

Introduction: The Absence of a Philosopher

1. The philosophy syllabi as well as the standard distribution of specialisations by philosophy teachers in most Indian universities suffer from an explicable but unfortunate cross-division (*sāṃkaryā*) which is almost as ludicrous as the division of animals into domestic, herbivorous and woolly. If you are teaching or researching philosophy, then you are supposedly either doing continental (Existentialism, Phenomenology or Hermeneutics) or Analytic or Indian Philosophy (plus, if you are trendy, perhaps feminist philosophy on the fringe). K.C. Bhattacharya who was by far the most original, subtlest and toughest of all 20th century professional philosophers in India would stand out as uncategorizable by this trichotomy. The chapters on Bodily Subjectivity in his major work *The Subject as Freedom* anticipates some of the finest insights of Phenomenology. His *Studies in Vedāntism* as well as the classic essay 'The Concept of Philosophy' allude to Kant's ideas on thinkability and knowability, albeit in a sharply critical manner, as if Kant and Śaṅkara were equally parts of *India's* intellectual traditions. His analysis of *Sāṃkhya* arguments for plurality of selves anticipates the essence of Strawson's famous argument that personhood could not be self-ascribable unless in was other-ascribable. Was K.C.B. doing phenomenology, Analytic Philosophy or Indian Philosophy? Professor Bimal Krishna Matilal, who was fond of the Buddha's concept of unaskable questions, would refuse to answer. His life's work was devoted to the demolition of the monolithic image of Indian philosophy as non-analytic non-rational edifying "Wisdom of the East". Wherever he would find a succinct piece of reasoning on a provocative conceptual distinction or a complex definition of an ill-understood but oft-used notion, he would deal with it earnestly in his fundamentally Indian logical idiom, irrespective of whether the original context was continental or Anglo-American, ancient or contemporary, religious or secular, metaphysical or practical. Why is it that even after these nearly seventy years of work in reconstructing classical Indian philosophy in analytical and phenomenological language – between K.C.B. and Matilal – the stereo-typing of Western philosophy as unspiritual and logical and of Indian philosophy as mystical and salvational still retains such vitality? Amartya Sen, in his

memorial address about Professor Matilal (delivered at All Souls College, Oxford on 6th June 1992) mentions four influences which have conspired to perpetuate the myth of this rational-versus-mystical contrast between Western and Indian philosophies.

First, the old 19th century orientalist's loving-hating refrain that the twains shall never meet. Essentialising the physical climate, the economy, the (religious) and even the biological racial features of these two cultures we have been trained to believe that it is quite impossible that the "Indian Mind" (a quasi-Hegelian abstraction that has far outlived Hegelianism) could ever have been interested in exactly the same theoretical issues as the European Mind.

Second, the more recent (e.g. 'New Age') disenchantment with the materialistic or dualistic culture of Science and technology. This disillusionment at the spiritual plane has fed the hope that a more 'soulful' alternative, something 'non-linear' and 'holistic' – two equally popular and definition-defying terms – is to be found in Yoga, Vedanta or Buddhism or the Bhakti-cult, or in the erotic-esoteric Tantra!

Third, the deeper 'post-modernist' criticism of rationality or objective claims of truth which has resulted in open or closet relativism. Such a relativist refuses to judge Indian philosophical (metaphysical or epistemological) arguments by any objective or universal standards of cogency or correctness, substituting, very often, anthropological history for philosophical critique. Imagine claiming to 'understand' the Advaita arguments given by Madhusūdana in *Advaita Siddhi* for the falsity of the world as a result of a whole generation of orthodox Vedic brahmins trying to wish away a distasteful political reality of alien invasion as a bad dream. Even if it contains some grain of truth as a *psycho-historical* hypothesis, what a tragic *philosophical* substitute it would be for even a traditional elementary interpretation of the first five definitions of falsity (*mithyātva*)!

