

EVALUATION OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE
CONTEXT OF WORLD PHILOSOPHY.

A Note for consideration

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Has Indian philosophy made a perceptible impact on World thought in recent times? The answer to that question depends on which of the three ways one adopts to conceive Indian philosophy.

- (a) academic philosophy as it comes out of Indian university facilities,
- (b) philosophy regarded as a way of life or
- (c) a theoretically articulated philosophy, coming, not from the academy but from the ashram. (i.e. Sri Aurobindo)

We have of course had, during this century, great philosophical minds, teaching in our universities, ~~beginning with~~ ^{like} Dr Radhakrishnan, who have ^{to cite a prominent example} also made an impact on the outside world. But most university professors stick to exposition of traditional Hindu or Buddhist philosophy, interpreting the schools, of course with their own creative individuality, but seldom reaching the point of philosophical creativity. Or else they expound some particular school of western philosophy, too slavishly, and after unsuccessfully, imitating their western counterparts. Perhaps the university is the last place from which to anticipate philosophical creativity in India today only a philosophy moulded in the crucible of life can be really creative. In the west, universities were at one time at the centre of life, and their philosophy faculties could create a Hegel or a Husserl, a Russell or a Whitehead, a Heidegger or a Brentano. Our universities have been too far alienated from Indian life to manifest that kind of creativity and the best we have are but compendious scholars, not philosophers as such.

We have done better in non-academic philosophy- in our way of life. We have Gandhi and Tagore, Ramakrishna and Ramana & just to mention a few who have manifested more their lives than their words of way of life which others can emulate. That is probably where we have made our greatest impact during this century and continue to make till this day. But none of the four I have mentioned have produced systematic of philosophy. Even Tagore, profuse of pen, stopped short of academic philosophy and in fact, apart from some feeble attempts (e.g. Sadhana), spurned the academic exercise as such.

Sri Aurobindo is perhaps the exception, the solitary sage who also sought to build some systematic philosophy, while pursuing Sadhana with undivided attention. And for that very reason Sri Aurobindo deserves better treatment than he now receives from the philosophy curriculum of most Indian universities, where dogmatic orthodoxy often away from creative innovation such as Sri Aurobindo's, regarding these merely as heretical.

If among the three categories of Indian philosophy mentioned clearly it is the second and the third which have had more impact on the world- note necessarily on the world of philosophy- at least more than the philosophy that comes out of Indian universities. This is certainly not to disparage university philosophy in India, but to point out its weakness springing from a triple alienation-

- (a) from the Ashram and its spiritual disciplines out of which alone ~~and~~ true darsana can come,
- (b) from the day to day concerns of ordinary human beings, such as the acute problems of injustice, human identity and integrity, communal harmony and national unit; and
- (c) from the recent advances in human knowledge, especially in the fields of scientific knowledge: theoretical physics, biochemistry and mathematics (Godel's theorem, for example).

... there is to be a serious Indian philosophy which is to make an impact on a world largely hostile to the philosophical enterprise, the overcoming of the triple alienation on the part of the Indian philosophical community would seem to be a necessary pre-condition.

Very few of our university professors and teachers give the impression of practising what they profess. Students get the impression, either of academic showmanship or of an easy way to make a living, or a combination of both; they seldom see a professor of philosophy whose very life bears witness to the truth of the philosophical maxims he expounds. This problem can hardly be tackled until the Ashram -Academy separation is overcome. For the university, especially our own pale imitations of the western secular university, can hardly be the milieu in which a deep rooted Indian philosophy can flourish. I don't see how the university Grants Commission or any particular university can begin to bring the creative matrix of a spiritual ashram to merge with, or even to imbringe upon, the life and curriculum of a university faculty of philosophy. It is more realistic to work for a replication of the Aurobindian pattern & that of savants with great knowledge and a rich experience of life going to Ashrams to pursue Sadhana and do some writing after they have advanced considerably in spiritual attainment. Unfortunately, very few of our great contemporary Yogins have the meticulous scientific and philosophical training and life background of a Sri Aurobindo, and their writings, though highly inspiring, seldom attain the high standards of philosophical respectability.

But even the Yogins are unable, as of today, to enter into the deep problem* structure of world poverty, national and international injustice, human dignity and identity, the arms race and the arms trade, war and peace, economic exploitation and torture of humans, decadence and corruption,

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government sponsored killing of its own citizens, and the myriad other miseries which have beset humankind.

