tucci returned to Italy, for good; he had been an Italian Academician since 1929; in 1931, being world-renowned in the field he was called to the chair of Chinese Language and Literature at the Oriental University of Naples; within three years, the University of Rome established a chair of Religions and Philosophy of India and of the Far East expressly for him, which he was to hold for more than thirty years, until he retired in 1964.

Considering the university to be a 'beaten up relict of nineteenth century traditions,' Tucci began to conceive the idea of an institution that might be able to develop Italian interest in Middle and Far East, while, at the same time, open up the young Italian nation that was being formed to the knowledge of a reality thitherto known only from accounts of enterprising explorers and isolated pioneers.

In Giovanni Gentile, with whom he had long been in contact, he found an essential interlocutor both from a political standpoint and from that of philosophical sensibility, and, in February 1933, they jointly founded l'Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (the Institute for Middle and Far East), IsMEO, of which Gentile was to be the official president until 1944.

IsMEO soon became the co-ordinating centre for Orientalist research in Italy, inclusive of the task of weaving a network of politico-cultural relations with major Asian nations, amongst which, naturally, India being then at the threshold of independence occupied a conspicuous position: as evinced by the articles published in the institute's bulletin and, above all, in the magazine Asiatica (1936-1943).

Gentile's ideas largely matched Tucci's, not infrequently those of Gandhi himself (one may refer to the copious Tuccian pages of 'My Approach to Gandhi,' in volume four of East and West, 1953). Tucci gave these ideas cultural and geopolitical dignity with his seminal intuition of the unity of the entire Eurasiatic continent. The ideal of reciprocal understanding and cultural unity amongst peoples was to be a constant in the life of IsMEO, almost in token of its intellectual independence despite the vagaries of politics, which, in the final analysis, might have been one of the reasons why the Italian government decided, in 2012, to withdraw its support to the institute, in an age that has often thought it more opportune to underline the things that differentiate rather than those that unite.

From 1947 onwards, under Tucci's guidance, IsMEO became deservedly renowned both with the international scientific community and in the Asian countries where it had, meanwhile, opened archaeological sites and started the restoration of deteriorating cultural patrimony.

These years were to give rise to the constant collaboration with young scholars formed in Asian research centres, above all Indians, who always looked up to the publications in East and West, the scientific periodical founded in 1950 as the organ of the institute, as a true and proper cultural bridge between the two continents.

With every country that it came into contact with, for scientific and cultural reasons, ISMEO was always Italy's ambassador. It was, therefore, time and time again, honoured by the visit of eminent political personages who looked upon the institute as an elective home.

Such was the case of the visit, on 22 Nov. 1954, of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, vice-president of India; or that of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, on 7 July 1955. Thanks to the prestige of Tucci, already before the war, Italy had been able to welcome Gandhi and set up a series of meetings between the Indian nationalist leader Subhash Chandra Bose and Italian statesmen and cultural figures.

India has shown her appreciation for Tucci on more than one occasion, by way conferring titles and honours, such as the Laurea honoris causa by the University of Delhi (1953); the Desikottam by the Visva Bharati University (1961); honorary associateship of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta (1971); the Jawaharlal Nehru Prize for International Understanding (1978). This last was the recognition dearest to Tucci's heart, both because of the love he always bore for India and the bonds of friendship that tied him with the person who, together with Gandhi, was the chief architect of India's independence. The decoration and the document thereof, containing the motivation for the prize, are now displayed in the show-window of a small oriental institute in Tucci's native city of Macerata, to which his family has left many of his documents and pieces of memorabilia.

Let me conclude by saying that international understanding was never an empty and abstract ideal for the Institute, but a matter of daily practice, almost a characterising discipline which united, and unites even today, in this new ISMEO which I have the honour to preside over, the ideal continuation of the historic one that was Tucci's and Gentile's, and of collaborators and scholars of every origin and formation, and of all nations of the world.

ADRIANO V. ROSSI
ISMEO President

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