Fourth, the growing reactive nationalism of post-colonial India which revels in advertizing how fundamentally different we are in our styles and concerns of thinking from *them*. Ironically, this search for a distinctively Indian *national* character of thought happily serves the Western desire to preserve the 'exotic' nature of Indian thought. The orientalist and the revivalist, the blinkered Eurocentric and the self-righteous Neo-Vedantin thus, unwittingly, slip into the same bed of careless generalizations.

Of course, isolating the above four influences constitute only a *diagnosis* of a mistake. The actual writings of Professor Matilal

spanning across Sanskrit philosophy, exegesis of ancient and mediaeval texts of logic and grammar, epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, broader philosophical analysis of confrontation of cultures etc. perform the more philosophical task of exposing and *correcting* the mistake. By doing philosophy in the style in which he did it Professor Matilal was not only overthrowing the bogus trichotomy I started by alluding to, as well as opposing the stereotypes we have tried to diagnose, he was also risking what he himself calls "falling between two stools". His early work on absence and negation in *Navya-Nyāya* done at and published by Harvard University seamlessly mixes philology and philosophy. He justifies it boldly by the following argument:

"The age of my material seems to justify a philological treatment, whereas the content of the material pleads for the use of philosophy" (*The Navya Nyāya Doctrine of Negation*, p. ix; preface).

As a result, however, he *did* miss a large section of both subsets of his intended audience. The Western as well as Indian Sanskritists looking for an accurate translation of Gaṅgeśa and Raghunātha were put off by the mathematical logical symbolisations and formal deductions whereas the Western philosophers looking for a cogent intuitive analysis of negative facts, our knowledge of negative facts and meaning of negative particles in language refused to learn the meaning of "*pratiyogin*" "*avacchedakatā*" and "*viśayatā*". These are not the only two roles, viz of a Sanskritist and a Philosopher that he was trying to combine, incurring neglect from both the groups, he was also claiming to be at the same time a historian of philosophy as well as a philosopher. In the elegant introduction to his major epistemological work *Perception*, he appeals to the distinction made by Benard Williams between history of ideas and history of philosophy. As a historian of philosophy, he claimed, he was a philosopher first and a historian only in a secondary sense. This insight is clearly voiced by K.C. Bhattacharya 70 years before Bernard Williams articulated it: "the historical study of an ancient system of philosophy, to be of any use at all, must be preceded by an earnest study of the philosophy in the expositions traditionally accepted as authoritative", he wrote, because you would not know which ideas, doctrines and controversies you were causally chronicling the origins of unless you acquaint yourself, in the spirit of a sympathetic interpreter with those ideas doctrines and arguments themselves in the first place. "The attitude of the mere narrator has, in the case of the historian of philosophy, to be exchanged as far as possible for that of the sympathetic interpreter. There is the danger, no doubt, of too

easily raising one's philosophic creed into the history, but the opposite danger is more serious still. It is the danger of taking the philosophic type studied as a historic curiosity rather than as a recipe for the human soul, and of seeking to explain the curiosity by natural causes instead of seriously examining its merits as philosophy." (*Studies in Vedantism, Introduction*, pp 1-2 of *Studies in Philosophy*. Dehli 1983).

At K.C.B.'s time, this kind of de-philosophization of classical Indian philosophy was only done by European historians of Indian thought. But now we have Marxists, Deconstructionists, Freudians as well as some Indian cultural purists who – for quite different reasons – find it shocking and meaningless to ask whether the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upanishad's doctrine of dreamless sleep is *correct* or whether Vasubandhu's arguments against six partless atoms joining to make up extended bodies are *sound*. According to these 'historians' we should never ask questions of truth or consistency about these ancient texts. We should only try to see under what *social* circumstance, due to what primitive beliefs and, with what deep soteriological or religious motivations the Vedantins or Buddhists said what they said. As to what dreamless sleep *is* or material bodies *are* we should simply read neuro-science and physics. Professor Matilal, on the contrary, could exactly follow K.C.B.'s blue-print and weave exposition and criticism, understanding and narration, translation and assessment inextricably together. Thus, in his writing, his own views are expressed as modest asides while, as it were, he is hosting an anachronistic conference in which Plato, Aristotle, Panini, Pātañjali, Bhartṛhari, Quine, Locke, Udayana, Frege, Vācaspati, Kumārila, Kant, Krishna, Gandhi, Gargi, Anscombe, Russell, Gangeśa all of them take part. As a moderator of this cross-cultural trans-temporal philosophical dialogue Matilal often takes sides, though sometimes he urges us to remain open-minded and to let the debate continue. He frankly admits that he is unsure as to who would be interested in witnessing such an ongoing, cross-cultural philosophical exchange, or, for that matter, who could be equipped to appreciate the conceptual harvest that would come out of sowing the ancient and mediaeval Indian seeds on the fertile contemporary Western field. But somehow he thought that this uncertainty and unconcern about the audience was healthy for his intellect and imagination.

