

APPROACHES TO INDIAN PHILOSOPHY :
—SOME SINS AND MERITS

I

There have been as many approaches to Indian philosophy, one might well say, as there have been Indian philosophers—whether from the East or from the West. But there have been certain discernible patterns among the many assorted methods and approaches which can be looked at with some profit—namely to find out just where Indian philosophy is going, both globally and in this continent from where I write.¹ Here I wish to offer and remark on some observations in this regard.

Indian philosophy has suffered from two basic misunderstandings. K. C. Bhattacharyya expresses one, and B. K. Matilal the other. The former writes, 'the very name of philosophy has sometimes been denied to Indian speculation on the ground, apparently established historically, that the oriental intellect is not sufficiently dry and has not masculine virility enough to rise to anything higher than grotesque imaginative cosmogonies.'² Matilal comments that 'Indian philosophy has unfortunately come to denote a group of occult religious cults, a system of dogmas and an odd assortment of spirituality, mysticism, and imprecise thinking, concerned exclusively with spiritual liberation'³. Matilal further classifies the generally available literature purporting to deal with Indian thought into two streams—viz., 'works of wild and unauthentic generalization along with cheap popularization, and works of philological scholarship which demand from readers knowledge of a whole field of Indological research extending over centuries'⁴ Matilal remarks that though philological research is essential 'for philosophical studies, it should be treated not as an end but as means to an end'. And that one intending to pursue Indian thought is caught between these two streams. But it would appear that the choice is even wider, and that modern writers (in both, East and West) on Indian philosophy have taken different pathways and by-ways, as it were. Kalidas Bhattacharyya suggests four categories into which these writers could be classified⁵ :

- (i) those who attempt new criticism of Western philosophy

from the point of view of the old Indian system. .in a thoroughly original way;

- (ii) those, on the other hand, who employed the best part of their scholarship and intelligence in novel interpretations, and sometimes in critical study, of the different Indian systems;
- (iii) some less original, but perhaps more scholarly who were writing objective histories of Indian philosophy with copious reference to original Sanskrit and Pali texts;
- (iv) a few who were noted for their original philosophizing, almost all of whom were conversant with Western and old Indian philosophy.

II

A slightly different version of the same story is given in a more detailed and critical assessment by Eliot Deutsch,⁶ in terms again of four basic approaches to doing Indian philosophy, which I shall summarise here and expand upon. I shall then present and argue my own position on this issue.

The first approach is what usually falls under the rubric of "esotericism," or worse still "occultism", which is couched in the search for cultural excitement, eccentricity and the more esoteric features of the Orient. It deals, very much as travel promotions do, with Indian "outlook" through exotic flirtations and condescending paternalism, and is marked with sentimental and cultic devouring of all the outer trappings of the 'East' (e. g. the "guru-image," gesture, clothings and so forth). This approach or rather mentality is aptly termed Orientalism. We have already referred to Matilal's comment on the popularistic effect this approach has on the available literature on Indian thought. This brings us to the second approach.

The second approach is aligned to the philosophical approach, but is characterised by the heavy 'cultural historical' concerns and 'the supposedly wholly objective and dispassionate treatment of the body of material to be classified, explained and analyzed.'⁷ Methodologically, this approach works from original source materials, compares various systems with one another, and analyzes their historical development within the framework of the values

and achievements of the culture as a whole. There is though a positive side to this approach, basically in its success in breaking down the narrow provincialism typical of so many Western philosophers, who believe that positive and critical philosophy is a product of the West. It has also brought the awareness of the depth and variety of Indian thinking. However, on the negative side, some definite limitations of this approach are glaring. The very nature of the scholarly methods in this approach forces one to treat traditional Indian philosophies as dead material, as museum pieces. There is very little attempt in assimilating ideas of values with a view to findings universal truths, and epistemological insights in these systems. The philosopher, unlike the historian-scholar, must be interested in the truth or falsity, the adequacy or inadequacy of the idea that he finds in these works. This approach however kills such an objective. Touching on a similar point, T. G. Mainkar, while paying tribute to Oriental scholars for their monumental work in Sanskrit and Indian literature, quotes Dasgupta, who offers three reasons for the backwardness of such scholars in the sphere of Indian philosophy: ⁸

- (i) the difficulty of the Sanskrit of the philosophical texts and commentaries,
- (ii) the lack of proper sympathy for Indian philosophy (regarding it as some form of primitive speculation).
- (iii) not being *bona fide* students of philosophy.

