



### The State of Philosophical Studies in India

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**Abstract:** The different philosophical traditions on the world have stressed and treated as primary only certain phases. If man everywhere over the earth is to lead a balanced and whole life, the philosophy that is to guide him should take proper recognition of all the phases, and so incorporate all the truths stressed by the different philosophical traditions. Contemporary philosophical activity in India is influenced not only by India's traditional philosophy but also by Western Philosophy. In contemporary India, Indian Philosophy is unfortunately not a common subject in all the Indian universities. But it has been a compulsory subject in most of them for some decades. This paper presents the state of philosophical studies in India

**Keywords:** philosophy, Christianity, Hindu, Buddhist, Jainism

#### Introduction

Contemporary philosophical activity in India is influenced not only by India's traditional philosophy but also by Western Philosophy. One of the results of the introduction, by Macaulay, of the Western system of education into India is the popularization of the study of Western Philosophy, and Indians took to it quite enthusiastically. Sanskrit philosophical texts were at first regarded as sacred, and Europeans could have no access to them. But in time, the prejudice abated, and Sanskrit texts began to be translated into English. At the beginning, the motives behind Western interest in Indian Philosophy were mainly of two kinds: the rulers wanted to understand the culture and religions of the ruled in order to govern them without hurting their religious sentiments, and thus with the least friction; and secondly, Christian missionaries wanted converts and studied the religions and philosophies of the latter in order to find out defects in them and uphold the superiority of Christianity. But whatever be the motives and however biased the scholarship in the beginning, genuine

academic interest in the philosophical literature of India came to be evinced, thanks to the work of men like Max Müller, Deussen, Rhys Davids, etc., and vast stores of Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina philosophical literature were unearthed not only in India but also outside. It should, however, be said that academic philosophers of the West did not take serious interest in Indian Philosophy as such; and not a single Indian philosophical concept has entered till now the discussions of Western technical philosophy. Schopenhauer was an exception: he made serious use of the concept of Maya. But later philosophers discarded it; and even when they mentioned it, they did so in a derogatory sense. So far as Western scholarship is concerned, Indian Philosophy still belongs to Ideologists, orientalist, and Sanscritists: men disciplined in technical philosophy have not yet taken to it seriously.

#### Contemporary Indian Philosophy

In contemporary India, Indian Philosophy is unfortunately not a common subject in all the Indian



universities. But it has been a compulsory subject in most of them for some decades. The attitude of reverence towards Sanscrit texts and their ideas was at first an obstacle to a rational understanding of them. It took time to render them into English and expound them rationally along with Western Philosophy. Western Philosophy, its exposition and its methods therefore became the exemplar, and supplied the conditions of rationality. Comparisons between Western and Indian systems as a result became inevitable. But the comparisons were made not from a vantage ground in order to survey both and define the peculiarities of each, but to present Indian Philosophy in the garb of the Western. It should, however, be added that the shortcomings of this comparison were not unnoticed. The rise and growth of national feeling, which was one of the important factors of the Indian Renaissance, deepened the interest of the educated Indians in their ancient philosophy and made them realize that Indian Philosophy was not merely Western Philosophy written in the sacred language of India, but had something unique to say.

Naturally at first, due to superstitious prejudice against imparting philo-sophical knowledge to the uninitiated and especially to non-Indians which was rendered stronger by the practice of the Muslims of destroying the Hindu sacred texts along with their temples-the discovery, procuring and editing of Sanscrit texts was the premier and the most difficult task. Editorial work was particularly difficult, because manuscripts were hand-written and contained many corrections and interpolations. Much money, energy and enthusiasm had to be expended upon this

kind of work, which is still being continued. It may be said that all Sanscrit texts on almost all the schools and sub schools of Indian Philosophy have been made available in print by the patience and perseverance of scholars from about 1784, when the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded. The second kind of work simultaneously taken up is translation of philosophical books. The orthodox wrote in Sanscrit, but the Buddhist and the Jainas wrote in Pali and Prakrit also. Both in India and outside, many oriental societies were started, which published not only original texts but also translations. And the work of translation, particularly into English, is being continued by Indian scholars now. In these two fields, the most well-known Indian names are those of Ganganatha Jha and Gopinath Kaviraj.

The third kind of activity is the exposition of Indian systems in English. Some of the Western scholars were from the beginning using stray comparisons between Indian and Western philosophers. But it was felt by some that stray comparisons were sometimes misleading. Indian Philosophy had a common spiritual tradition in spite of the differences between the schools; and stray comparisons were ignoring this tradition. Attempts therefore were made to give simple and bare expositions of Indian Philosophy without indulging in comparisons. With this type of work we come to philosophical activity proper.