Take a typical sample of a Matilal-hosted cross-cultural feast of ideas: chapter 4 of *Perception* (Oxford 1986) called "Knowledge as a Mental Episode". It opens with a discussion of perceptual doubt illustrated by a couplet from Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient*

Mariner and by a couple of verses from the Sanskrit long poem *Śiśupālavadhā*; it goes on to contrast Nyāya doubt with Cartesian doubt; distinguishes the dispositional and episodic senses of awareness/knowing by referring to Ryle, Plato, Vātsyāyana and Uddyotakara; goes on to discuss the metaphysics of mental episodes as upheld by Praśastapāda; brings in the *Theaetetus* and Peter Geach to throw light of contrast on Diñnāga's idea of pure sensation; passes from a discussion of intentionality in Brentano and Husserl to a Fregean charge of psychologism against the Nyāya way of giving a causal account of contradictory thoughts in terms of preventing and prevented cognitions - and so on! The problem of the content of knowledge comes alive as a purely philosophical common concern, a universal conceptual issue transcending historical and geographical borders, until we end up with the most intense discussion of the cases where a piece of false but reasonably believed evidence leads us to true beliefs and how far these beliefs deserve to be called knowledge or *Prama*. What makes the discussion breath-taking is the fact that examples and insights are taken freely from the eleventh century sceptic-Vedantin ŚrīHarṣa and from the 1963 classic paper by Edmund Gettier.

In order to prepare a solid foundation for such creative comparative philosophy, however, one needs first to train oneself in the most rigorous manner in each of the disciplines and traditions *separately*. Otherwise one faces the perilous prospect of rootless shallow eclecticism so rampant in India now. Bimal Krishna Matilal, in spite of his early interest in Western Logic and Psycho-Analysis, first took sustained painstaking traditional training in Sanskrit Grammar, Literature and-most of all - old and new Nyāya. His teachers were the greatest Sanskrit-speaking Nyāya pandits of the Government Sanskrit College, Calcutta: Ananta Tarka Tirtha - equally well-versed in Nyāya, Vedanta and Buddhism (this somewhat radical pandit started taking lessons in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* from Professor Gopinath Bhattacharya!) who also taught J.N. Mohanty; Madhusudana Nyayacharya (who was the teacher of Professor Sibajiban Bhattacharya - another contemporary Indian philosopher who combines expertise in Mathematical Logic with Nyāya) and Visvabandhu Tarkatirtha. *Outside* the university, these teachers taught him the toughest texts on inference, fallacies, knowledgehood, and other technicalities like limitorhood (*avacchedaka*) in a method which predates the British class-room lecture system and retains continuity with the Ancient Indian Guru-Śiṣya style. Your ultimate test of mastery of the subject is done under this system through your performance in a series of open

oral *debates* in Sanskrit. Matilal was a 'star' debator in this traditional style. We are fortunate to have the last teacher of Matilal still amidst us. Professor J.L. Shaw – a student of both Matilal and Pandit Visvabandhu Tarkatirtha – with his deep knowledge of modern Logic, has translated into English one seminal paper by the latter (about the meaning of the quantifier "all") for the present volume.

