



**INDIAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE POST COLONIAL
PERIOD: IMPACT OF WESTERN THOUGHT ON
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PHILOSOPHY**

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Though India has, down the centuries been succumbed to foreign invasions at near intervals, none of these had affected the philosophical tradition of India as that of the European and more specifically the British. The history of India's philosophical tradition in various fields underwent a radical transformation with the advent of the British especially between 1857 and 1947, when the British educational system was firmly implanted on the Indian soil. Right from 1800 AD, when institutions of British learning had begun to be established in Calcutta, there was an intense interest in European thought along with learning of English language, which helped in opening doors not only to a new civilization, but also to a different kind of cognitive enterprise in almost all fields of knowledge. Bengal became the centre of this new enthusiasm, and there was an attempt to find some sort of a new creative civilizational response to this Western impact so that its own civilizational and cultural identity was not completely lost. Most of thinkers in Bengal and elsewhere turned to the Upaniṣads for their inspiration, and by passing the long controversy between the Advaitins and non-Advaitins, they found in the doctrine of the formless absolute the ground for a new reconciliation between Indian philosophy and the European thought. The ideals of equality and fraternity which the French revolution had bequeathed to mankind and which the liberal British - thought brought to India, were seen as expressions of the fundamental Vedāntic truth

embodied in such Upaniṣadic statements as sarvam khalvidam brahma. Neo-Vedāntins also ignored the distinction between vyāvahārika and pāramārthika aspects of reality, the ordinary world of everyday life and the spiritual truth or the transcendental reality, which was supposed to be radically different from it and hence was literally of no relevance to the actual empirical concerns in which man was mainly involved. Not only this, it showed little awareness of the conflict between jñāna and karma or the life of contemplation and action, which had been an obsession and point of divergence in Indian tradition right from its beginning. Thus, ignoring the whole tradition of more than 3000 years of Indian philosophical concerns, bypassing the different and tricky philosophical problems raised by the earlier discussions and debates in classical Indian Philosophy, the Neo - Vedāntins gave a radically new interpretation which reconciled everything by vague references to the ultimate unity of everything in the indescribable formless reality of Brahman that permeated everything and thus was the essence of all that is.

There were also others like Swāmi Dayānand Saraswatī, who went back not to the Upaniṣads but to the Vedas to meet the challenges from the West. But Saraswatī too by passed the whole development that had occurred from the time of the Vedas onwards, though he did not ignore it so completely as the Neo-Vedāntins have done, as he did controvert Śankara and many others in his Satyārthaprakāśa. Though there is great difference between Neo - Vedāntins and Swāmi Dayānand Saraswatī, there is also a radical similarity between them as both used the Vedic-Upaniṣadic heritage for purposes of social reforms, which almost no one in the past had done. In the Indian philosophical tradition the social realm was always treated as a preserve of the Dharma Śāstras. The various Samajs that came up during this period attempted at social reforms through the creation of new

educational institutions where Vedic-Upaniṣadic traditions were as much part of the teaching curriculum as the new Western knowledge. This dual influence, they hoped would help us to retain our philosophical tradition in its pristine purity and at the same time open the doors for the liberating influence from the innumerable superstitions which the post- Upaniṣadic, Puranic tradition had encouraged.

But the use of the Vedic/Upaniṣadic tradition for social reform, sidelining the Dharmaśāstras, Vyavahāra śāstras and the Arthaśāstra led to direct conflict with the votaries of the orthodox Sanskrit tradition, who maintained that the Śruti texts should determine the course of action as far as in the field of social and legal concerns and the Śruti texts should be confined to the realm of the transcendent. Since then there came a cleavage between the traditionalists and those who decided to respond to the European thought.

In this connection, it needs to be mentioned that British educational system maintained three different streams of education. The First stream consisted of those who were the direct products of the British system of education in the country. The second stream consisted of those who were the products of the new institutions of traditional learning created by the British to maintain and foster the traditional forms of learning and Sanskrit studies. The third group consisted of those who were the products of traditional institutions which survived the British institutional innovations maintained by princely states. The deliberate policy of segregation and financial discrimination to the members of these institutions had a lasting influence on the intellectual scene in India . The whole world of classical knowledge and those who pursued and practiced it became gradually invisible to those who came out of the new institutions modeled on the British pattern and thus produced an intellectual environment which was only aware of the Western traditions in knowledge as its

reference point and treated India's traditional intellectual enterprise either as having had no value at all or as having been completely superseded by the developments of knowledge that had taken place in the West, and therefore were completely irrelevant to the contemporary quest for knowledge. In the post-independent India, it fell on the lot of the academic philosophers to shoulder the responsibility of rehabilitating Indian philosophy in the changed circumstances. And many of them indeed did that job exceptionally well, to mention a few names K.C. Bhattacharya, Kalidas Bhattacharya, N.V. Banerjee, Dr. Radhakrishnan, were some of the early philosophers who were aware of the problem created for India's intellectual tradition by the transplantation of alien modes of thought in this century. K.C. Bhattacharya even went to the extent of demanding 'Swaraj in ideas' in one of his lectures. What waited for the next generation of Indian philosophers was the challenge thrown by Western philosophical tradition to Indian Philosophy, questioning its method its method of doing philosophy. The rejection of Indian philosophy as being truly philosophical has been taken up by a number of philosophers, like Prof. Matilal, Mohanty, K.J.Shaw, Sibjiban Bhattacharya, to name few. The charges that Indian philosophy is no philosophy but pure mysticism, which lack rational discursive thinking, placing before the world only a romantic view of the oneness of all things, have all culminated in the Hegalian judgment that the Indians did not think, did not raise their intuitions to the level of concepts . Most of these charges were born either due to ignorance of Indian thought or due to the service rendered by some of our contemporary Indian thinkers like Dr. Radharkrishnan, who picturized Indian philosophy as something reducible to Vedānta philosophy, specifically to Advaita Vedānta, which is capable of synthesizing all diverse points of view. This is dangerous. Apart from committing reductionist fallacy it also commits Historicism. Historicism is dangerous game, for one's use