Again Sri Aurobindo was a notable exception. Professor of English, terrorist, freedom fighter, assertive nationalist, poet, literary critic, sage, mystic and finally Maharshi, no single Indian has comprehended such a widely and deeply catholic scope of knowledge experience and interests. Solidly opposed to karmic fatalism, and to superficial interpretations of the Maya doctrine and of the caste system as well as to the individualistic pursuit of Sadhana, he sought to redeem the collective soul of nations and peoples, developing in that process a sociology, politics and economics for a "spiritualized society" though his solution, the ideal superman in the gnostic community always lay beyond sociology, politics and economics. Sri Aurobindo's strength, in contrast with the corresponding weakness in most Indian Vedantic philosophers, was that he could see democracy, socialism social justice, freedom, equality, and unity as way-houses on the road to the full realization of God as superman in freedom and unity.

But when it comes down to brass tacks, Sri Aurobindo would insist that only on a spiritual foundation, any genuine and satisfactory economics, politics or sociology can be built. And to that extent our halfhearted defuse of democracy and freedom, our lazily conceived and totally secular five year plans would sound hardly relevant to him.

This is not the place to enter into an evaluation or critique of Sri Aurobindo's massive and profound thought. It was intended to point out only that he tried to relate his philosophy to sociology, economics and politics, though the way he did it may appear too idealistic and utopian to many of us. With roots in the Vedas and in the Gita, Aurobindo never excluded unlike many others, the realm of the socio-economic and political

from the purview of his integral vision. If Indian philosophy is to do justice to itself in the context of world philosophy, it can afford to do no less. But perhaps it may be necessary to go much more deeply into the processes of human social becoming (uenschwurdung) than Sri Aurobindo was able to - in the light of Hegel and Hary, and of western social, economic and political theory.

It may also be necessary for any real deep-rooted Indian philosophy to do justice to the problem of human alienation as experienced by people in urban societies all over the world and as reflected in much of contemporary literature - in John Updike and Saul Bellow, Kurt Vonnegut and T.S. Eliot, John-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Herman Hesse and Ginther Grass, just to mention a few western authors. Philosophy must deal with life as it is lived - or else it must convincingly argue that all life-experiences of the every day kind are totally meaningless. Indian philosophy cannot make an impact on world philosophy unless it can take into account how people feel and act, not only in India, but also elsewhere in the world.

The third alienation - of philosophy from contemporary scientific knowledge - seems at first are that is impossible to overcome. What philosopher can hope in addition to knowing the philosophical traditions of India as well as the west, also to master the mountainous mass of specialized scientific knowledge. But to think so is to misconceive what is needed. It is not detailed technical scientific knowledge that is needed, but intelligent insights into its revolutionary new discoveries of a general nature, affecting the nature of reality and the nature of thought and perception.

As regards the nature of reality as such, it is now evident, at least in English - speaking circles of the philosophy of science, that any pretensions that the scientific method may have had in the past, to know reality "as it is", objectively and indubitably, have now to be abandoned. The subjective has been shown to be an essential element in all perception, and there is no such thing as a purely objective

Scientific theory is now recognised to be a subjective creation, tested of course in relation to objective reality, but still the fact remains that the "world of objective scientific knowledge" is in essence a human creation - a third World of "objective truths" stored in libraries and books, related to, but distinct from, the first world of subjective consciousness and the second world of objective reality as such. We know, for example, at least at the sub-atomic level, no objective measurement of reality is possible which is unaffected by the process of measurement, which adds its own quantum of energy to that which is known or measured, substantially altering and fixing what is there, mainly as potentiality.

In biochemistry, brain research and computer technology, we are getting new insights into how systems work, how organisms differ from machines or mechanical systems and so on. We still know very little about the nature of life as such, nor about body-mind relationships, though there is reason to hope that some progress can be made soon in these areas.

It is important also to take into account the fact that most philosophers of science (with notable exceptions in Marxism) are today convinced that the methods of modern science can now deal only with certain specific sectors of the spectrum of reality, that poetry and art may give just as valid approaches to the apprehension of the reality, and that it is waive to hold that only scientific truth is "real" truth.