After teaching in Calcutta for a brief period, Matilal went, as a fulbright Scholar, to Harvard University where he was a student of W.V. Quine. Since then "Word and Object", "Methods of Logic", "From a Logical point of View", "Ontological Relativity" etc. became texts that formed an inalienable part of his basic intellectual grid.

His own method of teaching reflected this careful blend of the purely traditional, purely contemporary and then a bit of both. At All Souls he would, in alternate terms, choose one classical or mediaeval Sanskrit text from his wide range of expertise which included, among others, the works of Nāgārjuna, Kumārila, Śaṅkara, Udayana, Dharmakīrti, Bhartṛhari, Gaṅgeśa, Raghunātha. He would teach it word by word translating and explaining in English, often expecting participation from students. In every other term, however, he would lecture on a *theme* e.g. Can we be realists about universals? Do we have language-free experience? Is there a universal moral standard or are morals culture-relative? Is knowledge self-validated or other-validated? What is a definition? Why are definitions central to philosophy? Is there logical necessity and formal validity in Indian logic?, using insights from classical Indian thought to answer questions which were being hotly debated at his time by Analytic Philosophers in Britain and America. It is these lecture-notes which later became his published books, e.g. "Epistemology, Logic and Grammar", "Language, logic and Ontology", "The Word and the World". A considerably large amount of these materials (especially on Indian logic) still remains unpublished.

As a sensitive and alert human being with an encyclopedic erudition, Matilal, of course, had many other interests besides philosophy. Indian classical Music and all aspects of the genius of Rabindranath Tagore were two major ones. Very few of his later students are aware that he not only translated two Tagore plays into Sanskrit – with beautiful metrical verses mixed with limpid prose – but also was a regular enthusiastic actor of Sanskrit plays on the stage.

Having founded and edited for the last twenty years of his life *The Journal of Indian Philosophy* which is now the most prestigious forum for international scholarship in Indian Philosophy, he maintained correspondence with reputed and budding researchers all over the

world from Argentina, to Japan, United States, New Zealand and of course with his colleagues and former pupils in India. Towards the end of his life, while battling with stoic equanimity against a lethal cancer of the bone-marrow, he immersed himself in the Mahābhārata. After publishing a series of papers in Bengali (later collected in a book "Ethics, Reasoning and Dharma: Rama & Krishna in Narrative Literature") on the subject, he was planning, along with Gayatri Spivak, to write a book on women in classical Indian Thought and the perspectivist morality of the Mahābhārata. The only published precursor of this project that remains is his lead-article in the book he edited: *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* (I.I.A.S. Shimla). A completely different aspect of his ability to think modern problems through ingenious use of ancient insights comes out through his work on confrontation of cultures and his essay on Relativism in an anthology edited by Michael Krausz (who has written in our present volume on the related theme of constructing personal identity situating individuality within tradition). The preparation for this work, we may venture to surmise, was his early published work on the Jaina meta-philosophy of Non-Exclusivist (*anekāntavāda*) Realism. Intellectual nonviolence and a matured mixture of moderate skepticism with common-sense Realism made it possible for him to appreciate divergent philosophical positions with equal sympathy. The anti-rationalistic arguments of Jayarāṣi (the Cārvāka), Nāgārjuna and Śrī Harṣa on the one hand (hence his life-long interest in Emptiness and Ineffability!) and the pan-linguistic Sphoṭa theory of the Grammarians as well as the hard-headed Direct Realism of Udayana on the other were equally palatable to him.

Only in two matters Matilal was *uncompromising*: He could not tolerate the patronizing attitude of the historicist-relativist who would "refuse to judge dead esoteric ancient Indian views by the standard of scientific Western rationality". He also could not suffer jingoism of any sort no matter if it was shown by a Thatcherite supporter of the Falklands war or by a Hindu-chauvinist politician or intellectual! He had confided to me that he would like to categorize himself as a "Realist-Pessimist-Pluralist-Pacifist."

Let me end my introduction to this collection of papers written on subjects that deeply interested Matilal, by raising and answering three serious charges which have been often brought against Matilal's agenda in philosophy.

