

THE INDIAN TRADITION AND OUR INTELLECTUAL TASK

K. J. SHAH

In his 'Svaraj in Ideas' (SII) Professor Krishnachandra Bhattacharya (KCB) presents the problem of our intellectual life with simplicity, clarity and strength. True, it was written long ago; true also that we have been discussing the problem in many ways all these years; one of the ways has been to discuss the problem of our intellectual life in terms of modernization and indigenization — but it is also true that we have found no principle of adjustment between the two, and therefore our intellectual life goes on without any kind of clear orientation. Professor Bhattacharya's discussion of the problem articulates a principle of adjustment and orientation of our intellectual life and thus opens up the possibility of discussing the problem purposefully so that the principle of adjustment and orientation becomes an integral part of our intellectual life.

In this paper, I shall first present KCB's thesis as I understand it. I do this in order to distinguish my understanding from many other different ways in which it can be understood. I suggest that what looks like an advocacy or the acceptance of Indian spiritual values irrespective of comparison and competition with alien values is not so. Professor KCB is essentially giving reasons for holding on hard to one's own values before modifying or giving them up. I think that in the end whether we give them up or not, still the comparison and competition with our ideas is a necessary condition of our having an independent intellectual life. In the second section, I discuss the meaning of the Indian tradition — a problem that arises in the performance of this task. In the succeeding section, I discuss some steps that might facilitate developments which would make an authentic intellectual life possible. Lastly, I end with some concluding remarks.

I

The Indian Tradition and Alien Thought

It is important to note that KCB formulates the problem in terms of Svaraj and cultural subjection, and not in terms of modernization and indigenization. Svaraj is to be attained and cultural subjection is to be rejected, whereas neither modernization nor indigenization as such is either to be attained or rejected. Professor Bhattacharya clearly states the principle of orientation of our intellectual life: "...when I speak of cultural subjection, I do not mean assimilation of an alien culture. That assimilation need not be an evil. There is cultural subjection only when one's traditional cast of ideas and sentiments is superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost." (SII I)

But for quite a long time, it might be said, the alien and traditional ideas have been in interaction, in comparison and competition, both explicitly and implicitly. True, but is it real comparison and competition? KCB says that there is conflict proper only when one is really serious about ideas, feels each ideal to be a matter of life and death. We sometimes sentimentally indulge in the thought of a conflict before we are really serious with either ideal. And what we have as a result is a patchwork of ideas and ideals. However, we shall distinguish between conflict proper and sentimental indulgence in conflict, not with reference to the subjective seriousness of the participants, but with reference to the structure of the conflict itself. I shall attempt to explain this difference with reference to a point of dispute between Tagore and Gandhi. (See 'Truth Called Them Differently; Tagore-Gandhi controversy', Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad - 14, 1961.)

Let me begin by saying that both Tagore and Gandhi accepted the Indian ideal of man and society, of unity or oneness of everything. (It is not important for our purpose to go into the details of the nature of this unity.) And yet they disagreed on many points. One such point of disagreement was

that Gandhi advocated the burning of garments made from foreign cloth, whereas Tagore opposed it and advocated that they be given to poor Indians. To Tagore, this movement was based on a confusion between economics and ethics — calling foreign cloth 'impure' etc. If there be anything wrong in wearing a particular kind of cloth, that would be an offence against economics, of hygiene or aesthetics, but certainly not against morality. To this Gandhi replied: I must confess that I do not draw a sharp distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore, sinful. It is sinful to buy and use articles made by sweated labour. It is sinful to eat American wheat and let my neighbour starve for want of custom. Thus we find that this difference between Tagore and Gandhi is not superficial. The important question is: is there a sharp distinction between economics and ethics? For Gandhi there is not, and for Tagore there is.

This difference between Tagore and Gandhi could be understood in one of two ways: it may be that the difference shows the different ways the two want to adopt to reach the same ideal; or it may be that the difference shows that the two differ in their very understanding of the ideal though they express the ideal in the same and/or similar terms. A deeper examination of the difference between Tagore and Gandhi shows that the difference between the two is of ideals, and not of means to achieve a given ideal. According to Tagore, if we have a rational approach to problems, say, economic and ethical, we would achieve the ideal of unity. According to Gandhi the broad structure of the ideal of unity requires that reason in order to be reason must conform to it. This means that reason in economics and reason in ethics must mutually limit each other. (This is indeed an oversimplified account, but it helps to illustrate the distinction we are trying to explain. Here we have the echoes of the two senses of reason distinguished in the SII — mechanical reason and organic reason — which we shall refer to later on). More concretely we can see the difference between the two in the difference in their vision of India to come. Gandhi wants an India which has discovered her heritage, but

considers modern developments as a whole destructive of her body, mind and soul. Tagore too wants India to discover her heritage but he thinks that the West will invigorate her bones and shake her out of her lethargy. If we see the difference between Tagore and Gandhi rightly, we have conflict proper; and if we see the difference as merely a difference of means, we have patchwork of ideas and ideals.