Indian philosophy must take into account the frustrations of western philosophy, which in the modern period, under the inebriating influence of the European Enlightenment, sought to pursue a pre-suppositionless philosophy, freed from all tradition and all authority, based purely on rational cogitation, starting from clear and indubitable perceptions. The cartesian programme has come to grief. Wittgenstein's two attempts and Heidegger's at a deeper level, have both similarly come to grief. Now it is recognised that "prejudice" against which the Enlightenment seems to have had a heavy prejudice, is the essential element

in all perception. In other words there is no such thing as truth without tradition, and all statements can only be seen as man-made maps, not as truth itself. Hans-georg Gadamer and Jirger Habermas have shown us more clearly how the perceiving mind, which fashions truth in its own mould, has its own history of evolution and therefore limitations of horizon.

All this is important to take into account in the creation of an Indian philosophy that can be listened to with respect by the outside world.

If any contemporary Indian philosophy has thus to overcome its triple alienation - from the spirituality of Sadhana, from the world of every day life and from the great insights of modern science, it has also to have a deeper and wider perception of what constitutes Indian philosophy and the darsanika tradition in India.

India's rediscovery of its own identity is far from an accomplished fact. We are still reeling under the impact of the enormous cyclone of western secular thought. Our attempts at reaching against that onslaught and going ~~xx~~ back to our own roots has been at best half-hearted. We would like to make our past manageable to know, and we have created mythus (and western scholars have helped), myths of an "Aryan invasion", a proto-Dravidian culture and so on. And with whom am I, a man from Kerala, to identify? With the Dravidian or the Aryan? Or should I see myself as a mixture of the two? Mixture I certainly am, but I venture to suggest, of more than just two elements.

Let me try here, to enumerate, without any attempt to be exhaustive, of at least ten streams which have merged into the stream of social awareness which has shaped me as a person.

(I) First I must identify in myself a strain of perceptionary habits which I can only call "the primal Vision" shared once by all so-called primitive people of the world, and which I today associate with the tribal peoples of India - the Adivasis and the Girijans.

(2) At a second level, I find that I share in the

Consciousness in the concept of Yajna or Yoga, which to me is true Yoga. The concept of sacrifice is not to be moralistically or ritualistically misrepresented, though it has deep moral implications, and ~~Yajna~~ Yajna without ritual is to me inconceivable. The cosmic egg, the brahmanda needs to be held together, by Yajna or by a deep moving social rite of abandoning self - abandoning it by offering it to the source of all, to all humanity, and to all that exists. I find this Vedic rite-consciousness central to my own Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition.

3. At a third level, as an Indian living in the 20th century, I find in myself a layer that response to cosmic Sakti. I have no objection if you want to relate it to the so-called pre-Aryan or Dravidian religion. Or you can associate it with Saivism. What matters for me is my own perception of myself as an energy configuration system, dependent upon and drawing from the whole complex of energy systems in the cosmos - the energy of sun and moon, of galaxies and planetary systems, of ocean tides and gravitational fields, of electromagnetic and other yet unidentified force fields. I do not claim that this layer is unrelated to the first and second layers. But Sakti is not a matter of the intellect. It is a question of being in tune - to be changed constantly from the enormously complex force-field that our universe is. And if I try to conceptualise the universe merely as a mechanical system which is the object of my knowledge, I am bound to go wrong in my philosophical reasoning.

4. At a fourth level, I must recognise the Buddhist heritage as an important layer in my own identity. Not Buddhism as an intellectual system of four noble truths and the eightfold path, but Buddhism as true enlightenment (as distinct from the rational Enlightenment of the West), as true freedom - freedom from Kama and Irsna, from the myriad passions that unceasingly flail the self and drive it to and fro, from the innumerable false perceptions of the good in the external ~~world~~ world towards which I am almost irresistibly drawn, only to find that, an attainment, all imagined good turns out to be but ash or trash. I find something deep in me

responding to the best in Madhyamika philosophy, especially to Nagarjuna who has convinced me that "it is neither this nor that", that empirical reality is neither false nor true, that everything is caused by "conditioned co-origination", though I would like to include the very concept of pratitya-samutpada as an imperfect conceptual hold on something which can never be held in the intellectual grasp. Of course I tend to assimilate this concept to my own Eastern Orthodox Christian maxim of holding the Kataphatic (affirmative) and the apophatic (negative) in dialectical tension. But the Buddha and philosophers like Nagarjuna have clarified my perception of freedom, including freedom from the desire for a final conceptual grasp of reality. The doctrines of Sunyata and the irrationality of the concept of causality are other great Buddhist contributions to my own perception.

