

History of Indian Philosophy: Analysis of Contemporary understanding of the Classical through Colonial

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Classical Indian Philosophy is characterised with astonishing conceptions such as – being ‘captured by the West’ (Kalidas Bhattacharya), ‘gone into backwaters’ (S. Radhakrishnan), ‘blanketed by the West’ (Michael Dummet), ‘structurally altered’ (Raghuramaraju) and damaged, stunted and defaced (Aurobindo) and ‘frozen and mummified’ (Dayakrishna) – in the contemporary period. This papers attempts to explicate the presuppositions and background of these conceptions. These ‘contemporary conceptions of the classical’ presuppose that there is a body of knowledge called Indian philosophy that is available as a monolithic structure to be understood, interpreted and commented in its entirety. This monolith is characterised by certain essentials characteristics such as spirituality, pessimism, mystical and intuitive, Soteriological and otherworldly, static and unprogressive etc. which depicted an epistemic distinction between India and the West. Roots of the analysis of the ‘contemporary conceptions of the classical’ would take us not to the Classical period which is far away, but to the recent past i.e., colonial period. It is the recent past that shapes the present conceptions of the remote past. This paper attempts to investigate the recent past to explicate the reasons for the ‘contemporary conceptions of the classical’.

Given that history writing in India, through the Western categories, is developed during the modern period, and also given that initial attempts of writing histories of India are by western scholars – there is a need to understand - how we are told to see/ visualize our own past. Situating itself broadly in the debates on Orientalist and Nationalist debates on the history of India, the present paper attempts to substantiate that Indian philosophy, as we understand it today, is a colonial construct and examines two writings of the history of Indian Philosophy; one

by Max Muller, representing Orientalism and the other by S. Radhakrishnan, representing Nationalism.

History, though at the conceptual level is understood to be a comprehensive one, at the practical level is narrowed by the available sources and understanding of the historian. Both the objective and subjective aspects limit the comprehensiveness of the writing of a history. An honest historian may reveal not only his sources, but also lacunae in his approach as well as in the presentation of his sources.

History of Indian Philosophy, in general, means the way the philosophical thought in India originated, took different directions and developed into a heterogeneous system of thought. Historical interest in Indian philosophy began with the Orientalist interest in the Indian past. Orientalist interest is not a genuine interest in the historicity of Indian past but, it is something that is loaded with Eurocentric ideology.

After making some remarks on the development of historical writing of India, I would briefly look at the limitation of language in comprehending and presenting the Indian philosophical tradition by the early colonialists. Readings on the two histories of Indian philosophy, one by Max Muller representing Orientalists and the other by Radhakrishnan representing Nationalist historians are presented to show the dialectics between these two in producing the monolith called Indian philosophy.

I

The history of Indian philosophy extends at least for about 2500 years. This lengthy period of history has witnessed the growth of a rich variety of philosophical thought presented in incalculable number of works written by innumerable number of scholars. This vastness of the period and the literature exhibit the depth and richness which further complicates the attempts to draw a comprehensive picture of the history of Indian philosophy. Notwithstanding these limitations there were attempts at recording the previous philosophical thought with varied motives and views. In the classical period, there were works such as Saddarsana Samucchaya, Sarvadarsana Sangraha, Sarvamata Sangraha, Sarva Siddhanta Sangraha and Sarva Darsana

Sangraha, which have recorded the philosophical thought of their previous and contemporary times with the motive of pointing out their inadequacies and propagating their own thought. In the modern period there were attempts by scholars like Max Muller, Zimmer, S. Radhakrishnan, S.N. Dasgupta etc., in recording the history of Indian Philosophy with the intention to bring a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical thought of India. Each of the attempts though tried to provide a better understanding of Indian Philosophy, have endowed with their own limitations. These limitations have not only influenced but also structured their future course of discussions on Indian philosophy. In order to understand the influence of these limitations we need to look into the historiography of India itself.