First, an objection which is faintly echoed in the paper by Stephen Phillips here ("Contra Matilal's Bias"): Don't we falsify the unique general character of most Indian philosophies when we represent it

through the argumentative idiom of rigorous logico-linguistic philosophy? Is not philosophy in India *Darśana* and *Adhyātmavidyā* (Direct Vision of Truth and Spiritual Science) first and *Ānvīkṣikī* second?

A good answer to this can be found in Wilhelm Halbfass's papers on the meaning of the term, e.g. *Darśana* (primarily meaning a reasoned *view* rather than any mystical vision of God!) and on the Neo-Vedantic claim of Indian Philosophy being based on some direct transcendental supra-sensuous Experience rather than on reasoning [see his book *India and Europe*]. Matilal clearly acknowledges the role of mystical insight in Indian thought by his Oxford Inaugural Lecture. But he rightly reminds us that not only Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika which regards all reals to be fully speakable, but even the mainstream orthodox interpreters of the Vedas viz. the Mīmāṃsakas argue elaborately against the very possibility of mystical experience, yogic extra-sensory perception and any kind of human or divine omniscience! Even at the very heart of Advaita Vedānta we find rigorous linguistic and phenomenological analysis of the exact purport of a sentence like "*tat tvam asi* (You Are That)". Śaṅkara emphatically says that what meditation aims at is nothing but immediate *knowledge* (*śābda aparokṣa jñāna*) of the indirect unitary meaning of those words, Yoga urges us to discriminate between the word, the awareness and the meant object (Yoga Sūtra 1.42 and *Vyāsa Bhāṣya*). Matilal might have taken a conscious strategic decision to overemphasize the realistic and analytical aspect of Indian philosophy, to counteract the anti-argumentative spiritual-wisdom-centric orientation of the popular image of Indian philosophy in the West as well as in the Vedānta-dominated Indian academic scene. But, surely, preoccupation with speech, grammatical and etymological arguments, debating on adequacy of definitions and reflection through relentless objections and replies is a much more central and pervasive feature of India's philosophical tradition (right from the Vedas, Vedāṅgas, Upanishads, upto the latest development of Buddhism, Jainism and the systems) than obsession with the occult, meditational practice, spiritual experiences and so on. Surely the *end* of most philosophizing activities in India is a mind-eliminating supra-rational plurality-effacing self-realization. But that indeed is the *end* of all philosophy! It would be foolish, for example, to conclude from the Nyāya account of *liberation* as a state without any cognition whatsoever that Nyāya philosophy is opposed to cognitive exercise! Philosophy, even in the hands of great spiritual teachers like Madhusudana Sarasvati and Abhinavagupta, was a matter of rational

engagement with an unliberated intellect!

The second objection arises out of a certain frustration that comparative Indian philosophers feel at the total lack of reciprocation from the Western side. Why must we use the idiom of a dominant Western school of philosophy to re-interpret Indian thought when Western philosophers scarcely feel the need even to take notice of the rich Indian doctrines and arguments? A true but historical reply to this allegation has been given by J.N. Mohanty!

First, it is a contingent historical situation that even... the *gurus*, saints and professors alike write unhesitatingly on Indian Philosophy in the English Language... (European thinkers do not have to write in Sanskrit or in Indian languages). Secondly, Indian philosophers of that (Neo-Vedantic) generation, whose interpretative positions Matilal opposed, no less thought from a Western perspective; only they used the language of a Kant, Hegel, a Bradley... Third, there is a growing attempt in India – highly commendable and instructive – to interpret and critique some very fundamental concepts of Western thought in the language of Indian Philosophy.”

(*Philosophy East & West!* Vol.42: No. 3, 1992 p. 405)

We should look upon our accidental colonial exposure to Western ways of thinking as an advantage rather than a lamentable perverting influence. Matilal himself often attempts to reverse the process in asking questions like “Is Locke a *nirākāra jñāna vādin?*” “Is Frege an *anvitābhīdhānavādin?*”, “Does Russell deny the role of *śakyatāvachhedaka* in the meaning of a proper name?” – Nevertheless, there is a more frontal and philosophical way of meeting this implicit charge of intellectual slavery against Matilal.

