

If contemporary Indian Philosophy - rather, more appropriately, philosophy in contemporary India - is to be traced back to its significant period of inception, it is the fifties of this century, roughly the immediately post-independence period of time. It is during this time that the mammoth five-volume *A History of Indian Philosophy* by Surendra Nath Dasgupta, and the two-volume *Indian Philosophy* by Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan are brought out to the knowledge of international scholarship. Both these works are accepted as authoritative sources of reference and understanding for any modern study of classical Indian philosophy.

While Dasgupta and Radhakrishnan are prominent for their exemplary historical-interpretative scholarship on the entire spectrum of the Indian philosophical tradition, Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya stands out as a remarkably original and acutely subtle thinker bearing the unique imprint of contemporary Indian philosophical identity. No less abreast of traditional Indian philosophical ideas, Bhattacharya excels his historical awareness of classical thought by creating new ideas, whether in metaphilosophical reflections on 'The Concept of Philosophy' (a classic essay of his) or on the perennial issue of bodily subjectivity (discussed in his major work *The Subject as Freedom*, 1930), all of which are perspicuously indicative of a distinctive pattern of philosophy in contemporary India.

Bhattacharya's *Studies in Vedantism* (1907), apart from being a work that represents his neo-Vedantic identity, is also a sharply critical, interpretative-constructive venture into the Kantian or transcendental conditions of thinkability and knowability. With rare comparative philosophical insight, he is able to weave a new fabric of philosophy, as it were, into which are woven both Kant and Samkara as equal parts of India's intellectual tradition. Furthermore, there are some of the finest insights of phenomenology in his meticulous elaboration of levels of theoretic consciousness and of various grades of subjectivity. What is interesting is that Bhattacharya is a self-made phenomenologist, India's counterpart to Europe's Husserl, and curiously contemporaneous with the latter. Since there is in fact no reference to Husserl in Bhattacharya's published writings, it can justifiably be surmised that this

## The Availability of Philosophical Ideas

### *Sketching the State of the Philosophical Art in Contemporary India*

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Indian phenomenologist is entirely of his own making.

Even though K. C. Bhattacharya sets the scene for a vibrant trend of imaginative philosophical activity by subsequent thinkers on the Indian soil, the immediately subsequent scenario does not seem to present any such view. Most philosophical works on classical Indian thought appear to be insipid and unoriginal, a degenerate form of scholarship dominated by mere description, classification and almost tautological reassertion of ancient views. It is largely because of such intellectual vapidness that many young Indian minds, in the sixties and seventies and even later, are drawn towards philosophical cultivation in the Western style, whether in the continental European tradition or in the Anglo-American tradition. Exuberant development of philosophical thoughts in the West are perceived as sharply contrasted with the feeling of the near-extinction of the philosophical spirit in the indigenous climate.

The two Western strands that draw Indian attention are analytic philosophy, mostly practiced in the English-speaking West, and phenomenology, which is largely of German and French origin. While some acquaintance with the celebrated writings of the masters of analytic philosophy such as Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein have always been locally available due to India's accessibility to the English language, some ambitious and bright young Indians begin to leave for higher studies in American and British universities to imbibe the spirit of the analytic tradition directly from its finest experts. Foremost among them are K. J. Shah, who goes to Cambridge and studies in very close touch with Wittgenstein, and Rajendra Prasad, who crosses the Atlantic and takes meticulous training in analytical ethics under the ablest supervision of C. L. Stevenson at Michigan. Others, still younger, such as Ramchandra Gandhi and Mrinal Miri, make a similar journey to Oxford and Cambridge respectively, to be

educated by the best living analytic philosophers of the like of Peter Strawson and Bernard Williams.

For quite a while philosophy in India appears to be 'Anglo-Indian' analytic philosophy, marked by an unprecedented enthusiasm for logico-linguistic analysis of any concept embodying significant theoretic content. Ganeswar Mishra, another leading votary of the British analytical tradition and a direct trainee of Alfred Ayer then in London, even goes to the extent of reinterpreting Samkara's Advaita Vedanta in analytical terms. Pranab Kumar Sen, also exposed to Oxford philosophy and the British analytical tradition from Bertrand Russell to Michael Dummett, engages himself in the hard-core analytical themes in the philosophy of language and logic, such as meaning, truth and reference. The latest results of this engagement are documented in his *Reference and Truth* (1991).