R. D. Ranade also offers some reflections in responding to some damaging accusations made by Oriental scholars against Indian philosophy—as being ‘sophistic’, ‘dogmatic’, ‘*a priori*’, ‘scholastic’ in method, ‘unscientific’ in result and, ‘evangelic idleness’ in mission.⁹ Ranade retorts that their Sanskrit reading has been more philological than philosophical, and that their interest has been taken largely in tracing the history of words, than in interpreting the meaning of ideas, in finding ‘correlations’, and in ‘constructing’ and so forth, as the proper task of philosophy would require. Remarking on Thibaut’s translation of Rāmānua’s works, Ranade commends the translation, but despairs the thorough lack of interpretation of Rāmānua’s ideas. The situation, however, in more recent times has seen some changes. And this brings us to the third approach.

The third approach is called the 'realist technical approach' by Deutsch, 'the goal of which is to disclose the technical philosophical achievements of Indian thought so as to influence Western philosophers; the implicit goal... is to find additional support for one's own Western naturalistic position'¹⁰. But this approach tends to reduce the whole of Indian philosophy to a naturalistic *dar'sana* (even to a naturalistic 'metaphysic'), and relegates everything else to 'religion.' It thus reduces the unique and different to what is already familiar, and dismisses everything that does not come under the scheme of classification as 'unphilosophical'. It thus tends to make Indian philosophy a mere extension of Western philosophy, and naturally, when one emerges from some years of schooling in Western thought this tendency is hard to rid.

Though, it must be said that one advantage of this approach is that it awakens interest in, and knowledge of, the technical side of Indian thought. And it has helped to overcome the false stereotype of Indian philosophy as being 'Yoga combined with dogmatic theology'. As Matilal rightly points out, the unique merits of the Indian philosophical tradition has been borne out in such recent research which reveal 'a disciplined methodology and critical philosophic approach', and that 'a considerable portion of Indian philosophy consists of a number of rigorous systems which are more concerned with logic and epistemology, with the analysis and classification of human knowledge, than they are with transcendent states of euphoria.' Verification and rational procedure are as essential in Indian philosophical thinking as they are in Western philosophical thinking. These remarks brings us to the fourth approach.

The fourth approach, according to Deutsch, is the true spirit of the comparative approach, where a study of the traditional Eastern philosophy is undertaken to enrich one's philosophical problems that interest him. The approach consists of harmonising sympathetically, with the accomplishments of Indian thought, of the richness of traditional views, in which one looks for responses to universal questions and problems. One expression of this approach is the spontaneous influence of Indian thinking in one's own thinking. But it should not impose Western classifications and categories on non-western thought, while continuing to examine critically and creatively specific arguments and solutions to problems, and it would take a philosophical stand in affirming or

denying the truth of the same. This approach, though, requires wisdom and sympathy towards its subject matter, and if abused could be as detrimental as the other approaches.

III

In concluding this part of the discussion, it could be said that the best, as always, is the hardest to master—or muster—as it requires considerable skill and experience, and, of course, maturity even if a modicum of it initially. But if the students of Indian thought is at the same time a *bona fide* student of *philosophy* then, unlike the historian-scholar, he must be moved to pose questions about truth and falsity, adequacy, and inadequacy of the ideas and views, and so forth. He sets out to investigate and interpret with a view to finding universal truths and epistemological insights in these systems. But he cannot, on the one hand, afford to treat his material as just dead museum pieces, nor, on the other hand, look upon the material as merely exciting sources for 'cultural' and 'esoteric' illumination. One other danger faced on the part especially of the over-zealous is the tendency often to reduce the whole tradition of Indian thought to some one metaphysical, or ontological, system prevalent at some time in the West (e. g., the early Hegelian-Bradleyian influence), or even to some sort of a naturalistic system, while classifying everything else that does not fit this system as 'unphilosophical', and relegating them to 'dogmatic theology' or simply to the irrational'. While clearly what is required is the true spirit of the comparative approach, where a sympathetic, or better, an empathetic attitude and a hermeneutic ability to unravel the intricate and tightly-knit doctrines have to be cultivated, alongside a degree of critical acumen. One pursuing this approach should also be open to the new vistas of thought pattern Indian philosophy might suggest itself—to the extent of letting that influence one's thinking and 'form of life' (in the Wittgensteinian sense)—while continuing to examine critically and creatively the specific understandings offered by the system being investigated. This approach though requires much wisdom and care if originality is to be achieved. In this regard also, some recent thinkers have inclined themselves towards the phenomenological method in dealing with some of the specific issues in Indian philosophy. J. N. Mohanty names at least five Indian thinkers who have achieved some degree of originality in utilizing this method in their own ways of philoso-

phizing; the more influential of whom have been the two Bhattacharyyas, mentioned earlier, and Mohanty himself. The value of phenomenology at least as a method of inquiry, for Indian philosophy cannot be underestimated, as phenomenology, like Indian Philosophy, realises that the beginnings of philosophy is in the individual's awareness of his own experiences and his subjective consciousness. The attempt to unearth intentional structures underlying the streams of experience is common to both the traditions. As Mohanty rightly point out,¹² the preoccupation with the problem of consciousness and subjectivity theories of grades of consciousness, along with the important interest in the concepts of bodily subjectivity, persons and other selves, and the renewed attempt to understand the notions of freedom vis-a-vis *mokṣa*, provide, as it were, a methodological bridge between the two traditions of philosophy.