True, a Sanskrit-speaking pandit does not need to legitimise Nyāya or Mīmāṃsā in terms of Russell or Gadamar. Then, why do we? But if you scratch the surface of this nationalistic defiance, a certain cultural revengefulness seems to come out. Pointing out the West’s neglect of Indian philosophy cannot be a consistent *reason* for not bringing in Western philosophical ideas in Indian philosophical activities because the alleged reason itself is based on a keen observation of what the West is doing. If it does not matter to us what the West does (as many of these defiant purists disingenuously announce) then it does not also matter that they do not pay any attention to either our classical or our contemporary philosophical writings. If we decide to ignore their current style of Philosophizing then we must also ignore the fact that they ignore our traditions and our comparisons. In intellectual

activities as in emotional and practical life, retaliation is a poor justification for any strategy because it is self-annulling in repeating what it resents!

Finally, one often hears a complaint that Matilal never worked out his own original philosophical views, busy as he was, all his life, just elucidating the views of older Indian Philosophers! Three responses can be made to this charge:

In keeping with the general Indian cultural trait of not claiming originality even when one is saying radically new things, Matilal did all his philosophical innovations quietly, unobtrusively and under the garb of exegesis. We must remember that in India philosophers, even the most original ones, are remembered for their commentaries rather than their independent treatises, and that even when they present novel ideas they trace it back to some pre-existing authority, school of thought or chain-of-masters. A thoroughly innovative Jayanta Bhatta starts by remarking

"From where can we (in philosophy) construct something new?
Please judge whether I've arranged my statements in unexpected configurations"

a favorite saying of Matilal's quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of his *Epistemology, Logic & Grammar*. Secondly, not only in his cautious criticisms of the ancient and mediaeval masters but even in his expository reconstructions, Professor Matilal shows that same originality as we find in Strawson's work on Kant or Dummett's work on Fege (not surprisingly, he dedicated *Perception* to these two Oxford colleagues).

Even K.C. Bhattacharya, most famous for his originality, spent most of his life interpreting Kant, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Vedanta and Jainism. But one can say about Matilal's or K.C.B.'s acts of elucidation what the latter said about transcendental reasoning (of the Kantian variety): "It is like reflecting on a poem and to retrace the steps by which the original formless feeling in the poet's mind came to take its present articulated shape". (*Studies*, p. 722)

To read Matilal is, for the equipped mind, to taste originality in its most literal sense: going back to the traditional *origins* of one's unexamined conceptual scheme! Lastly, I feel that a personal characteristic of Matilal provides by far the profoundest explanation of why he hardly wrote anything which he would call "My Philosophy"! Like Kant's transcendental unity of apperception which makes the synthesis of object-identifying experience possible without ever being an object of knowledge itself, Professor Matilal's own intellectual self

made this fascinating dialogue between diverse disciplines, traditions, times and schools possible without ever presenting itself as an accusative of exposition. In a seminar or a conversation or a party also Matilal would, similarly, be mostly receding, raising questions, egging other people on with a rejoinder here or a counter-example there, but never taking center-stage.

In spite of his phenomenal learning and endless capacity to think up new possibilities, therefore, he would insist on *appearing unoriginal*, because he mastered the rare art of *absence*. As a synthesising commentator whose novelty consisted in his critical exegetical authenticity he is there like the Vedantic witness-consciousness *behind* all this Meinong-Ratnakīrti, Kṛṣṇa-Sartre, or Quine-Bhartṛhari dialogue that he inaugurated. But like a Mādhyamika Buddhist he refuses to tell us what is his *own view*. While we study his logical work on absence, and feel sad at his physical absence at this point, perhaps we can learn from him how to make our intellectual ego, as far as possible, absent from our own philosophical focus. That, rather than a studied insular inattention to Western philosophy, would perhaps bring about a resurrection of a true Indianness of tradition-anchored philosophical creativity.