Context

History in India, points out Neeladri Bhattacharya, began its modern career implicated in projects of colonial knowledge. The colonial conceptions of history embedded in the sources that were collected and stored, the institutions of research that were built up have become part of our commonsense.

Orientalist ideas were the earliest structured historical representations of India's past which were began in the late 18th century and early 19th centuries. Inspired by the romanticism and classicism of the time, Orientalists like William Jones, H.T. Colebrooke and Max Muller returned to the ancient past, discovered its greatness and defined a specific notion of a glorious classical age. The Orientalists saw themselves as the mediators who would define this relationship between the past and the present. As codifiers and translators they would be the ones to discover the ancient texts and ascribe to them their true meanings. As researches into ancient texts and projects of translation proliferated, and institutions and journals for Asiatic researches were set up, modern history in its colonial form began to take shape.

By the early 19th century, with liberalism gaining ground, Orientalist histories were questioned from within the fold of imperial thought. If Orientalists had glorified India's past, the liberals condemned it. From a veneration of classicality there was a move to a phase of arrogant deification of modernity. While Orientalists had discovered in India's past a succession of golden ages, liberals like James Mill and Thomas Macaulay could see only shades of darkness. For the

liberals the dynamism of historical time in the modern West contrasted with the static time of the Orient. This immobility, they underlined, could only be broken with the intervention of an external temporality – the civilizing power of the West. Structured by racial, climatic and evolutionary theories, historical explanations focused on the innate inferiority of Indians, the degenerative effects of Indian climate and the problems of a diseased landscape. The myth of the lazy native and the idea of the ‘tropic’ as a debilitating space emerged as framing tropes of historical analysis.

Later, nationalist histories developed in opposition to imperial frames, which depicted the inferiority of the Indians and their culture, history and hijacking of their civilization. While doing this, they have taken hints from the Orientalists who have glorified their past. This limited their opposition only to the imperialist frames.

This is the general historical background in which the histories of Indian philosophy are initially written, which in a way determined and structured the whole conception of it. In other words, this background – Orientalist-Liberal Utilitarianist-Nationalist – has structured how Indian philosophy was written about, how trends and interests in research have changed and how and why people have come to comprehend themselves in a particular way.

Let us now probe into the background by investigating the history of the Indian philosophy as it is understood now.

Indian philosophy as we understand it now is an outcome of the dialectics of Orientalist-Liberal utilitarian-Nationalist discourses. It is not just an imposed one but a moderated and negotiated one. It is a product of continuous contestations and negotiations – but all this, within its own framework developed during the early colonial depictions. It would be an interesting study to take up, if one investigates whether one is going far from the Indian Philosophy itself as a result of these negotiations. However, such an investigation should not intend to discover the original or essential or pure Indian philosophy, but rather should attempt to see the possibility of looking for alternative ways outside the framework of the Orientalist-Nationalist construction of Indian philosophy.

This whole exercise is to look whether there is Indian philosophy in the western sense of the term and construct the Indian philosophy in those terms.

Let us see when and how the term philosophy is applied to Indian thought. Most of the depictions of traveler-historians of India did not make note of philosophical thought in India, even if they did, it was termed as a religious one. India has been projected as a wealthy and a mystic religious country in the pre-colonial times. This impression was carried forward with some modifications by the Orientalists and Indologists. Along with the material wealth there was found a literary wealth.

The term Indian philosophy is used either as a mere label or as another term for the mythology or religious mysticism of India in the early colonial period. William James, who is responsible for the establishment of the Asiatic society of India, fascinated by the Sanskrit literature, though written about the history and culture of Hindoos, we do not find mention of philosophy in relation to India nowhere in his writings. It is HT Colebrook who has written about ‘On the philosophy of Hindus’ the six philosophical systems of India called Nyaya-Vaisesika, Samkhya-Yoga and Purva-Uttara Mimamsa (Uttara Mimamsa is also known as Vedanta). His purpose, in his own words is not to exhibit a contrasted view of the tenets of different philosophical schools, but to present a summary of the doctrines of each set. (1997:228).