May I be permitted to enter a caveat at this point. The contemporary Indian philosophical tradition suffers from its failure to take the unorthodox Indian systems seriously. And if the light shining from Gautama and Mahavira have nothing to contribute to my seeing my way, I will be so much the poorer as an Indian. Indian philosophy is largely in Orthodox Brahmin hands, and it is natural that they would have inherited a built-in prejudice against the unorthodox Indian ways of thought. But the liberation of Indian philosophy today demands emancipation from these prejudices and a willingness to learn from Nagarjuna just as much as from Sankara, from Mahavira just as much as from Ramanuja or Madhva.

After all, what single religion in history has had such impact on all of Asia as Buddhism? It is the one system of thought which led to "the Indianisation of China" and to the transformation of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Kampuchea, Vietnam, China, Japan and Korea.

The title of an address by Dr. Hu Shih at the Tercentenary Celebration of Harvard University in 1936. See his Independence, convergence and Borrowing Cambridge, Mass. 1937. cited by Kenneth Ch'en. The Climate Transformation

5. At the fifth level I find my own indebtedness to the Upanisadic -Vedantic perspective on reality. I find the quest for self-realisation by attaining to the one - in consciousness, beyond consciousness - as exhilarating and ennobling. And I mean more than a pedantic and dogmatic enslavement to the thought of one Lokacharya, be it Sankara, Ramanuja or Madhva, Ramakrishna or Pillai Lokacharya. It is a spiritual quest - not merely an intellectual enquiry. It is a discipline to become what one is.

But I want to pursue that quest in a manner not divorced from the compassion which the Buddha and the Christ have taught me. I do not want to separate my quest from my conviction that my fellow human beings should find food, shelter and clothing and be enabled to live a life worthy of human beings, in societies of peace and justice.

I will thus have to reinterpret the Upanisadic quest, in the light of my understanding of historical reality, which I cannot dismiss as mere Vyavaharika and therefore as unrelated to the paramarthika. I know that our colonial imperialist past, and our neo-colonial-imperialist present are very much a part of the reality, whether Vyavaharika or paramarthika, to which I must relate myself and within which I must find my Indian-human identity today.

Therefore my commitment to the Upanisadic quest for unity must ever remain in dialectical tension with my social concern. And in relation to the latter point, none of the Lokacharyas, even Sri Aurobindo (is he formally a Lokacharya, not having written a Brahma Sutra- bhasya?), can be sufficient guide to understanding contemporary social reality and the way the quest for social justice impringes upon the quest for the one.

6. At the sixth level I perceive the early Greek impact on my Indian heritage. Already from the time of Ashoka, there seems to have been a free flow of ideas between the Greek and the Indian civilisation. The edicts of Asoka speak about his spiritual conquest

It is not idle to presume that the channels so opened for Buddhist monks and missionaries to travel to Central Asia, Europe and Africa were also used in reverse. The apocryphal Apollonius of Tyana reports the debate between Greek and Indian philosophers from a Greek rather than an Indian perspective. If Clement of Alexandria could speak of the Buddha, it is equally conceivable that Greek philosophy came to India through the Brahmins who are reported to be in Alexandria already in the first century, as well as by Greek travellers who visited the courts of Indian princes and conversed with Indian philosophers. I would even detect in this mutual intercourse which must have begun at least three or four centuries before our era, the beginnings of the common features we see in the Hellenic and the Indian traditions - common features like the disparagement of matter, the perception that the soul is a prisoner in the body, and the concept of the worlds that lie between our shadow world and the real world of the mukhas, all these later developed in Greek Gnosticism.

I must recognise this early impact of Hellenic culture on the development of the Indian consciousness, for otherwise I would be in danger of presumptuously presuming that the Indian culture and philosophy developed in a total vacuum, untouched by so-called foreign elements.

