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Krishnachandra Bhattacharya's Review† of

*The Origin of Subjectivity in Human Thought**

The present brochure is an American study of Indian thought, from Vedic times downwards, viewed not only as a philosophical but also as a sociological movement. The central topic is 'subjectivity with its attendant pessimism and doctrine of illusion', which is taken to be the essential characteristic of later Vedic thought. The sociological problem is to trace 'the sources and conditions which could produce such a peculiar type of experience'.

The material used by the author appears to be the writings of Western orientalists which present a certain amount of information and express certain 'opinions' about Indian thought and social history. There is not much evidence of a firsthand acquaintance with the Sanskritic literature of the subject. The labelling and valuation of Indian thought by Western names like subjectivity, pessimism, and pantheism appear to be rather too facile and the social conditions of ancient India are depicted with a definiteness which is hardly warranted by the extant evidence. Western scholarship has not seriously tackled the systematic philosophical literature of India as distinct from her early religious literature. This systematic philosophy may be presumed to have been in touch with the atmosphere and tradition to a greater extent than any Western investigation today can claim to be and so an interpretation of Hindu religious thought which does not attempt to meet this philosophy is bound to be risky, if not altogether imaginary. Early inchoate

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concepts in Indian religious literature can only be understood in the light of their philosophical development and a serious study of this alone can supply the criticism that is necessary of the western philosophical labels before they can be usefully applied to Indian speculations.

It is not possible in this review to discuss the speculations about early social conditions of India that are accepted as historical data in this book. Even if they are admitted as facts, the deductions that are attempted here from philosophy to sociology and *vice versa* must be pronounced to be utterly insecure. One can at best imaginatively trace an aesthetic congruity between thought and historical life : the depths of a speculative concept are much too subtle and sociological science is much too imperfect yet to allow of scientific deduction. The offhand way in which the place, for example, of the Brahman and the caste-system in society and of pantheism and transmigration in thought is determined here would be amusing, were it not for the fact that such imaginative studies are actually utilised today for what is called the cultural conquest of the East by the West.

The central conception of subjectivity requires to be examined at some length. An arrest of the experience-process is said to cause a division of it into object and subject. Self-consciousness arises and is taken to express itself in two ways — either as a mediating opposition to object which resolves itself into action, a unity in difference where object and subject determine each other and jointly get socialised or as an unmediated opposition which cannot become action, where the subject turns back upon itself and with the arrest of the socialising process becomes a solitary individual controlling mere ideas and contracting away into nothingness. The latter type of self-consciousness is called subjectivity and is said to be 'due to a persistent thwarting of individual experience'. In India, the author believes that 'a fixed caste-system furnished the unyielding opposition against which the self was forced' and 'the result was the doctrine of illusion in the Vedanta system and the pessimism and negation of Buddhism. The trend of subjectivity was fatal and pre-determined as long as the Brahmans were at

the heed of the caste and not aroused to self-consciousness'. This is practically the theme of the entire book.

The two forms of self-consciousness correspond to what are called concrete and abstract unities, to the two rival conceptions of identity-in-difference, viz., of identity as comprehending and as transcending difference. The transcendent identity is generally misunderstood, though influential types of the conception are not lacking in Western philosophy. The negation of the immanence is too often taken as an empty abstraction or as only a mystical feeling. The reality of a dissociating or inwardising will is ordinarily denied. The abstracting process is admitted but it is understood more as not attending to certain details than as a new direction of attention. The attention of the subject to itself — when it is not a preparation to spring upon the object again — is regarded as only helpless or perverse suicide of concrete experience. In the moral sphere, the rejection of a desire is indeed taken as willed but is conceived as a positive suppression: rejection as dissociation, as a cutting of the root of desire, is hardly admitted to be voluntary. Obedience to the law as an attitude of the spirit and not a mere acting according to it is not allowed to be a real doing and terms like will-negation or transcendental activity used in this connection are taken as only mystic metaphors. So all that is conceived as spiritual doing — like prayer, self-surrender in worship and wanting to forgive or to love — would be taken as no doing but unique feelings merely. Self-realisation as a moral formula is no prescription yet of a specific description: the activity it prescribes is but the creation of social or objective values — a sort of artistic activity at its best from ever new depths of spiritual insight, the energising of which however is left to accident, the luck of inspiration, and is not believed to be controllable. There is in fact a general disbelief in a continuous inwardising activity towards one's subjective being, in a specific method of realising subjective depths, in the reality of what may be called a subjectively spiritual will.