The foregoing is indeed a very brief account of the distinction between proper conflict and patchwork of ideas. It can be generally formulated as follows: where comparison and competition is between two systems as wholes, we have real agreement or disagreement; when comparison and competition is partial — limited to parts of the systems ignoring the wholes — we have patchwork of ideas and ideals.

But if we have such discrepancy — incoherence — can we not have a synthesis? But what do we mean by synthesis? If there is a fundamental difference in ideals we can have synthesis only in so far as one ideal can accommodate an application of the other ideal. But there are limits to such adaptation. Such adaptation must not distort or destroy the principle itself. For example, the range and purpose of practices of economic efficiency would be different under different systems or goals like capitalism, communism and Gandhism. Capitalism would seek to maximise economic production and profits, communism would seek to maximise economic production and equality of distribution, Gandhism would seek to maximise economic production consistently with avoiding abject helplessness of individuals and groups. To extend or contract the methods of attaining efficiency of the one so as to assimilate them to the practices of the other beyond a point would not be adaptation and synthesis, but replacement of one system by another. But this leaves open the question of choice between the ideals themselves. It is important to clearly understand the position of SII on this issue. But how are we to choose between such fundamentally different ideals? In our illustration, the two principles are two different interpretations of the Indian idea of unity; but for discussing the foregoing question, we could very well take it to be the difference between the traditional and

the alien ideals. (Professor M. P. Marathe of the Department of Philosophy in Poona University suggested to me that KCB's controversy between Svaraj and universalism in intellectual life reflects the controversy between Gandhi and Tagore. This is indeed a very valuable and almost certainly a true suggestion.) One possible way of dealing with the difference suggested by KCB is that we can accept the application of the alien ideal which can be subsumed under the framework of our own ideal. This is the principle of synthesis already suggested by KCB.

However this does not answer the basic question of how to choose between our own and a fundamentally different alien ideal. Instead of giving an answer to this question, KCB says that such a choice is indeed very difficult. "The ideals of a community spring from its past history and from the soil, they have not necessarily a universal application, and they are not always self-luminous to the other community." (para XV) This is the reason why we should not forsake our own spiritual ideal.

Certainly the choice of the alien ideal may be very difficult, but it may be the right choice; the alien ideal is claimed to be supported by reason which is universal. If so, one must face and overcome the difficulties in the way of the acceptance of the alien ideal. In response to such an argument, KCB distinguishes between an abstract mechanical idea of reason which is superficial and a concrete organic idea of reason which is the result of meditation and long experience. According to him the traditional idea of reason is the organic one, and the alien idea is the abstract one. The choice is therefore between one reason and another. And to KCB, "The only way to appreciate a new ideal is to view it through our actual ideal, the only way to find a new reverence is to deepen our old reverence". Once again what we have is the same principle as before: we must accept what can be adapted to our own spiritual ideal.

But can there not be an alternative which may be better than our spiritual ideal? KCB seems to accept such a possibility, but says: "it is wrong not to accept an ideal that is felt to be a simpler and deeper expression of our own ideals simply because it is different from our present spiritual ideal or be-

cause it hails from a foreign country. To reject it would be to insist on individuality for the sake of individuality and would be a form of national conceit and obscurantism" (para XVIII). And yet we continue to be within the framework of our own spiritual ideal — a simpler and deeper expression of our own ideals.

This may naturally make us suspect that the comparison and competition suggested by KCB are not completely open, or maybe, KCB thinks that there can be only one truly spiritual ideal — in accordance with the true nature of man; and therefore, there cannot be any question of accepting any other ideal which does not fit into any one of the foregoing patterns. It will be impossible here to enter into the controversy whether there can be more than one true spiritual ideal. However, for the sake of argument, we can imagine such a possibility and its consequences for the idea of comparison and competition.

Suppose that there is a radically different alien spiritual ideal such that it cannot be reduced to or subsumed under our own ideal. What would comparison and competition in such a case amount to? It would be a struggle between the two ideals for mastery over the souls of men. This must necessarily involve not only a struggle in the mind and life of an individual, but also a struggle between groups supporting the radically different ideals. During this process the individual and the society will be in utter confusion, and the outcome would be anybody's guess! And whichever of the two wins, is it necessarily better? Whatever may be the outcome, comparison and competition would be a necessary part of the struggle.

Surely, all this smacks of chauvinism and unshakeable attachment to one's own spiritual ideal. KCB does not want to deny that it could be a danger, but he has taken sufficient precautions against such a possibility. And in the then circumstances, the danger rather was from our acceptance of alien criticism which was ignorant and/or unsympathetic. (Is the danger much less even today?)