I shall not be diffident to recognise as the seventh element the impact of the semitic civilisation and religion on Indian culture throughout the centuries. And I am not speaking merely of Syrian Christianity in Kerala. I am speaking rather, of successive waves of Jewish, Christian and Muslim traders, immigrants, missionaries and conquerors, who had an impact on India already before the coming of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British in modern times. And this semitic impact was by no means confined to maritime India. The North West was particularly inundated with these influences, and what is today Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Punjab, have been deeply influenced, first by numerically not large but still powerful Jewish immigrants who fled the successive persecutions of the

in Jerusalem around 70 AD. The whole area from the Tigris to the Indus, once comprised in the State of Parthia, was deeply influenced by these Jewish immigrants, in whose wake came also Christians, either fleeing persecution or as in the case of the Persian Christian missionaries, spreading the message of Christ. There were undoubtedly large Christian colonies in the whole of North West India as well as along the coast - right up to Madras. The lack of sufficient research leaves the field free for speculation, but both Ramanuja and Madhva give evidence of reaching to the semitic impact - at least after the tenth century. Was the impact of Christianity and Islam on the Indian tradition purely negative? One would have to be very naive to think so. Even in the 18th 19th centuries when the confrontation was between Hinduism and a militant Western Christian culture, the impact was never purely negative. And in the 8th to 15th centuries when Christian and Muslim cultures confronted India's Buddhist, Jain and Hindu cultures, the impact led to fruitful new constructions and insights in Indian philosophy. Our research on pre-moghul interactions between Islamic civilization and Indian religions still remains quite sketchy.

8. I must briefly mention the Persian element as the eighth. We were very conscious of our debt to Persia in the 19th century. In the 20th we have come to forget it. The great leaders of the Indian Renaissance like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the cultural elite of his time had a thorough grounding in Persian civilisation and culture. Iranian mysticism and the dualism of light and darkness have deeply penetrated the Indian soil, and are today part of my heritage. I cannot out of any false pride, deny what I owe to the Persian.

9. The ninth element can only be briefly mentioned-precisely because it is so recent and so well recognized. This is modern western secular civilisation with its institutions, ideals, concepts, ways of thinking and gathering knowledge; its most decisive elements being critical rationality and the empirical philosophy. We have been so monumentally inundated with this

for granted. There are so many strands in this impact, and I shall not try to even list them in the short space available here. I simply believe that we have a double task in relation to this most recent impact on our consciousness on the one hand we have to master the techniques of critical Nationality more adequately, in order to reassess all our old perceptions and received traditions. On the other hand, we have to develop sufficient critical distance and objectivity, in order to discern the respective strengths and weaknesses, possibilities and limitations, of critical Nationality itself. Here we must learn from Dilthey and Heidegger, from Adorno and Horkheimer, from Gadamer and Habermas; but we must also bring our own non-western critique to bear upon critical rationality as a method.

10. The tenth element which I must recognise as part of my heritage as an Indian comes from the thought of Marx and Engels, Lenin and later Marxist theoreticians. Whether we recognise it or not, the impact of Marxism is there on the Indian Consciousness - in our aspirations for social justice, for the dignity of the worker, for a society without exploitation and oppression, and for socialism in general. Our conscious reactions to Marxism may have been largely conditioned by the media, as well as by the anti-Marxist predilections of most of our intelligentsia. The tragedy of the matter is that even professing members of the communist parties have only a nodding acquaintance with the basic contours of communist strategy, but no profound schooling in its ideological niceties. The Marxist impact on our society needs to be recognised and reassessed; but perhaps a deeper initiation into the profound subtleties of Marxism both as a tool for socio-politico-economic analysis and as an ideological map for human action can help the Indian philosopher deeply rooted in our own traditions, to be both creative and communicative with the modern world.

I have listed these ten elements which I regard as basic to Indian identity and culture, in a somewhat random fashion. There may be other strands that I have failed to recognize. What I have listed could perhaps be rearranged in a different and more cogent pattern. This list is submitted only as a basis for discussion.

The main point however is this: only an Indian philosophy that has overcome the three alienations and takes fully into account the various strands that go to make up our Indian culture and identity bids fair to make an impact on world philosophy.

Such an endeavour can hardly be a personal or individual effort. I know of no one who has in himself/herself the necessary equipment to cope with the whole range. In the nature of the case the endeavour has to take the form of a corporate or group effort, with intermittent mutual discussion, through several years of sustained toil.