In this regard, I may take the liberty to make a few cursory remarks on what I believe *philosophy* to be basically about, to which I would relate also the above reflections on the best 'approach' available and on phenomenology. Though it may be too general a statement to make, it would not be wrong to say that the vocation of philosophy brings to light everything that lies hidden;¹³ or, even in more general terms, that 'anyone who thinks about the meaning and purpose of life is a philosopher'¹⁴. But more *seriously* philosophy is a theoretical discipline, which has three basic aims: (a) to rid man of his ignorance through disclosing 'new' knowledge and understanding in areas where it is too dark for him to normally 'see' or probe; (b) to enable him to question and justify the foundations for any view, knowledge, belief, he may come to hold, and (c) of the 'way' in which he may come to these.

There should come a stage in one's philosophizing wherein the critical, analytical component of his activity is increasingly complemented by 'sight' or intuitive understanding, when his thinking has matured sufficiently and withstood the storm of time. By 'intuitive understanding', however, I do not mean the sorts of 'esotericism' and 'irrationalism' we spoke of earlier, but one in which there is reflective and sympathetic thinking, with a degree of detachment, about the more important problems that philosophy does, or should, concern itself with. This, again, as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

The method of philosophy is no doubt a tight and a disciplined one, not one given to generating trenchant criticisms for the sake of criticism, but one that begins with description, clarification of one's own understanding of some problem in comparison with the views of others or of other systems of thought. And where one brings in criticism which one must-one must be aware of the logical presuppositions of the criticism and the prior ontological, even metaphysical, i. e., theoretical commitments of the framework of the critique. At times however it may be methodically expedient to avoid excessive critical analysis especially where one is dealing with descriptive metaphysics, as one often has to in doing Indian philosophy. Sometimes though, metaphysical statements in the Indian context are better taken to be elucidatory as some of the problems dealt with--such as with epistemological notion--would be difficult to understand without recourse to the background in which they are set, and which they address to some extent. To enter into trenchant barrage at every stage, as some have expected of Indian philosophers, could cost the theory under investigation, indeed the tradition itself, some damage and the risk of being misunderstood--especially since the criticism would necessarily be levelled at one or other part of a whole, which when not looked at within the context in which they "breathe" as it were, would indeed appear outrageous and inconsistent. It would be like the criticism made of the radiator in a Japanese car, say Datsun, on the grounds of its absence in the Volkswagen for an efficient cooling-system. Indeed, the German designer could allege that the radiator is a redundant instrument, and could be done without, as in the Volkswagen. Thus, if some works in Indian philosophy, whether traditional or modern, appear to be elucidatory, and interspersed with descriptive metaphysics, this also in a way highlights another attempt at philosophizing, and sheds some light, hopefully, on the 'insights' of the ancient thinkers--indeed, the 'insights' of an ancient tradition of philosophy. But has this not been the time-honoured task of philosophy--namely, in Wittgenstein's terms, the elucidation or 'clarification of propositions'?¹⁵

IV

Finally, to make a passing comment on the state of Indian philosophy in this continent, it need only be said that Indian thought
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is constrained by a general, what Renè Guènon would have called, 'intellectual myopia', this malaise regrettably is presently affecting many other areas of learning as well. Despite the sincere attempt, on the part of those involved, at making Indian thought respectable in this part of the otherwise sleeping world, much yet remains to be done before the ice sets hard, so to say. But the area of Indian *thought*—which I here distinguish from the more successful studies of Indian 'history', 'culture', 'arts', 'history of ideas', 'socio-politics', etc—has not been altogether successful in getting off the ground, as it were and on to its feet. One suspects there are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the rather un-intellectual attitude of the existing regime (i. e., the funding and policy bodies), and the dominance of the Anglo-American analytic tradition in mainstream philosophy. But there are, it would appear, internal discrepancies too, the onus of which lies particularly with those more senior and apparently 'attained' in the field. Apart from the usual institutional and regional wranglings one comes up in any academic set-up, there is the sad fact that there are just far too few teachers, scholars and students (though many more willing) in this field.¹⁶ The interest though is growing, and those genuinely dedicated to the cause are investing more than their personal interests, time and energy in carrying further *that* noble task of interlacing Indian thought with the mainstream—and with the land's own traditional (Aboriginal) philosophy.