The first two types of work have been undertaken generally by linguists and orientalist, many of whom do not claim to be disciplined in Western Philosophy as such. But the third kind of work cannot be done effectively and with advantage by those without sufficient



grounding in Western Philosophy; for though comparisons are eschewed, the followers of this method have to use Western philosophical terminology, any lack of proper understanding of which results in false exposition. Dr. S. N. Dasgupta, in his famous volumes on *The History of Indian Philosophy*, follows this method. Scholars who have undertaken the above three kinds of work have made Indian thought available for systematic and scientific study.

The fourth kind of activity is interpretation and evaluation. Christian missionaries and philologists have been very active in this field; but the work of neither is quite reliable. As observed already, the work of the former is motive and biased. Further, to say that this or that kind of thought is due to this or that kind of geographical or climatic conditions neither enhances nor lessens the value of the thought evaluated. It says only that this or that kind of thought interests or appeals to a particular people; it says nothing about the inherent rightness or wrongness of the thought itself. It is like saying that X is more interested in mathematics and Y in economics-which is not the same as saying that mathematics or economics is false. Just so philological interpretations are defective, because those who follow the method evaluate an idea solely by taking the root meaning of the word into consideration. Atman etymologically may mean breath; but for that reason the atman of the Upanishads is not air, and the Upanishads do not preach materialism. Otherwise, even spiritualism would be a form of materialism, for spirit originally meant breath and air. Plato long ago condemned the philological method in philosophical discussions. True, comparative philology

and mythology do help us in understanding the growth of philosophical concepts; but they cannot determine the value of a philosophical system. Further, not only do some words get new meanings strangely unconnected with their original meanings, but also do the concepts, when they form a system, acquire new significance. And in many cases, philology, instead of being even a help, becomes a hindrance.

Fifthly, there are many who think that comparisons are indispensable. In fact, even to use Western philosophical terminology in the work of translation would be tacit comparison. To name a thing is to make a judgment; and to call an Indian concept by a Western name is to compare the two. And when comparison is tacit, as in this case, there is the chance of its being vague, slippery and misleading; but when it is explicit, there is a greater chance of its being corrected, if wrong. Hence, even to expound correctly and interpret Indian Philosophy, comparison is felt to be necessary. True, stray comparisons are often misleading; but the fact should not be an objection to comparison itself.

The shortcomings of stray comparisons should make us realize that comparison should be systematic and should bring into bold relief the standpoints and motifs of the systems compared. Professor S. Radhakrishnan has so far done the most extensive and important work in the field of comparative philosophy, and has done most to popularize it. He is best known to the Western world for his penetrative insight into the living significance of the Western and Indian philosophical concepts has enabled him to interpret the latter in a most understandable and familiar way to



Western readers and audiences and give a most rational and scientific clarification of the Indian concepts. But comparative philosophy, unlike comparative religion, is a difficult subject and requires sound knowledge of both Indian and Western philosophies. Hence, in spite of the enthusiasm shown for the subject, we do not find much systematic literature on it. As Western academical philosophers have not taken adequate interest in Eastern philosophies as such, no great work on comparative philosophy has yet been published by them.

Masson Oursel's is the only good book written by a westerner worth mentioning in this connection. The author's *Thought and Reality: Hegelianism and Advaita* attempts a systematic treatment limited to the comparison of the two schools. There have been a number of stray articles written by Indians; but so far the work has not been co-ordinated on a large scale, which is greatly desirable.

In the sixth place, in order to avoid the difficulties involved in comparison, some start with a line of thinking adopted in Western Philosophy, and develop it so as to reach a result reached in Indian Philosophy. This development, the followers of this method present as their own thought, and thereby give no scope for the criticism that they are misinterpreting Indian or Western Philosophy. Of the followers of this method, Professor K. C. Bhattacharya is the best known. There are very few who follow this method exclusively. But it is a very useful method in that it encourages original thinking. Its defect is that it is prone to ignore even the logical context and background of the line of thought developed and, in the

hands of the unwary, may result in confused thinking.

The seventh kind of activity is that of men like the late Dr. Hiralal Haldar, the author of *Neo-Hegelianism*, who are proficient in Western Philosophy and do not claim acquaintance with Indian Philosophy. Very often it is asked whether original and creative work is being done in India now. The question elicited varied answers and curious criticisms, because of the indefiniteness of the meaning of "original and creative work."