By his time the *Sarvadarsana sangraha* of Madhavacharya is translated and the philosophy of six systems is available for the Orientalists. The label Indian philosophy might be getting strengthened during his time. In the writings of Max Muller the skeleton – label of Indian philosophy completely strengthened with flesh and blood provided by the colonialist and Eurocentric structuring. This would be elaborated a little later.

For the time being let us explicate the language politics involved in the Orientalist constructions of Indian philosophy.

Language:

Language has played a very crucial role in the colonial construction of Indian philosophy. Understanding and interpreting a knowledge system existent in one language through another language structured with another knowledge system always poses a problem. The problem

accentuates when the interpreting language is loaded with an ideology as it happened in the Indian context.

The problem of language of the colonialists not just the issue of terminological equivalences between Sanskrit and English, though it is also a big barrier in carrying the cultural load of the terms and concepts. It is rather also the ideology with which the language operates, which allows the interpretative language to construct Indian philosophy to suit their prejudices and idiosyncrasies.

Significant outcomes on the way to construct the Indian philosophy that have played a pivotal role are philology and comparative studies. These two, helped the Orientalists to look for not only the similarities in words and thought, but also in positing and further developing the theories of origin of languages and philosophy. These theories situated the origins of language and thought outside India through the propagation of the theory of Aryan invasion.

To understand the features of the ideology of colonialism let us look at the depiction of Indian philosophy as constructed by a very significant Indologist, Max Muller. Significance of his place in the history of Indian philosophy lies not just in his translations of the ancient Indian Sanskrit literature, but also in ideological construction of Indian philosophy with certain characteristic features.

Max Muller: The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy

After his first contributions to the study of Indian philosophy as early as in 1852 published in German, Max Muller has written *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* in 1899. The gap between these two periods is filled by publication of the translation of Rgveda and the Sacred Books of the East.

It is in the depictions of Max Muller that we see a clearly formulated set of Eurocentric traits which tried to construct the Indian philosophy in a formidable way. It is in his writings that we see the terms, Indian philosophy, National philosophy along with Hindu philosophy and qualifying it as a universal philosophy. In these depictions, there exists an underlying ideology of constructing a national philosophy or universal philosophy which can be thrust upon the people

of India. There is a difference between this National philosophy and the Nationalist thought developed in the subsequent period. In a country where there exists a complex diversity and plurality of not just cultures and languages but also philosophical positions, construction of a National philosophy which can be accepted by all the people is a part of the process of the unification of the country which can be controlled in a centralized way.

He explicates his objective in publishing the results of his studies in Indian philosophy to be “not so much to restate the mere tenets of each system, so deliberately and so clearly put forward by the reputed authors of the principal philosophies of India, as to give a more comprehensive account of the philosophical activity of the Indian nation from the earliest times, and to show how intimately not only their religion, but their philosophy also, was connected with the national character of the inhabitants of India...” (vii)

Max Muller while attempting to give a comprehensive account of Indian philosophy, cleverly points out a defect (not limitation) of his work. His cleverness lies in attributing the defect of his work to the whole of Indian philosophical tradition. The defect pointed out is lack of chronological framework. This led to the later conceptions of ‘existence of past but lack of history’ of Indian tradition.

In his construction of National philosophy of India, Max Muller intentionally leaves out certain particularities and places excessive stress on certain other specificities which have resulted in stereo-type depictions of later colonial scholars. He claimed appreciation for omitting whatever is ‘less important’ and ‘not calculated to appeal to European sympathies’ in the history of Indian philosophy when he says “if I can claim any thanks, it is for having endeavored to omit whatever seemed to me less important and not calculated to appeal to European sympathies”. This intentional omission of so called ‘less important’ and ‘non-appealing aspects to European sympathies’ is guided by an ideological agenda.

Max Muller is popularly understood to be one who has glorified the ancient India specifically philosophical literature embedded in Sanskrit literature with much appreciation and admiration. But if his statements are read with a closer examination then his ideological agenda can easily be traceable.

