

Book Review

Jonardon Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India, 1450-1700*, Published in the United States by Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 2011

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This unusual and rather unorthodox treatment of Indian philosophy comes in the shape of an argument spread over several chapters. The interesting part is that the well-known author doesn't just present his case but also justifies his argumentative-hermeneutic style as the most befitting for the Indian context. There are two reasons behind the author's preference – first, a large body of Indian philosophy comes in the shape of re-interpretations or readings, often masking the elements of novelty and fresh departures, giving a strong impression of continuities rather than breaches. The commentarial slant of course comes in much variety and may be graded as simple explanation, parsing, semantic clarification, advanced exegesis, rediscovery of hidden meanings and a refutation of a line of thought or concept by using the referred text as a *purvapaksha* or premise/backdrop, or an extremely wide textual threshold/terrain for departures. In simpler words, one may look at a text in order to shed light on the present but one may instead address a text from a stance firmly rooted in a problematic, query or puzzle culled from the present. The radical difference between the two becomes apparent through the contrasting hermeneutic orientation. Even if at times the readings obtained from the contrasting stances seem to converge, their disparateness always stands out in full conspicuity.

Second, the widely acknowledged linguistic-grammatical slant of several schools of Indian philosophy may give the appearance of the act of mere parsing or glossing as some of them indeed are, even when they go profoundly aslant from the textual core. Ganeri however focuses on three schools of Navya Nyaya that seem to break the mould: they come geographically from Mithila, Navdvip

and Varanasi in a tight temporal sequence, with Mithila taking the chronological lead. Unlike the other orthodox schools of philosophy, Nyaya at its very outset had never seen itself as an extension of the Vedas and even when it defended the Vedas from without, it acknowledged the need to do so instead of regarding the Vedas as a given. It is however with the arrival of Dara Shikoh, with his battalion of Sanskrit pundits, and the patronage offered by the Bengal Sultans and kings, that we see a sudden resurgence of the Navya Nyaya school of philosophy, focusing on reason and empirically based rationalism. Ganeri provides a rich, almost resplendent, context for the ideas generated by the numerous thinkers associated with the Nyaya stream of thought largely through the *tol* system of education but also otherwise. Even if we do not get to know the philosophers in question the way we know a Kant or a Spinoza, Ganeri provides an elaborate backdrop to their thinking.

The *tol* system followed a specific model of pedagogy with the teacher receiving grants from a variety of patrons that he passed on to the students as sustenance, making it comparable to the full funding or scholarship of our time though with a far greater resemblance to a tightly knit community or clan (a bit like the musical *gharanas*). But this is just the threshold from where Ganeri launches his argument as he takes us deeper into the specific formulations made by a string of philosophers, conveying a sense of the intellectual climate of the times. The most outstanding part of the Navya Nyaya authors is that they are very self-consciously 'new' and different. So much so that some of them even use the epithet Navya Navya (new among the contemporary). This is unusual for the larger Indian tradition of philosophy where, implausible as it may seem, the common habit was to claim full fealty to the Vedas by way of ritual or token before getting down to one's own altogether unrelated business, turning the Vedas into a sort of an empty symbol (a point made by Halbfass, 1991, among others). As an aside, to use a parallel from our own times, scholars have been dismayed by how tenuously linked Hindutva formulations seem when juxtaposed with the Hindu tradition as we have known it despite the incessant Hindutva nods to the Hindu stream of thought.

It is the novelty and the explicit insistence on reason that distinguishes these philosophers from the past, showing them in an altogether new light. Notably, the 16-17th century Navya Nyaya theorists proclaim knowledge (including that of the self) to be their primary goal rather than salvation sought by the other philosophers of the past or the present. According to the author, these traits display a variety of modernism that befits the context of the Indian tradition.

One of the initial paragraphs from the introductory chapter of the volume puts it most pithily:

The arrival of modernity at a certain point in the history of philosophy seemingly admits of two non-compossible explanations. One model presents modernity as involving a thorough rejection of the ancient – its texts, its thinkers, its methods – as starting afresh and from the beginning. This was how the two figures who are emblematic of the ‘new philosophy’ in Europe, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650), chose to present themselves. A second model locates modernity not in a rejection of the past but in a profound reorientation with respect to it. The ancient texts are now not thought of as authorities to whom one must defer, but regarded as the source of insight in the company of which one pursues the quest for truth. This new attitude towards the texts does not imply abandonment but a transformation in their place within inquiry, a change in conception of one’s duties towards the past.

This 17th century tale of unimpeded progress unfolding in Bengal and Varanasi however gets disrupted with the loss of patronage as the East India Company begins to entrench itself, uprooting the patrons who provided systematic support to the philosophers, including high fees for scholarly debates (*shastrarthas*) held in public as performative occasions, not to mention the mundane expenses of the teachers and their pupils. The taxes extracted by the patrons reduced and ended up in British hands, and the British in turn began to tamper with the pedagogic practices, leaving the *tols* impoverished. It is thus a tale of an aborted growth where the blossoms don’t fructify to the extent they could have.

So far so good! Ganeri’s take on the entire sequence fructifying through the 17th century is fairly convincing, even for those with a cursory familiarity with Indian philosophy. Even his juxtapositions of Navya Nyaya with the early Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Spinoza make due sense. But when he attributes to Navya Nyaya of Navdvp and Varanasi the epithet ‘modern’, one begins to wonder if he stretches matters a bit too far. One may also wonder if so much argumentative energy should be invested in justifying the title of ‘modern’ at all, and whether his task is fulfilled in presenting a rich portrait of the philosophical school in question. Is the purpose here to save the honour and prestige of Indian philosophy demonstrating it to be more advanced than a Descartes or Spinoza or claim equivalence or forwardness of the Navya Nyaya streams of thought in question?

This is an issue that can leave a reader in a messy hermeneutic tangle and perhaps lead to an unending debate inherently difficult to settle even for the moment. Modernity after all is a composite

idea based largely on empirical-historical evidence as it embraces a wide range of features not simply from philosophy but also politics, economy, technology, and the arts. The wide gamut of features in their entirety may or may not be found in specific countries and contexts for us to ever make unambiguous judgments. There is no singular trait on its own that determines the outcome of the 'modernity' litmus test! This applies as much to now as then, when the utterly new and the archaic continue to march hand in hand defying easy categorizations. Modernity is quite likely more like a bouquet or a chain of concomitant developments in several aspects of life and society. To take matters just the last step ahead, the present work would lose none of its value as a landmark in Indian philosophy/history of ideas without its claims around the idea of modernity.