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## A PLEA FOR A NEW HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY IN INDIA

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Few will dispute the fact that most of the existing books on Indian philosophy are outmoded. Yet, these are the books that have always been used all the world over to teach what Indian philosophy is, and have been so used through the ages. A lot of important information and new material has accumulated which needs to be assimilated and organised afresh in an inter-related manner around philosophical issues which are being dealt with by a succession of thinkers over at least three millennia of recorded history. Each of these thinkers has an originality of his own and makes some new contribution, even though he may have written only a *bhāṣya*, a *vārtika*, a *vṛtti*, a *tika* or a *parisúddhi* on an earlier work. There have also been new departures and radical breaks, many a time self-consciously, as when Udayana calls himself on “*ādhunika*” or a school calls itself ‘*navyanyāya*’.

The philosophical insights which is found in such abundance in the earliest texts needs not only to be highlighted but linked with the later developments which assume a more differentiated and systematized “form” from the *Sūtra* period onwards. The differentiation, however, is not a loss of active interrelationship, though it is usually presented as such. Even

the earliest texts such as those of Yāska present views ascribed to previous thinkers and the *Nyaya-Sūtras* explicitly refute the Mimāṃsā views of the *nityatva* and *apauruṣeyatva* of *śabda*, the *aikatva vāda* of the Upanisads and the *sarva pramana khandana* of the Madhyamic Buddhists, besides many others.

It is not only the interactional dialectic that is missing from the usual presentations, but its historical development over a period of time. D.N. Shashtri's pioneering work in this regard in his *Critique of Indian Realism* has hardly found any followers, or been pursued further.

The shifting focus and emphasis in the discussion of issues has hardly been noticed, or the reasons for them explored. The long absence of certain schools of thought from the centre of philosophical debate and their sudden reappearance into prominence has totally escaped the attention of historians, as has been the background of socio-political events surrounding philosophical activity in the country. The sudden disappearance of Buddhism on the philosophical scene from 1200 A.D. onwards has hardly been noticed; nor has the dramatic rise in the number of Jain thinkers from, say, 1000 A.D., onwards. The rise and fall in the fortunes of schools seems to have totally escaped the attention of scholars, as have the radical shifts and developments within the schools themselves. Never has history been so absent from the writing of the history of any subject as

has been the case of the history of philosophy of India. How unbelievable it seems that hardly any attempt has been made to see its inner connections with developments in thought in other civilizations, or even with those that occurred within its own civilizational space in the field of art, or the sciences, or the theoretic reflection that occurred on them. The realm of social, political, legal thought seems to have been segregated apart as if they had no relation to philosophical thought in the country. The same has been the case with the thought about the arts; even though poetics is known to have had a long history of distinguished thinkers in the tradition and the actual achievement in the field of sculpture and architecture is of such an outstanding quality as to arouse the wonder of the world. Theoretical thought in astronomy, mathematics and medicine has met the same fate, implying that knowledge enterprises in these domains had no relevance to philosophical thought in this country.

Both the timeless and insulated perspective in which Indian philosophy is seen has been aggravated by the almost total absence of any awareness of the way it has been influenced by thought current in sister civilizations, or the way it might have influenced them. The Persian, the Greek, the Central Asian and the Chinese civilizations were in active interaction for long periods of time with the Indian civilization and it is extremely unlikely that they were not influenced by one

another. In fact, it might be intellectually more rewarding to see this as one whole civilizational area with diverse, relatively autonomous centres in it. The parochial ego-centricism of the currently, 'national' and 'civilizational' identification stands in the way one looks at the past, and forgets that at that time no such identifications existed and that people did not need passports and visas to cross the boundaries.

The "creation" of history by the way it has been written during the past four centuries itself, is however, the root cause of such a distorted way of looking at the past. History writing has been a child of the exposition and domination of the world by a few West European powers during the last four centuries and they have systematically produced a history in their own way, to suit their own interests. This *is not* the history as "others" see it and, even at its best, it may be regarded *only* as history from the viewpoint of modern West European man who did not exist at the time when Greece and Rome flourished.

The total appropriation of the Greek heritage by the West would have remained a strange curiosity in the intellectual history of mankind were it not for the fact that it has not only been accepted by most scholars in the world but also given rise to a persistent denial of any influence on Greek thought and culture by the other civilizations which flourished in those times. The close similarity of Greek thought, particularly in

Plato and Parmenides has always been a "problem" to Western scholars, as if the admission of any influence would contaminate the purity which they had achieved solely on their own. The thought from Plato to Plotinus has such an Indian echo that only a "purist" about civilization would even feel like decrying it.