Prominent among those who make their transition to the European philosophy of phenomenology is Jitendra Nath Mohanty, who takes his philosophical training in Germany at Gottingen. In the course of prolonged and persistent research following that training, Mohanty has been able to establish himself as a leading international authority on the problem of intentionality and on other kindred issues. He stands out as a contemporary Indian philosopher because of being at once a widely recognized expert in contemporary European philosophy - especially Husserlian phenomenology - and a very insightful critical interpreter of classical Indian thought. The various essays collected in his *Essays on Indian Philosophy: Traditional and Modern* (1993) bear witness to an enviable command over both Eastern and Western thoughts and the ability to illuminate the central philosophical problems such as consciousness, subjectivity, rationality, historicity, freedom and sources of knowledge, from a comparative perspective.

Mohanty has always been intent

on tracing the parallel lines of intellectual progress in diverse traditions and thereby articulating the inner dynamics of philosophical reflection as such. His reflective engagement draws its continual inspiration from within two philosophical traditions - Indian and Western - and out of this deeply disturbing intellectual experience, he strives towards a fundamental unity of rational thinking, that is the possibility of diverse currents of thought in a unitary stream of reflective consciousness. Mohanty believes that this possibility is being actualized in his own case, and suggests, in his prologue to the book cited above, that this unity of rational thinking 'is not what one can begin with, but has to ceaselessly strive towards.'

There are later works of Mohanty's such as *The Possibility of Transcendental Philosophy* (1985), and *Transcendental Phenomenology: An Analytic Account* (1989), which, though primarily works of European-Western philosophy, are characterized by interesting critical allusions to Indian views. These works therefore speak as much to Indian philosophical audience as they do to their primary audience of Western philosophers. More recently, returning to his own cultural roots, Mohanty has delved into the rational depth of Indian thought and articulated his mature understanding of the role of reason in it in his recent book *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought* (1992).

Whereas Mohanty has enlivened Indian philosophical scholarship by the contemporary light of phenomenology, Bimal Krishna Matilal has saved the vapid condition of classical Indian philosophical research from turning into a moribund state by representing classical ideas in the contemporary idiom and insight of analytical philosophy. Matilal combines in a single mind both esoteric expertise in traditional Indian thought and incisive analytical skills acquired through his prolonged and persistent acquaintance with contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Perhaps the greatest contribution of this eminent Indian philosopher (who had held the prestigious chair of Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at the University of Oxford until his premature death in 1991) is his resolute attempt to demolish the Western myth, generated mainly by the Orientalists under the disciplinary rubric of

Indological Studies, that, whereas Western philosophy is rational, rigorous and analytic, Indian philosophy is intuitive, spiritual and synthetic.

Against that deeply entrenched myth, Matilal demonstrates, with missionary zeal, the ample availability of logico-analytical thinking in his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford entitled 'The Logical Illumination of Indian Mysticism' (1978). In a series of works done in a relatively short span of academic life, such as *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (1991), *Language, Logic and Reality* (1985), *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (1986), *The Word and the World* (1990), he has highlighted the rational and argumentative side of Indian classical thought by a careful and contemporary analysis and interpretation of the views of the great Indian masters such as Bhartrhari, Dharmakirti, Gangesa, Kumarila, Nagarjuna, Panini, Samkara and Udayana. These and other writings of his have vindicated that Indian philosophy is not irredeemably religious and mystical, and also that the Western (and even Indian) conception of Indian philosophy will never be quite the same again.

The ideal of the unity of rational thinking, to which both Mohanty and Motilal are inclined, is not, however, left unrejected in contemporary India. K. J. Shah is particularly vocal in insisting on the impossibility of tradition-transcendent, non-perspectival universalism of thought. It is with this conviction of a perspectivist thinker that Shah has consistently tried to establish the distinctiveness of Indian thought as essentially shaped by the salient concepts of the classical tradition. In many verbal presentations, and seldom in writing, he has interpreted classical ideas such as the theory of *purusartha* with a refreshingly modern attitude.