of history can be selective. Viewed thus, there is an important point in the post modernist rejection of grand narratives advocating the cause of pluralization of histories. Countering the charges thrown by Western philosophers on Indian philosophy, contemporary Indian thinkers have pointed out that if philosophy can be defined as ways of questioning and modes of argumentation to acquire pure theoretical knowledge, Indian philosophy can very well be considered as belonging to the same genre of philosophy as that of the West. Questioning is not the monopoly of the West. If one follows the questioning made in the Darśanas, the argumentations and disputations that take place amongst various schools in critical spirit that pervades them, one should have to admit that they are philosophies. In fact the questions which philosophy raises are of universal nature. It's only a myth of a particular brand of historiography of philosophy that there was a root idea underlying Western philosophy, of which all subsequent philosophies are developments. The difference between Carnap and Heidegger is no lesser than that between Heidegger and Gadadhara.

Now, if the idea of pure theory is not typically Western, then Husserl's dream project of Europeanization of earth becomes empty. In fact as philosophers we must transcend the orient - occident distinction. Good philosophical thinking is always beyond occident and the orient. Indian philosophy, for that matter, never understood itself in such historicist terms. A Darśana was not regarded as a cultural phenomenon, but as science itself. In brief it is immature to conclude that Western philosophy is intellectual and purely theoretical and Indian philosophy is largely intuitive, geared towards the practical goal of redemption from suffering. Let us note that Western philosophy too has had a more explicitly developed theory of intuition, and similarly, it is not that Indian Philosophy is devoid of pure theoretical exercises, we have good samples of pure theory in Indian

Pramāṇa Śāstra . Therefore the way the two traditions were set apart is due to hurried conclusions, inadequate survey of texts, misleading translations and deep prejudices.

Since Indian philosophers began to creatively respond to Western thinking, Indian philosophy has turned comparative in nature. It is worth exploring the philosophical use of this comparative exercise. Prof. Matilal found it unavoidable for one who writes on Indian philosophy for the benefit of global philosophy community . In 80's and 90's this comparative exercise has gone overboard ignoring the fact that philosophers have access to the question of truth without going through the medium of how truth is represented in various traditions. Even if we grant that there is no access to truth, save through some tradition or other, the interest of genuine philosophy is and should be truth, something which the comparative philosophy falls short of. However, comparative philosophy can serve philosophy well for one thing, for the purpose of freeing philosophers from their dogmatic inhabiting of their own tradition. However as we engage in comparative exercises it would be more useful if we cite differences between aspects of Indian philosophy from its Western counterpart. For, from a strictly philosophical view it is more interesting to detect differences than it is to find agreements. If we detect commonalities between theories belonging to two traditions the discovery is interesting, as it bolsters faith in universality of reason, but is not philosophically exciting. But if a researcher identifies that underlying seeming identities there are differences – in the questions raised and methodologies employed – then we have philosophically interesting findings .


Indian philosophy can profitably learn from Western philosophy and vice versa only if the two traditions open themselves to each other's differences, and in the light of that recognition each

examines itself. If the Indian philosopher looks for an Advaitic concept in the West, he will not learn anything from the West, he will only re-affirm himself. Similarly if a Western philosopher finds in Indian philosophy nothing but linguistic analysis of his favored kind, he will only recreate his own self- image and learn nothing from Indian philosophy. Donald Davidson once said that he would turn to Indian philosophy iff it could provide him with some solution to the problem he had been wrestling with, for ex, one can try to find, if the Gettier paradoxes may be resolved using the tools of Navya-Nyāya. In a similar vein one may want to reformulate notationally as well as conceptually the theses of Navya-Nyāya with the help of Western symbolic logic . Similarly, Indian thought has the wisdom doctrines specifically in Vedānta, Yoga and Buddhism. It is a matter of fact that at least some of the Western scholars, who are disgusted with Western intellectualism have looked towards India in search of more meaningful existence transforming philosophies.

A third attitude with regard to the approach to another tradition is to fill in the gaps. For instance if Indian philosophy does not have a philosophy of history, let's import it from the West. Similarly a developed theory of consciousness in Vedānta may be put to use to supplement the Western phenomenological philosophies. To cut it short, the oriental and the accidental can be contributory to each other if these two traditions strike the differences each carries in terms of the other. As a matter of fact one can truly understand the other only if she knows the other as the other and not as a replica of herself. Needless to say this attempt to understand the other would result in understanding the self.

Notes and References

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