If the western historian of thought is allergic to admitting even the possibility of any influence on Greek thought from any "outside" source, his Indian counterpart is not even aware of the problem and takes it almost as axiomatically true that the Indian civilization has grown in complete isolation from the Vedic or the Harappan times onward. The "monadic self-sufficiency of Indian thought and culture is taken for granted in spite of the fact that in the field of mathematics, explicit mention of borrowing from the Greeks has been made in the Indian tradition and the development of what is known as "Gandhara Art" unambiguously confirms this. It is extremely unlikely that the Greek influences were confined *only* to these two fields. The Indo-Greek kingdoms in North-West India in the post-Alexander period must have fostered interaction in all fields. Later, during the Śāka and Kuṣāṇa periods (1<sup>st</sup> cent.-3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A.D.) large parts of North India were integrated intimately with Central and West Asia and it is highly improbable that only administrative and commercial interaction occurred between the different units of the region. We have also evidence of active

trade links with the Roman Empire on the South-Western coast of the Indian peninsula and, better still, of a long intellectual interchange with China, centering around the Buddhist University at Nalanda. The latter seems to have been connected both by land and sea routes to China and there is evidence that a strong intermediary intellectual centre emerged at Palembang in what is now known as Indonesia.

The Buddhist connection with Sri Lanka and Tibet is well known, but little is known of the counter-influence from these countries except in the field of Tantra from the latter. The story of Non-Buddhist, primarily Hindu, influences in South and South-East Asia is usually vaguely known, but the awareness of its intellectual side seems totally absent. Similar is the case with the changes and modifications that they underwent there. Hardly anyone knows, for example, that a work from Thailand entitled *The Three Worlds of King Ruan* (Ed. B.L. Smith, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1978, pp. 194-203) shows a distinct influence of Indian thinking in the intellectual domain but presents noticeable differences with it also.

The pre-Islamic encounters and interactions are however, at least dimly present on the margins of the intellectual consciousness about the past of this country. But even this is absent in respect to the intellectual interaction with the world of Arabic learning, its science and philosophy. From at least 1200

A.D. onwards, Islam may be said to have a definitive presence in North India. Yet, the histories of thought in the second millenium A.D. in this country show hardly any awareness of its presence, or of the possible influence that it might have had on the varied fields of intellectual life in this country. Normally, it is taken for granted that, except for the arts and religion, there was nothing substantive in this regard. Yet, Prof. A. Rehman's pioneering work on this subject has shown that from the eighth Century A.D. there is evidence of active interchange between Arabian, Persian and Sanskrit learning in the different fields of specific knowledge, particularly medicine, mathematics and astronomy. More than seven thousand works are listed in his *Bibliography* and they include translation of texts from the two different traditions in their languages.

These figures need an upward revision in the light of recent work, but this does not make any difference in respect to the problem that we are trying to point out in connection with the writing of the history of philosophy in India. There is, as far as we know, no mention of any interaction or influence between the Arabic and Indian philosophical traditions, even though there was an ample opportunity for such interaction to occur in this country. How could the rich traditions of Arabic philosophy remain unknown in India in spite of this long presence of West Asian learning in India? It is extremely unlikely that this was the case, particularly when there is substantive evidence of an

opposite situation in so many other fields of knowledge. And, in case it was really so, it requires exploration and explanation.

The absence of any discussion regarding this issue in the histories of Indian philosophy is an anomaly that can hardly be understood in any way. So also, perhaps, is the total neglect of the presence of Christian theological thought in this country, or its influence on Indian philosophy. Christianity is supposed to have come very early in India, and yet as far as I know, its influence has hardly been a subject of any investigation.

The need for a new history of philosophy in India, thus, can hardly be denied. But even if the plea is accepted, how shall one go about implementing it? The usual method, is for some institution to approach an outstanding scholar to undertake the work who, in turn would ask other scholars to write for the volume. But as they are generally well-known specialists in the field, when they are invited to write upon the subject, they only summarize, repeating what they have already said on the subject. Few scholars are prepared to do any new research to write for a volume edited by someone else and hardly anyone can adopt the viewpoint or perspective of someone else to do the task he/she is asked to do. Thus, at the end, what one usually gets is a volume of uneven quality, repeating the old things with the addition of some new information which has appeared since the earlier volumes were published on the subject.



What, then, is to be done to avoid such a situation? Perhaps, only a long-term plan consisting of diverse strategies at various levels would yield the desired result. One could start with a stock-taking of what has been done, spell out what needs to be done and then locate persons at various levels who could be involved in the thinking and execution of the project. A detailed spelling-out of interrelated research could be given to see that research work is done in those domains. Similarly, successive seminars could be planned in such a way as to explore questions that need and answer on problems that need to be resolved.

The idea of a long term collaborative, cumulative research has not happened in the Humanities though it is now a commonplace in the natural sciences even though. It is true that disciplines in the Humanities need this particularly in the context of projects such as this. What one needs is imagination, will and commitment to undertake these enterprises. Potter's *Encyclopaedia of Indian Philosophies*, Thangaswami Sharma's *Darsanamanjari* and some of the forthcoming volumes in the "Project on Historical Science, Philosophy and Culture of India" have already done some fieldwork in this connection. The challenge is to carry the work further, and let us hope the challenge will be met. But, first, there has to be an awareness of the need for such a work. The rest will follow, at least, let us hope so.

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