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NOTES

1. I might first here pass some comments about the early frustrations I experienced in looking for a viable approach to the study of Indian philosophy in the West. Having just descended from the mountains, and fresh out of a neo-Popperian school of philosophy, my confrontations and difficulties in coming to grips with Indian thought have a history too awesome to relate here. I had though long ceased to believe that a purely analytical approach to any traditional philosophy was adequate. My earlier flirtations with phenomenology continually haunted me, but even then it was

not until recently, and then only through the influence of thinkers such as J. N. Mohanty and K. C. Bhattacharyya, that I myself began to explore the phenomenological method for its usefulness in the Indian context, though I have not utilized this method to its fullest in my works. In exploring the various methods, I remember feeling uneasy about some of the approaches taken to the study of Indian thought by several writers.

2. K. C. Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Philosophy*, I.2, (ed. Gopinath Bhattacharyya, Calcutta, 1964.
 3. B. K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (hereafter — ELG), Mouton, The Hague, 1971. Preface, p 10.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. In his Introduction to, ed., *Recent Indian Philosophy*, 1963, Calcutta, p. vii.
 6. Eliot Deutsch, 'Some remarks on Contemporary Western approaches to Indian Philosophy', in *Proc. of the Indian Philosophical Congress*, B. H. U. 1967, pp. 12-15.
- But also see Renè Guènon, chapter on 'Official Orientalism', in his *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, London, 1945 (Lucas); and., Bilimoria, P., 'Orientalism', Review Article (on *Orientalism* by W. Said RKP, 1979), in *Cosmos* (N. S. W.), Feb. 1980.
7. Deutsch, *ibid.*
 8. T. G. Mainkar in *Mysticism In the Rg Veda*, Popular Books, Bombay, 1961 p. 13, quoting Dasgupta from his *Aspects of Buddhist Philosophy* pp. 82-83.
 9. R. D. Ranade from his essay 'On the Study of Indian Philosophy' in his *Essays and Reflections*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1964.
 10. Deutsch, *loc cit.*
 11. J. N. Mohanty 'Phenomenology and Existentialism : Encounter with Indian Philosophy' *International Philosophical Quarterly* (Fordham), Vol. XII. No. 4, pp 485-511, p. 511.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. Arapura, J. G., 'Some Perspectives on Indian Philosophy of Language', in *Revelation in Indian Thought*, ed. Coward and Sivaram, Dharma Publishing, Calif. 1977, p. 15-44.
 14. My friend Dr. Renuka Sharma remarked in conversation.
 15. Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* 4. 112; 'a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations' p. 49.
 16. This is an indirect way can be taken as a plea for more Indian philosophers to descend, as it were, like *avatāras* to this part of the world. However, some cautious words need to be said about what the new-comer may be faced with: the circle, though small, is rather entrenched, dominated mostly by Western scholars, and influenced by philosophically-unsophisticated Indologists (who though dabble in philosophical issues), in an atmosphere where neither the general Australian apathy and non-intellectualism, nor the indifference of the local Indian community (mostly professionals, apologetic about their heritage) are particularly

encouraging. Also, as in any corporate set-up of complex relationships, whether in public service or in academic, personal elements and untoward human emotions intrude and manifest themselves as well—no less amongst those I speak of here. But the manifestations are rather subtle, and couched often in language supposedly concerned with being “philosophical”, “scholarly”, “critical”, “academic”, and so forth. The ‘games’, one might say (if I be allowed to make a single sociological remark) are played at for less overt levels than they are, say, for example in some Indian set-ups. As regards the latter, I am reminded of two incidents that may illustrate my point. The first regards the story about Padmapāda (direct disciple of Śaṅkara) and how he lost his entire manuscript of a work commissioned by Śaṅkara himself, in a fire that gutted his hermitage. The first apparently was started by one of Padmapāda’s close colleagues and rivals, whose uncontrollable jealousy at not being able to produce a work of the same magnitude as the *Pañcapādikā* (part I of which only survives) is said to have led him to such a horrid act. The second, and more recent, incident was related to me personally by a philosopher whose appointment to a department had caused discomfort to one or some of his colleagues. He was attacked by two mercenaries who attempted to slit his throat—the blood stains on the floor appeared fresh!—but got away with the entire manuscript containing ten years’ work of the philosopher. In more modern times, especially in the west, as a colleague of mine once remarked, people do not burn down houses and literally cut throats, but, to parody the saying, throw stones at other’s glass-houses (—or politely ignore and refuse to endorse the fruits of other’s works).