Daya Krishna has trenchantly argued for a 'counter-perspective' on the history and nature of classical Indian philosophy, in his *Indian Philosophy: A Counter-Perspective* (1991), which advocates the demolition of the widely accepted picture of Indian philosophy as essentially spiritual, as *moksa*-centred, as based on the authority of the Vedas, and as consisting of a fixed number of clearly delimited 'schools' or 'systems'. Criticizing this picture as baseless, and also criticizing the unfounded belief that

the theory of *Karma* and the theory of *Purusartha* epitomize the traditional Indian conception of human action, Daya Krishna makes a fervent appeal to the contemporary mind to create a new picture of the Indian philosophical tradition which will at once be undistorted and contemporarily relevant.

In his latest book *The Problematic and Conceptual Structure of Classical Indian Thought about Man, Society and Polity* (1996), Daya Krishna takes us on a fascinating journey through the much neglected area of classical Indian thought on morality, politics and society. Here he traces the vicissitudes of the conceptual scheme that is specific to the cultural and civilizational fabric of India - a scheme used in the effort to come to terms with its own version of the problems of individual and social

quite evident on the shaping of contemporary scholarship in India, there is a growing awareness to place traditional Indian thoughts on the platform of global philosophy. The prejudice of exclusive spirituality is replaced by the picture of genuine rational thinking, whether in epistemology, ontology, value-theory, logic or grammar.

Notwithstanding the conscious down-playing of the ideological chord of spirituality or the mystical in the enthusiasm for crystallizing the rational-argumentative image of Indian thought, certain concepts central to the spiritual-mystical dimension of the Indian *Darsana* tradition have found an extremely significant place of imaginative discussion in contemporary research. But this has been done entirely single-handedly, and with

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life-of-the-human predicament itself. The need to articulate concepts in the classical Indian tradition in relation to the contemporary situation is urged, because, it is argued, this is how conceptual structures actually grow. Daya Krishna exhorts: 'When contemporary thinkers in India begin to articulate their experiences about man, society and polity in terms of classical thought, a new direction will be given to concepts'.

From the foregoing account one would easily form an impression of the complex character of philosophy in contemporary India - a kind of complexity that defies the simple recognition of a monolithic identity of thought or pattern of thought. While the impact of Western ideas and methods in their diversity is

utmost philosophical acumen, by Ramchandra Gandhi in his lamentably neglected book *The Availability of Religious Ideas* (1976). This work is at once highly original, refreshingly sophisticated, analytically rigorous and, most importantly, sufficiently perspicuously indicative of a new identity in the character of contemporary Indian philosophy.

Apart from being a superb exercise in the philosophy of religion showing how the salient ideas of religiosity - such as the soul, immortality, God, prayer, the mystical and the miraculous - are available to human beings even outside the context of actual religious or theistic belief, Gandhi's book is an illustration of a masterly metaphysical exploration in the

explication of the idea of the soul in terms of a novel theory of communication, specifically that of the idea of addressing. In essence, what this argument tries to establish is that communication through the speech-act of addressing one another by the use of personal pronouns has the peculiarity of involving a non-referential or non-predicative identification of the addressee by the addresser. It is precisely in an act of addressing, in an act of establishing communicative contact with another, wherein 'we have to imagine that our addressee is a unique bare particular' and, as such, 'we have to identify him non-referentially, non-predicatively', that, according to Gandhi, the 'notion of a soul gets a foothold in our life'.

Indeed, if Gandhi's metaphysical analysis of personal pronouns set in the context of addressing is a profound philosophy of human communication, it is equally an Advaita-Vedantic theory of the personal subject formulated in a totally new perspective. That our interpersonal communicative contact in its most authentic nature is reflective of, and sustained by, the presence of 'pure' personal beings who admit neither of referential identification nor of predicative characterization, is profoundly suggestive of the traditional idea of a 'pure' self - the concept of *atman* - that each of us is taken to be.

Undoubtedly, this interpretative philosophical route to the availability of the Advaita-Vedantic concept of *atman*, provided by the most pervasive and most ordinary communicative context defined through the use of personal pronouns, is unlike any hitherto known interpretative route taken by any Indian philosopher seriously concerned with the classical Indian metaphysical tradition. I should think that it is only when traditional concepts, which are otherwise deeply perplexing and lost in unfathomable spiritual depth, are made available in such accessible terms, whereby we get the intimation of a timeless truth in the imaginative understanding of even an utterly usual 'form of life', that we are likely to reestablish ourselves as worthy descendants of the magnificent philosophical ancestors from whom we have been cut off by centuries of cognitive inertia.

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