His reading of Indian philosophy is a 'sympathetic' one, as he himself claims. How appreciation and admiration can go along with sympathetic reading? Sympathetic reading presupposes a certain kind of pre-conceived hierarchical structure. This sympathy is consolidated with the following depiction of the ancient India which gave birth to the philosophical knowledge. He says;

It was only in a country like India, with all its physical advantages and disadvantages, that such a rich development of philosophical thought as we can watch in the six systems of philosophy, could have taken place. In ancient India there could hardly have been a very severe struggle for life. The necessities of life were abundantly provided by nature,.... What was there to do for those who, in order to escape from the heat of the tropical sun, had taken their abode in the shades of groves or in the caves of mountain valleys, except to meditate on the world in which they found themselves placed, they did not know how or why? There was hardly any political life in ancient India.....and in consequence neither political strife nor municipal ambition. Neither art nor science existed as yet, to call forth the energies of this highly gifted race.Literary ambition could hardly exist during a period when even the art of writing was not yet known.... But at a time when people could not yet think of public applause or private gain, they thought all the more of truth. (1984:vi-vii)

Political life, political strife, art, science, literary ambition, public applause, private gain – all the modern western categories are found absent in the ancient Indian life.

Appreciation is always qualified by pointing out some lacunae by Max Muller in his writings. For instance, he says, "however imperfect the style in which their (Indian) theories have been clothed may appear from a literary point of view, it seems to me the very perfection for the treatment of philosophy." (1984:x)

Yet other place he says “...it cannot be denied that the Sacred Books of the East” to publish which he has spent much of his life time, “are full of rubbish.”¹ But he further adds ‘that should not prevent us from appreciating what is really valuable in them’. This dichotomous representation- imperfection and perfection; rubbish and valuable - shows a kind of ambivalence in the mind of Max Muller.

The depiction of the Vedantic philosophy, especially the Sankara Advaitata Vedanta, as the culmination of all Indian philosophical thought which has continued to dominate the western understanding of Indian philosophy for centuries is sowed by the Max Muller. He considered the Vedanta-philosophy to be ‘a system in which human speculation seems to have reached its very acme’ and written specifically on this system with lot of appreciation and admiration.

Thus Max Muller makes the first attempt to write the history of Indian Philosophy in the modern period with clear cut orientalist ideology and conviction as it was put forth by Edward Said.

The liberals who took charge of Colonialism from Orientalist disagreed with the orientalist to in condemning the Indian past. The liberals like James Mill and Thomas Macaulay could see the shades of darkness where the Orientals have seen succession of golden ages in the Indian past. Structured by racial, climatic and evolutionary theories, historical explanations focused on the innate inferiority of Indians and their culture.

Nationalist histories rejected the liberals interpretations of the oriental histories. One of the prominent writers of history of Indian Philosophy from the Nationalist perspective is Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Now let us look at the history of Indian philosophy written by

¹ Max Muller says, “I am no promiscuous admirer of everything that comes from the East. I have again and again expressed my regret that the Sacred Books of the East contain so much of what must seem to us mere rubbish, but that should not prevent us from appreciating what is really valuable in them.” Elsewhere he states, “It cannot be denied that the Sacred Books of the East are full of rubbish.”(1985:113) He also remarks, “I know I have often been blamed for calling rubbish what to the Indian mind seemed to contain profound wisdom, and to deserve the highest respect.” (1985:112)

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to see how the Orientalist depictions of Indian philosophy were countered from within the imperialist framework.

Radhakrishnan: Indian Philosophy

Radhakrishnan's Indian philosophy written in two volumes (first one published in 1923 and the second one in 1927) appeared in print nearly 25 years after the work of Max Muller. The gap between these two works consolidated the Orientalist conceptions of Indian philosophy. This consolidation was contested by Nationalist historiographers. At least two scholars were prominent among the Nationalist historians of Indian philosophy at that time; one is SN Dasgupta (who has written multi-voluminous history of Indian philosophy) and the other is S. Radhakrishnan. Without going into the details of the differences among the two scholar's approaches, let us focus on the work of Radhakrishnan in contributing to the Nationalist histories and thus participating in the Orientalist-Nationalist discourse.

