

Contemporary philosophers, especially those working in India, are often torn between two apparently opposing pulls of their practice. As academic practitioners (typically, in a university), they embrace the scholarship and the analytical rigour that characterizes much of the mainstream philosophy as practised in the West. Contemporary analytic philosophy, so-called, marks the extreme of this attitude in the very abstract, frequently formal, nature of its theories. This philosophy, however, is also marked, except perhaps in some areas of moral and social philosophy, by a self-consciously universalist approach to fairly esoteric issues concerning the nature of human thought. Its links with more direct concerns of human life, thus, are at best tenuous and, often, entirely broken. Over the centuries, the West has developed a system of institutions in which such a lack of direct social concerns fits in nicely with honest, intense and largely disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Since philosophy became a university discipline centuries ago, the preceding image of philosophy has found a natural place there as well. Except for solitary lapses, the Western philosopher is, by and large, comfortable with his practice.

However, one does not have to go too far back in time to find that, even in Western philosophy, concerns of pure enquiry were often conducted hand-in-hand with more human (if not social) concerns; thus, one recalls philosophers such as Spinoza, Kant and Hegel. In the Indian tradition, this intermingling of the cognitive and the existential was even more marked at least in the proclamations, if not, sometimes, in the actual practice. Philosophy was to address some central questions that accompany any reflective, self-seeking agent as he hurtles towards death. As human life in general and societies, in particular, become immensely complex (and, therefore, fragmented), the image of the grand philosopher tying facts with value can hardly be sustained.

Devoid of the historical weight and power of the Western university system and tortuously linked to his translucent past, the philosopher in India often finds himself overwhelmed with confusion and guilt. Not surprisingly, this often results in the adoption of dogmatic, often jingoistic, positions just to see one through to retirement. Some just follow what a recent issue of a front-line journal advocates; others chain themselves to yellowing texts with only their determination in hand.

## Sundara Rajan: An Obituary

Nirmalangshu Mukherji

It is extraordinary, therefore, that, in this somewhat forlorn scenario, R. Sundara Rajan was able to develop and sustain a meaningful and productive philosophical practice within his short life. He had just retired from his position at the University of Pune and was in the middle of an important series of works when, all of a sudden, he died. Even then he could leave behind a set of books and innumerable papers which, in time, will supply answers to some of the issues of philosophical practice

(continental, existential etc.) that are useful only for writing undergraduate syllabi. Sundara Rajan's philosophical approach is best understood when the compelling unity of this culture finds a voice in our academic scene.

I cannot undertake here the task of establishing the unity of culture just suggested except for noting that it supplies at least a significant (though partial) answer to the worry with which we began. It is not as though each member of the cited group engaged himself in tying fact

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I do not know whether he had specific training in science, but his approach to philosophical problems displayed a rigorous, original and organized mind that is seldom seen in the Indian philosophical scene. He was well versed in the analytical and logical traditions of Western philosophy to the point that even hard-core logicians sought his opinion on the philosophical points they made in their formal mode. He was also deeply interested, and partially trained, in the classical Indian traditions though he seldom displayed this fact in his published writings except for occasional and interesting uses of terms from Indian philosophy.

Yet his heart lay in the philosophical tradition that is best described by listing its authors: Spinoza, Descartes, Leibnitz, Kant, Frege, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer and Ricoeur. I am not suggesting that he did not read anyone else; quite the contrary. But I am suggesting that this line of philosophers define a massive philosophical culture that is often missed in facile groupings (analytic,

with value; in fact, except perhaps for Spinoza (arguably), none of them did and quite a few of them explicitly argued against it. What ties them together, in the context under discussion, is the belief that philosophy is a specific and unique activity, both rigorous and profound, which, when properly marshalled, can address any reflective issue of human life that gives life its lasting meaning: *philosophy is most enlightening in its method*. Thus, questions of method (not tools, but *method*) occupied the larger part of Sundara Rajan's thinking.

As the line of authors show, the task he set for himself was difficult, unpopular and uncertain. I think the central question that he asked himself was: can philosophy help me understand, truly understand, some issue, some state of mind which is at once human and political? Notice that the very asking of such questions, which are literally scattered all over his writings, raises the enquiry beyond a mechanical tying of fact and value, whatever that may be. The question is posed in terms of *understanding* and it is

directed towards our political selves. In a world deeply divided over traditions, values, power and information, a political self is perhaps the only sense of identity one can hope to nurture with full freedom; can philosophy help in understanding that? This is about as significant as a philosophical query goes in the post-colonial experience of, at once, freedom and fragmentation.

These attitudes to enquiry are perhaps best illustrated in Sundara Rajan's magnum opus, *Towards A Critique Of Cultural Reason* (1987). It is astonishing that he found courage to ask the question: what are the conditions under which a radical politics which claims universal validity at a particular conjunction of history is justified? (p. 17). If the radical posture is the only political posture available, then an answer to this question is not only interesting for understanding history, it is vital for the sustenance of our political selves.

Surprisingly, the only method available to place this question under sustained scrutiny (that is, if one wants, in order to reach true understanding, to avoid a series of loaded proclamations) is the Kantian one, the one which can also serve reaction when suitably oriented. Philosophy by itself is neither radical nor reactionary; philosophy fits the vessel and displays, each time, one's true colours. If there is a phenomenon and a common, overriding experience of the phenomenon, then the Kantian method always apply. In fact, the test of whether post-colonial experience is a genuine experience depends on whether one is able to apply the Kantian method to it. Obviously, this goes much beyond the original agenda of the critical method even if takes the later Critiques into account. This required developing new concepts, new levels, new antinomies and new categories while keeping to the basic tasks of transcendental philosophy.

The results of this complex enterprise ought to be debated for years to come. One may disagree with Sundara Rajan on almost every point, including his style. But one is filled with admiration that an enterprise of this scale and novelty was not only entertained but actually brought to life in contemporary India. We will certainly miss his inimitable presence in philosophical gatherings, yet the effect of his work will be felt even there.

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