The symbolism of a deepening or inwardising of the will has not been sufficiently investigated either in its psychological aspect or in its metaphysical significance. The problem is cer-

tainly there: some specific kind of spiritual activity is the postulate of the feeling of religious progress and it cannot be brushed aside as mere imagination. The faith in a will continuously efficient in this inwardising direction demands indeed verification in a systematic discipline that works in practice. But in any case it cannot be rejected before one has begun to practise and meantime all that can be demanded is the intelligibility of the psychological theory underlying the discipline. Such a theory is presented in all Indian systems, one form — the most systematic among them — appearing in Yoga philosophy. The psychological possibility of the voluntary control of the inwardising process has to be seriously investigated before the faith in the reality of a subjectively spiritual will can be definitely accepted or rejected.

The psychology of subjectivity as presented by the author is unacceptable on many grounds. The subject turns back on istelf not merely when the experience-process is arrested but also when it prevails, through the success itself relaxing the stress of the will. Outward defeat and success alike may induce either an inwardising reversal or a reinforced objective effort according to temperament; and either movement may prepare for the other or accentuate itself. There is no ground for the ordinary assumption that the practical or objective tendency of the mind is the normal condition, that the recoil of subjectivity, when it comes, is normally a drawing backward to spring forward again, and that continued subjective deepening is only a pathological process. What we may call the aesthetic-contemplative process is just as primitive as the practical life-preserving process; in the child, each may be as dominant or as defective as the other, though temperaments vary. There is no special reason to assay reality in terms of the practical function rather than of the other function: there are contemplative attitudes that like practical attitudes either work or do not work, induce or do not induce continuous experience of satisfaction.

Not that the two attitudes are unrelated. The deepening of contemplative activity and the extension of the objective value-creating activity may — though they need not — be mutually

helpful. Society as a spiritual essence gains in depth and cohesion with such inwardising of the individual as implies self-abnegation or relaxation of the combative stress; and the individual too gains in subjective depth and reality with such conquest of others as leads to the creation of abiding social value. Again, subjective self-realisation of the individual does not exclude the positive helping of others to achieve their salvation : teaching (lokānugraha) is one glorious function of God or seer or perfect spirit. Nor does objective life for society exclude the explicitly subjective activity of self-realisation.

To the present author, subjectivity is a pathological process and is in India due to the arrest of the natural creative will by the wicked or stolid social system of the Brahmans. The picture presented is of the princes and people representing what value-creating activity there was in the society and of the Brahmans ever blocking it by inertia or perverse priestcraft. The possibility has never occurred to the author's mind that the *trend* of subjectivity' might be only a healthy manifestation of the prevailing contemplative temperament of the community, that the priest was only the articulate expression of their temperament, and that the social system came into being and derived its entire cohesive strength from religion, from its perpetual accommodation — conscious on the part of the much-maligned priest — to such divisions of the spirit as were inevitably caused, for good or for evil, by the natural or secular life of the community. The continued dominance of the priest is apparently the social side of the predominant religious mentality of the people. Indian thought, as the author admits, 'has almost nothing in it that could be classed as strictly secular', though presumably the mentality is regarded as pathological. Here and there might be evidences of class selfishness and priestcraft; there must have been good individuals and bad individuals among all classes, and cycles of health and degeneration in society. It bespeaks however a lack of the historical sense, of the capacity of understanding society as a life or growth to put forward seriously that the Brahmans — admittedly without military power and material wealth — held the community in thrall through long centuries by stolid selfishness and deliberate

priestcraft. How the diabolical resolve to block all progress could be efficient is hardly intelligible unless one resorts to some theory of an age-long collective hypnosis induced by the man of magic. A singular hypothesis appears to be that as a class the Brahman stood for spirituality, and that his power lay not merely in the superstition but also in the reverence of the community.