Radhakrishnan straight away in his preface to Indian philosophy opposes the earlier existent colonial notions of Indian thought by stating; "Ignorance of the subject of Indian thought is profound. To the modern mind Indian philosophy means two or more "silly" notions about *maya*, or the delusiveness of the world, karma, or belief in fate, and *tyaga*, or the ascetic desire to be rid of the flesh." "Even these simple notions," he further adds, "it is said, are wrapped up in barbarous nomenclature and chaotic clouds of vapour and verbiage, looked upon by the 'natives' as wonders of the intellect". (1923:7)

He labeled against the 'silly' notions propagated by the colonialist framework which dismissed the whole of Indian culture and philosophy as 'pantheism' 'worthless scholasticism' 'a mere play upon words', 'at all events nothing similar to Plato or Aristotle or even Plotinus or Bacon.' (1923:7-8)

After criticizing the existent notions, Radhakrishnan goes on to explicate the glory of Indian thought by stating, "There is hardly any height of spiritual insight or rational philosophy attained in the world that has not its parallel in the vast stretch that lies between the early Vedic seers and the modern Naiyayikas." (1923:8) In saying this he was obviously getting into a

dialogue with his contemporary colonialists and asks them to study Indian thought ‘in a true scientific frame of mind, without disrespect for the past or contempt for the alien’, which may prompt one towards a ‘sympathetic reading’ adopted by the Orientalists.

He is aware of the fact that Indian philosophy as rendered in English is a colonial construct, and therefore finds a strange alienness to it. According to him, “The special nomenclature of Indian Philosophy which cannot be easily rendered into English accounts for the apparent strangeness of the intellectual landscape.” (1923:8) He smells the strangeness of the intellectual landscape though it is of Indian philosophy, since it is developed in English.

Thus Radhakrishnan is aware that the Indian philosophy rendered in English is a colonial construct and has attempted to enter into a dialogue with colonialists both to disprove their ‘silly notions’ and thus to project a system of philosophy of India in tune with the Nationalist ideological demands of his time.

While saying that he is not attempting to write a history of philosophy, Radhakrishnan intentionally discusses the characteristics that should be there to a historian of philosophy in general and Indian philosophy in particular. In his opinion a philological or linguistic or historical approach to the history of philosophy is unprofitable. A linguist or philologist will regard the views of ancient Indian thinkers as ‘fossils laying scattered throughout the upheaval and faulty strata of the history of philosophy; and would dismiss ‘any interpretation which makes them alive and significant as far-fetched and untrue’. (1923:671)

History, according to Radhakrishnan, is more than just a collection of facts and the accumulation of evidence. The historian, he says, should be a critic and an interpreter and not a mere mechanical ‘ragpicker’. “He must”, points out Radhakrishnan, “pay great attention to the logic of ideas, draw inferences, suggest explanations, and formulate theories which would introduce some order into the shapeless mass of unrelated facts”.(1923:672)

He should, in fact be a philosopher, ‘who uses his scholarship as an instrument to wrest from words the thoughts that underlie them’, and should realize ‘the value of the ancient Indian theories which attempted to grapple with the perennial problems of life and treat them not as fossils but as species which are remarkably persistent. (1923:671)

These views of Radhakrishnan on historians of philosophy implicitly criticize the colonialist histories of Indian philosophy. Since most of them have used either philological or linguistic approach stated above, or have condemned Indian philosophy for lack of historicity. It should be noted that none of the colonial historians of Indian philosophies are philosopher, but were either philologists or historians with imperialist motives.