It might be said that all this was all right at the time the matter was raised by KCB; but is it not too late in the day to

rake up all this now? Have we not gone too far in the direction of accepting alien ideals and practices; so that consideration of our spiritual ideals is merely an academic exercise without any practical significance? To such considerations one might respond in the following two ways:

(a) Have we really accepted the alien ideals and practices? Has our soul been transformed so that we really welcome or resist new ideas? Or do the alien ideas still possess us like a ghost? Or is it that the old spirit has become a ghost and is not leaving us? or wherever we are, is it necessary to know from where we have come, in order to know where we are? I am raising these questions to imply that the obligation to have a reference to the past cannot be forsaken, if we are to regain our identity, or even to acquire a new identity. Otherwise we would be where we are because some one else has put us there.

(b) However, this is not all. The theory and practice of alien ideas by the alien as well as by us, in fact, by more or less the entire world, has raised serious doubts about the validity of both the theory and the practice of modern civilization. Is science that all-conquering as it at one time seemed to be? Is it the only science? Is it a true science at all or has its truth got serious limitations? And even if the theory of it were to be granted, can it be worked out in practice in the context of the depletion of the non-renewable resources, and a murderous competition between the nations of the world? Do modern theory and practice not need a reconsideration? And in this reconsideration, are we to presume that the traditional modes of thought must have no role to play? Thus the need for a serious consideration of the traditional cast of ideas by comparing and contrasting them with the alien or modern cast of ideas is a necessary condition of an authentic intellectual life for us, and perhaps not only for us.

II

What is the Indian Tradition?

(A) The discussion in the last section sets the task of comparison and competition with the traditional cast of ideas. But

the task needs an explanation: what is the traditional cast of ideas? To this question there is no clear or simple answer. Anyone who talks about tradition, very often talks of some one part of tradition or other which it is recognized is not the whole of tradition. The whole tradition consists of several strands of tradition — Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Tribal etc. — mutually related, mutually interacting both in an oppressive and an enriching manner. This should not present a problem to the task, any specific tradition that is taken for comparing etc. will be related to the other strands and therefore the whole tradition will be considered at least indirectly.

However what is true of these parts of the tradition is not true in the same way in the case of Islam and Christianity and yet they too are now part of the Indian tradition. Here too the question arises, what is the Islamic tradition and what is the Christian tradition? It is true that these traditions go much beyond the border of India. However, what we need to consider is their Indian presence. Certainly the complex tradition that Hinduism is, and Islam and Christianity have mutually interacted in the course of history in a variety of fields like art, music, politics, religion etc. and continue to do so. However, the nature and range of such interaction has been complex and continues to be so. It is important that this mutual interaction is founded on the principles of mutual fairness and enrichment, and not of mutual weakening and derogation. This cannot be done by the Hindus on the ground of their past memories, true or imagined, of Muslim or Christian dominance; nor on the basis of their present political superiority (1). It can be done only by a serious attention to the Indian presence of Islam and Christianity and a recognition of their legitimate problems and their legitimate role. Equally, the Muslims and the Christians cannot establish a proper relationship with the Hindus on the ground of their past dominance, nor on their desire to exploit Hindu weaknesses. It can be done only by recognising their legitimate problems and their legitimate role. This means paying serious attention to the Hindu tradition and not setting it aside as old, religious, anti-secular. Surely what is old is not necessarily wrong or to be forgotten. Secularism in our context involves not only the attitude of the state to religion, but also

the attitude of one religion to another religion. And even when something is specifically local in a religion or a theory, it has universal aspects also. In so far as this is so, the Hindu past will continue to be the part of the consciousness of the Hindus not merely as past, but also as providing coordinates of thought to the present-day India not only in religion but also in other areas of thought. There are general principles which will need to be carefully worked out with reference to specific issues and situations. There are many such — music before mosques, beef-eating, common civil code, idolatry, conversion, attitude to one's own religion and to the religion of the other. On these and other issues Gandhiji has put forward thoughts and principles which are sound, in any case, which serve the highest consideration.

It might be said that theoretically this may appear to be sound, but practically, it is fraught with many dangers. But surely this is ground for keeping away from such excesses; to claim that it is ground for giving only historical significance to the tradition is so unjust that no one with any goodwill will advocate it. The choice is only between mutual goodwill and enrichment on the one hand, and mutual ill-will, barrenness and destruction on the other.