The whole outlook of the author on religion, priestly class, and caste-system requires to be revised. Religion need not be primarily the creation of social values: contemplative inwardness may equally be a primary religion. The warrior need not be the social expression of religion, the warrior-priest need not be the normal institution of early societies, and in any case the priest need not take part in politics to regenerate religious and social ideas (p. 47). The predominance of the contemplative religion in India implied the non-political character of the priest whose power lay in his very detachment. The Dravidian intermingling, the increasing complexity of the sacrifice and the consequent institution of sacerdotal apprenticeship, the settling down of the nomadic Aryans in certain tracts and the consequent reduction of the king to a figure-head — conditions suggested by the author to explain the 'tremendous dominion of the priest' — would at best explain the increasing segregation of the priest-caste but not its *comparative* influence. The real quarrel apparently should be why the religious function was taken to be at all so important by the community.

Like subjectivity, objectivity also appears to have been misconceived. In the chapter of Vedism occurs the remark 'the Rig-Veda hymns had in them very little of direct, warm, and vital experience: they were ritualistic, practical, and wholly utilitarian' (p. 20). The warm experience here apparently means subjective feeling. That the religion was objective is readily admitted: spirituality was of the form of actual sacrifice. The epithets practical and utilitarian appear, however, to be utterly inappropriate. The division between natural and spiritual life had not yet emerged though life was none the less spiritual, its significance lying in the sacrifice. The sacrificer was not ashamed to ask for the good things of life but they

were to be received as gifts from the gods. The efficacy of sacrifice was indeed unquestionably accepted but it was in no sense a *means* or 'conscious tool' to be appropriated by the merely secular will. The practical or utilitarian attitude would imply the employment of means — natural or magical — with a worldly motive. But the idea of flattering of gods, of cheating them into making gifts is entirely foreign here. Sacrifice meant adoration and not flattery or clever mendicancy — a distinction wantonly ignored in modern 'scientific' studies of ancient religions — adoration of gods conceived in terms of sublime power or wisdom or goodness — all as objectively real and not as luxuries of subjective reflection. The gifts prayed for — strength or life or sinlessness — were themselves conceived as sacred, not good things of the world in our sense but things which gods only could give.

Spirituality was of the form of objective sacrifice but this objectivity is perversely misjudged. 'The gods were to be appeased rather than revered. To give them food, drink, and flattery was better than to be good. In fact this was the only good that the Hindus knew : no recognition was granted to the spirit and intention of the act. The consequence alone was the conscious problem' (p. 21). One might have expected at least a better appreciation of the ethical unity of the consequence and motive. Objective morality is not necessarily utilitarian : to pursue consequences is quite compatible with a spiritual motive, though it may be subjectively undistinguished. Experience in fact in which object and subject have not yet been distinguished is not merely objective in the practical sense : without being subjective, it may yet be spiritual in the contemplative sense. The division of the spirit is after all only a natural necessity, a human tragedy which is not in itself a merit. The degree of division is no measure of the depth spirituality.

The contemplative experience of natural purity or defilement may be of all degrees of reality or depth without being subjective. The laying bare of subjectivity, of what is called 'spirit and intention' is only an accident of spirituality which may make alike for realisation or inanity. There is no parti-

cular merit in the feeling of sin in the subjective sense. The propitiation of the gods, it must be remembered, was a sacrifice and not merely an offering. It was a propitiation for sin in the objective spiritual sense. The element of self-surrender in sacrifice is apparently ignored by the author both in the chapter on the theory of sacrifice and elsewhere. Attention is drawn in that chapter more to the increase of communal or spiritual life achieved by sacrifice than to the other necessary element, viz., renunciation, the symbolic self-purification and self-killing. That sacrifice was a killing of the god to renovate the god is indeed recognised but the significance of the god killed is not brought out. The sacrificer purifies his detailed objective self and offers it as purified to the gods to have it renewed or sacrificed. The depth or reality of the renunciation need not suffer because it is objective.