It may safely be said without fear of criticism that contemporary Indian philosophers have shown their originality in some of the above respects but not in the last. With regard to the last, it may be said that originality in a sense has been shown by a few: Dr. Bhagavan Das attempted to present a system of monism like Sankara's, but without treating the world as an illusion; Dr. Rabindranath Tagore tried to do the same, following Vaishnava philosophy with the main stress on love and devotion; Sri Aurabindo Ghosh reinterpreted the Saiva and Sakta monism by incorporating some of the modern scientific categories; Mr. J. Krishnamurti has a systematic attack on tradition and system-building, and has negatively developed a monistic system of his own; and Radhakrishnan has reinterpreted Sankara's Advaita with less stress upon negativism. The general tendency of all these thinkers is to discourage the negative attitude to the world and encourage the positive and affirmative. But if it is asked whether any thinker has developed a philosophy, which, as in the West, systematically embraces and deals with social, political, ethical and educational fields, it is



difficult to answer boldly in the affirmative. None of the philosophers claim to give a new system. This is what is meant by those who say that modern India has so far contributed nothing creative to philosophy. Its spirituality has begun to react to the modern ideas; but its reaction has not yet been systematically articulated. A more systematic exposition of even Mahatma Gandhi's ideas than has yet been done—they are rooted in our ancient spirituality, but are applied to modern political and social life—has to be undertaken; and the work is being sponsored in several places.

### **Conclusion**

The reason for the absence of creative work is to be sought in the attitude of some Indians to Indian Philosophy. Indian Philosophy started with as spiritual motive and grew in a spiritual atmosphere. All the systems of Indian Philosophy claim moksha or liberation as their objective, which is attained by realizing the ultimate Truth. This Truth is eternal and unchanging, and was discovered by our ancient sages centuries ago. Therefore nothing new can be added to their discovery. And hence there is no scope for creative and original work in Indian Philosophy. It is true that, if creative work is to add to the Truth discovered by our ancient sages, there is really no scope for it. But no new philosophical system claims to add to the eternal Truth. Every new system is a new way of understanding the same Truth; and this method of understanding differs from age to age and from place to place. So even if the scope of philosophy is limited to the problems concerning the nature of ultimate Truth, there is scope for a new type of activity whenever the

intellectual atmosphere of the time and place changes. In Indian Philosophy every school accepts successive stages in the practice to be observed for the realization of Truth; manana or thinking is the second of them. Philosophy proper, which is systematic understanding of the nature of ultimate Truth and its relations to the phenomenal world, belongs to this stage, which differs from man to man according to his mental equipment. And when our intellectual equipment changes, there is not merely scope but a need for a new approach to the same problem. Those who plead for creative work advance another important argument.

The foundations of even the Ten Commandments are no longer stable. Besides, we should not overlook the existence of those Indians who either deny or do not care for ultimate Truth. And their speculations also should be included in Indian Philosophy, which would be India's philosophy, past, present and future, but not merely the ancient philosophy of India. There is now appearing on the horizon another type of philosophical activity, which has already begun to attract a few Indian minds. There is a growing realization that the world is one, and that all philosophical traditions should be integrated without overlooking the significance of any. Nationalism and provincialism in philosophy should be abandoned. However imperfect and defective the beginnings, this activity is bound to have important and desirable results. A philosophy that is to be a philosophy of life should give due recognition to all phases of human existence. The different philosophical traditions on the world have stressed and treated as primary only certain phases. If man everywhere over the earth is to lead a balanced and whole



life, the philosophy that is to guide him should take proper recognition of all the phases, and so incorporate all the truths stressed by the different philosophical traditions. I But there seems to be a feeling in some Western thinkers that comparative philosophy is the business of the East and perhaps of India, and that it would contribute little of importance to philosophical activity in the West. This is to assume that the West has little to learn from the East, and that the East only has to learn from the West. This attitude, though not universal, is still the stronger. It is not for an oriental to defend the use of East for West. But it is on the face of it unbelievable that Eastern cultures and civilizations, which are thousands of years old, contain nothing useful for the West. "It is a reproach to us," says Dean Inge, "that with our unique opportunities of entering into sympathetic relations with Indian thought, we have made very few attempts to do so. I am not suggesting that we should become Buddhists or Hindus, but I believe that we have almost as much to learn from them as they from us.

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