(B) However, to accept the role of the traditional cast of ideas in our intellectual life is not the end of our difficulties. Now, we are faced with another question: in view of the fact that tradition comes to us through sources which are inadequate and not unambiguous, how are we to get at the authentic tradition? This question can never be satisfactorily answered; but this is not a weakness, it is a strength. It is usual that with changing times, different parts or aspects of tradition get emphasised; the interpretation of tradition is also changed. It is this that enables us to establish authentic contact with the tradition, this enables us to think of our problems in such a way that our understanding illuminates the past, and the past illuminates our problems. We regard this as unsatisfactory only if we think that the role of the study of tradition is purely a historical one.

(C) It might be said, however, that this creative use of the past is no longer possible for us because our consciousness is itself contaminated; and we have lost our capacity to understand the tradition. There can be no doubt that our thinking is affected to a greater or less extent by western ideas and ideals; however this makes our task difficult, but it need not prevent authentic and fruitful contact with tradition.

III

What can we do?

We have stated the task, we have explained it and shown that the difficulties are either no difficulties or they can be overcome. But the question remains; how is the task to be accomplished? How is one to avoid patchwork of ideas and ideals and institute real fruitful comparison and competition between the Indian traditional and alien systems of thought? This is a creative task and can be performed in many ways, as one can see from the way some individuals have attempted the task. It must be a priority task to see how differently and how usefully this has been done. We shall find that this involves many choices backed by a general and special background, hard work and luck. One cannot, lay down rules for this creative task. Then what? Are we helpless? Is this development to be left to chance?

Not altogether. It is possible for us to take steps which will facilitate the desired development. Quite a few individuals have thought that a significant and satisfying intellectual life is possible by work in this kind of direction and have worked as best as they can and with more or less success. Among contemporaries, to name only illustratively, we may mention A. K. Saran and G. C. Pande; among the recent ones, Ananda Coomaraswamy or Nirmal Kumar Bose. And towering above them all and very different is Gandhi. In the context of our academic life, these have been more or less systematically ignored, though nowadays some kind of lip-service is paid to them. I think, one useful step we can take is to focus attention on this

kind of work, by these and other authors. Here too there are bound to be differences of judgement. However, this could help in pointing out the problems, possibilities and prospects.

With the help of these or independently of them, one could attempt another opening. For example, it is possible to consider a number of traditional texts which are central to the consideration of issues say in grammar, political thought, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and so on. Certainly there will be differences of emphasis and choice. However, one can make some suggestions. It is more important to emphasize study in depth of some central texts rather than to go in for exhaustiveness, historical development and causal explanations. It is more worthwhile to look for authenticity of contact rather than for historical authenticity. And it is important to remember that fairly or highly different theoretical systems can be compared more fruitfully and intelligibly in the context of broader and more abstract levels than in the context of details.

The foregoing should give us some suggestions about our studies of western thought also. I think that here too our emphasis on the study of classics will help us in many ways. For example, a study of Kant or Descartes through their texts (in translation) will give a point of contact to the students of Kant and Descartes which a study of them through histories of philosophy can never give. A further consideration gives us a suggestion for the study of contemporary western thought also. One could say that the classics represent a crystallization and culmination of a certain line of thought on certain issues. For example, Kant represents a crystallization of the issues discussed by his predecessors like Wolff, Baumgarten and others. In this crystallization the local and specific aspects of the discussion are left in the background and the universal aspects are brought into focus. In so far as this is so, the contemporary discussions of many issues can be seen as representing a pre-classical stage arising out of the discussion of earlier classics and contemporary thought. Is it not worthwhile for us to have our own pre-classical stage out of which we may develop our own crystallization and classical stage, rather than go from one alien classical stage, through an alien pre-classical stage to the next

alien classical stage? This suggestion will effect an economy of both thought and expenditure, and may help a better grasp and understanding.

However, all these steps facilitate, they do not guarantee: but if we work hard and are lucky, we may strike gold at home!

IV

I think it should be clear that in my opinion it is not the attempt of Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya to advocate the acceptance of the traditional thought or the traditional system of values or the rejection of a particular understanding of society like Marxist or modern liberal, without a serious consideration. This is not to say that he himself may not have been inclined towards the acceptance of the traditional after serious consideration. However, what he wants to emphasize is that for a meaningful intellectual life the co-ordinates of reference for our thought, must be provided by traditional thought. I do not think that this point of KCB's is weakened by any other agreement or disagreement that we might have with SII. If so, SII should have momentous consequences for our intellectual life in all its aspects.

What will happen as a result of such a development? It will bring into our intellectual life two or more articulated structures — along with sub-structures — traditional and alien — of thought with their problems and possibilities. This would give depth, clarity and paradoxically, unity and coherence as distinguished from fragmentation and confusion to our intellectual life. In the context of the present state of western of thought — no longer full of confidence and certainty — we would be better able to understand its limitations. But would all this enable us to make a confident choice between the two structures and possibly corresponding different life-styles? At this point, it is too late to take on this question.

Department of Philosophy,
Poona University.