That the author's view of objectivity does not work appears in her own admission : 'While the Rig-Veda is thoroughly objective in its earlier portion, there is much that is mystical and unintelligible, portentous of undefined problems and half-conscious of the ineffectiveness of the Vedic religious system' (p. 21). The unintelligibility would be largely relieved if objective adoration and sacrifice be admitted to be throughout spiritual and not 'practical and utilitarian'. There is no question of 'ineffectiveness' of the system here : the same spirituality was only passing from the objective to the subjective. The need was being felt to adapt the religion to a division of the spirit that was inevitably coming. There is no discontinuity in this inwardising movement, it was but an adaptation of the Vedic spirit to the natural emergence of subjectivity. One can trace this continuous adaptation of the spiritual to the natural or secular order down to what is called ritualistic and philosophical Brahmanism. The growth of the conception of *Brahman* and of the monistic tendency and the deification of the sacrifice itself are arbitrarily understood by the author as a degenerative process, as a shrivelling up of spiritual content : the emergence of the conception of *ātman* is taken to mark a recoil of self-expression and the identification of *ātman* and *Brahman* is supposed to have choked this nascent movement.

The truth seems to be that with inevitable changes in the secular or historical life, there came a subjectivising abstraction, an 'undefining' transformation of nature on the one hand and the corresponding discipline for realisation of the subjectivity on the other. The emergence of the conceptions of the subjective *Brahman* and *ātman* marks the operation of one and the same undefining activity directed to the cosmos and the body respectively; and the formula 'That art thou' indicates just the spiritual discipline adapted to this subjectivity. Subjectivity is here to be understood as at once a contemplative undefining of objective distinctions and the spiritual fixation for the individual meant on the social side a reconstruction, understood in the Brahmanical sense, adaptation of the old spirit to new and, it may be, fallen times — not creation of new institutions by iconoclasm but the reinvestment of a naturally changed society with the eternal ancient spirit of religion.

The nature of the undefining abstraction requires to be cleared up. There is difference between contemplation or aesthetic abstraction and practical or scientific abstraction. The withdrawal from the concrete is in both an undefining movement and is conditioned by striking relations within the concrete. In scientific abstraction, the withdrawal is for the practical handlings of a more extended objectivity; the analysis is for the construction of a comprehensive concept. In contemplative abstraction, the content is undefined to be envisaged as a deeper reality, not to be applied to a wider objective range. The undefining means *eo ipso* a spread which is redefined either externally or internally, either by a comprehensive grasp of the distinct concretes as related or by an inwardising stabilisation of the abstraction-nucleus, whether as truth or value or reality. It is this latter movement that has led to the emergence of the pantheistic gods — Vedic and post-Vedic. The lack of individualisation in the Hindu gods means lack of external, not internal definition. With each perception of secular differentiation, there emerge a further internalisation of the nucleus and a wider pantheistic spread. Cosmic life, the sacrificial ceremonial, and the sacrifier thus get respectively internalised and spread out through continuous stages into *Brahman* as the one

presence, the word as its pervading symbol, and the *ātman* behind all grades of the body, which realises the identity.

The significance of the doctrine of *ātman* is misunderstood by the author. There is no special reason for regarding it as a revolt against pantheism, as a hopeful reconstruction that was arrested by the Brahmanical doctrine of *Brahman* and sacrifice. In one sense, every deepening or inwardising is a revolt, an unsettling of the abstraction-nucleus for contemplation. At every stage of it there comes a conflict with those who would not push forward to the inner vision, adapt the old spirit to the new secular division. The conception of *ātman* represents an undefining, not a reconstruction but an analysis or division; and the realisation of it as one with *Brahman* is the adaptive reconstruction. The new discipline is a continuation of the old spirit of sacrifice but is none the less opposed by those who cling to objective spirituality and would not recognize the demand of the time. It is thus that one understands the conflict between ceremonial religion and subjective realisation. The concept for *yajña* sometimes expressed in the Upaniṣad, the emphasis on knowledge and subjective life and the philosophical recognition of continuity and discontinuity alike between outer and inner life, between works ceremonial and moral on the one hand and *mukti* or absolute freedom of the subject on the other are all intelligible in the light. The continuity is in the efficacy of works to destroy the illusion that comes through the desiring identification with the object and the discontinuity is in the final lapsing of time for the individual which all *mukti* implies, freedom being in no Indian system taken as mere *result* continuously appropriated by the will before it.