Though the nationalist prerogatives instigated Radhakrishnan to reject the imperialist notions, his understanding of history is a clear example of how he is still entangled to the colonialist framework. He accepts the Eurocentric conception of the notion of history as linear and joins hands with colonialists in arguing for the lack of historicity in India. According to him “In the absence of accurate chronology, it is a misnomer to call anything a history” (1923:8). As against the native notion of cyclic notion of time, Radhakrishnan opted to adopt the linear notion to denounce any attempts to call his work a history of philosophy. In contrast, S. N. Dasgupta (1922) who calls his work *A History of Indian Philosophy* published one year before the work of Radhakrishnan, does not give any importance to chronological placement of the various philosophical systems and their philosophers. “I have never considered it desirable that the philosophical interest should be subordinated to the chronological” states Dasgupta. Without getting into the debate on the necessity of chronological data for the construction of Indian philosophy, it is sufficient for us, from the above, now to note that Radhakrishnan has accepted the Western conception of history and tried to look for it in Indian tradition.

Radhakrishnan accepts the essentialities of the ‘India and the West’ conception that was naturalized by the colonialists and constructs his Indian philosophy within that framework. He explicitly states that his aim has been not so much to narrate Indian views as to explain them, but to bring them within the focus of Western traditions of thought. (1923:10) While attempting to address the West in explicating the depth of the Indian thought. Radhakrishnan has a tough task of bringing Indian philosophy within the focus of Western thought. In other words, his attempt is more to bring the Indian thought within the West’s focus than to explicate Indian thought as existent in the classical period. In doing so, the Indian thought that he was dealing with is the one developed by the Orientalists. Being within the colonial framework he tried to contest and thus negotiate with the Orientalist conceptions. On his way, he has even carried forward certain Orientalist conceptions such as – culmination of all Indian philosophy in Advaita, essentially

spiritual nature of Indian philosophy, a-historicity, and soteriological orientation of all systems of Indian philosophy.

He is also aware of the charges against Indian philosophy in terms of pessimism, dogmatism and indifference to ethics and upprogressiveness. (1923:54) These are the imperialist charges forged on the Indian thought to prove its inferiority to the West. The development of human thought in general, depends upon the dialectics of pessimism and optimism, dogmatism and openness to change. In these dialectics sometimes pessimism or dogmatism would be dominant and at other times optimism or openness. Branding a particular tradition, to be ascribing to only one of the alternatives is to unrecognise the growth of its development. By branding this way, the imperialists, not only attempted to demean the growth of rich Indian tradition, but also kept the Indian thinkers in defense in criticizing, and rejecting this branding. It is also politically motivated, as it has started the discussion on Indian thought by drawing its framework. Charges such as pessimism, dogmatism, indifference to ethics and non-progressiveness were labeled, so that the subsequent discussions would be centered only around them either in contesting or rejecting or modifying. Radhakrishnan, while criticizing and rejecting these views has only become a part of their politics.

Though Radhakrishnan written the history of Indian philosophy in opposition to the imperialist framework, he remained tied to the framework which he sought to transcend. The assumptions and terms invented and imposed by Max Muller and others became part of the accepted commonsense and shaped his nature of reasoning. By arguing within the frames of the colonial assumptions, he inscribed their truth and reaffirmed their taken for granted status. The Orientalist notions of India's past – the idea of classical golden ages and the corollary myth of a subsequent civilisational decline – were also accepted by Radhakrishnan, and in looking at past and present he operated with Western modernist ideas of what constituted progress, and what was to be criticized as primitive, backward and irrational.

Conclusion

To conclude, my aim in this paper was to argue that the history of Indian Philosophy which is presently available to us is colonial construct. To be precise, it is a construct of the

orientalists such as Max Muller which was later negotiated, modified and reconstructed by the dialectic of Nationalists such as Radhakrishnan.

As stated by Edward Said, the Orientalist analysis almost universally proceeded to confirm the 'primitive' 'originary' 'exotic' and 'mysterious' nature of oriental societies. Nationalists tried to negotiate with these conceptions in modifying, rejecting and providing alternatives. However, in doing this, as pointed out by Said, the nationalists have only limited themselves to the framework created by the orientalists.

As this is a working paper, some of the aspects of the paper are still need to be developed and articulated in the argument form.

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