

Indian Philosophy in the First Millennium AD: Fact and Fiction

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Histories of Indian philosophy are usually centred around the so-called six schools of Indian philosophy designated as 'orthodox' and the three schools designated as 'unorthodox'. This seems to be the standard practice and, as far as I know, there is hardly any exception to it. The very acceptance of the designations 'orthodox' and 'unorthodox', which are supposed to be translations of the terms '*āstika*' and '*nāstika*' generally used by Indians to describe these systems, underwrites the perspective in which Indian philosophy is to be viewed and treats it by this very strategy, as a natural objective or given classification. However, it is little realized that such a way of viewing philosophy in India is merely to accept uncritically the way the philosophical scene in India was perceived by a particular set of thinkers belonging to a certain tradition of philosophizing which they thought was derived from the Vedas. Such a move treated the Vedas as central to the philosophical enterprise and gave primacy to those traditions which accepted in some sense or other the so-called authority of the Vedas at the expense of those which explicitly denied it or refused to accept it.

The implicit presuppositions of such a way of looking at the history of Indian philosophy would perhaps become clearer if we try to see it from the viewpoint of the Buddhists or the Jains. The Buddhists, for example, characterized all non-Buddhist thought as 'heretic' as for them the world of philosophy was divided into that of the Buddhists and of the non-Buddhists. On the other hand, the Jains always describe the other schools of philosophy as propounding partial perspectives of the total truth which they alone have captured in their view of reality as being essentially *anekāntic* (multifaceted) in character. The others are therefore all *ekāntic* (one-faceted) according to the Jain perspective and they criticize them basically on this ground.

It may of course be said that as the Vedas are prior to both the Buddhists and the Jains, the treatment of them as the basic term of reference for defining the centrality of the Indian philosophical tradition is justified and that those who, like the Buddhists and the Jains, treat themselves as central do so only for sectarian reasons. But, though this argument may have some force, ultimately it will be the quantity and the

quality of the philosophical achievement derived from these various perspectives that should be taken as determining more appropriately the characterization of a philosophical period in Indian philosophy in its own terms. In any case it would be best to be aware of the presuppositions involved and to try to see the picture of Indian philosophy as it developed over a period of time from alternative points of view so that no specific centrality is imposed on the material without one being aware of what is being done. For, even if we accept that large parts of the Vedic corpus, including the Brāhmaṇas and the Āranyakas and some of the older Upaniṣads, were prior to the times when the Buddha and the Mahāvīra emerged on the Indian scene, there can be little doubt that traditions of non-Vedic thought had already emerged which are referred to in the Vedic literature itself. The distinction between the *rishi* and the *muni* is drawn in the Vedic literature and the reference to Rśabhadeva, the first Jain tīrthaṅkara, is supposed to be found in the *Rg Veda* itself, at least according to the *Śrimad Bhāgvat*. Also, Sāṃkhyan thought, which by common consent is supposed to be non-Vedic, is found earlier to the period of the Buddha and the Mahāvīra, if we accept that Sāṃkhya or what Larson has called 'proto-Sāṃkhya thought' is found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Besides these it is significant that all the other contemporaries of the Buddha and the Mahāvīra who are referred to in the Buddhist and the Jain texts hardly hold views which can be described as deriving from the Vedic texts in any significant manner. Makkali Ghośala or Gośalaka, who played a significant role in the early accounts of the Mahāvīra and the Buddha, for example, cannot be considered to hold views which can be regarded as deriving from the Vedic tradition by any stretch of the imagination. Similarly, the views of others such as Puraṇa Kassapa, Ajita Keśa Kambalī, Pakudha Kaccayana, Sañjaya Velatthiputta, have little to do with the thought found in the texts deriving from the Vedic tradition. This points to the fact that the contemporary climate of philosophical opinion in the sixth century BC was hardly dominated by the thought derived from the Vedic tradition and that the reflections on the *yajña* in the Brāhmaṇas and the Āranyakas and the debates and discussions on various subjects in the Upaniṣads formed only one stream in the philosophical picture of these times and were scarcely the dominant ones as has been projected by those who have written on the history of philosophy in India until now.

The point may become clearer if we reflect on the developments in the philosophical traditions of India after the appearance of the Buddha and the Mahāvīra and the self-conscious writings of their disciples who treated themselves as representing a tradition radically distinct, even if not completely opposed, to that deriving from the Vedas. In fact, the term 'Veda-Vādina' is used by them for their opponents to indicate those who held the doctrines propounded in the Veda. It is perhaps ironic

that the Gītā which later came to occupy such a prestigious position amongst the so-called orthodox texts of the Indian tradition also described the 'Veda-Vādina' as 'Vedavāda ratāḥ' and characterized them as 'Nānyadālītvādinah', that is, those who say that nothing else is to be believed except what they say.¹ The Veda-Vādins themselves of course emphasized either the *yajña*-centric interpretation of the Vedic texts epitomized in the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras* erroneously ascribed to Jaimini or the Brahman-centric interpretation deriving mainly from that part of the Vedic corpus usually designated as the Upaniṣads and epitomized in the *Brahma-Sūtras* ascribed to Bādarāyaṇa.² There were earlier attempts to interpret the Upaniṣadic texts, some of which are referred to by the author of the *Brahma-Sūtras*, but their authority seems to have been superseded by the appearance of Bādarāyaṇa's text on the subject. It is of course true that the texts designated as the Upaniṣads breathe a common philosophical atmosphere and are witnesses to a common enquiry and discourse which seems substantially different from the one that is found in the Āgamic literature of the Buddhists and the Jains. In fact, if we confine ourselves to the Upaniṣadic texts alone we might get a wrong picture of the philosophical activity during that period. Such a picture can only be corrected if one moves to the Buddhist and Jain texts, and such works as the *Kathāvala* and the *Milindapāñha*. It is not that the questions do not concern the ultimate aim of life and its meaning in this world governed by space, time and causality, but that the modes of analysis and the terms of discourse appear to be distinctively different and it would be difficult to say that the Upaniṣadic perspective prevails and dominates the philosophical scene as revealed in those texts in the India of those times. Ultimately, it was but one of the many strands in the philosophical activity that was emerging in what may be regarded as different sectors of Indian civilization at that time, and if one chooses to designate the thought contained in the texts known as the Upaniṣads as Vedānta, however mistaken such a description may be, it is clear that it did not occupy any privileged or pre-eminent place amongst the thinkers of those times. This fact, however unpalatable it may be to the Vedāntins of modern times, is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the compilation of the *Brahma-Sūtras* did not seem to have had much effect on the philosophical scene of India as it not only failed to make any impact on any of the dominant philosophical schools of that time but itself remained uncommented upon till about Śāṅkara's time, seven hundred years later.

The situation however is not confined to Vedānta alone or to the *Brahma-Sūtras* which are supposed to epitomize it, but extends to all the other so-called schools of Indian philosophy which arise from the various Sūtras which are generally supposed to be their foundational texts and on which not only a large number of commentaries have been written, time and again, but which have also been the source of

continuous inspiration for those who have believed in the tenets of that school. But there appears to be a radical difference between the *Brahma-Sūtras* and all the other Sūtras which are supposed to be the foundational texts of other traditions of Indian philosophy. The *Brahma-Sūtras* do not supersede in any way the authority of the Upaniṣads whose diverse views they present in an organized, coherent and harmonious form. Rather, they seem to have continued to enjoy a superior and independent status as is evidenced by the fact that many of those who wrote a commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtras* felt it necessary to write independent commentaries on the Upaniṣads also. Not only this, many a time, thinkers have written commentaries on the Upaniṣads without being concerned with what the author of the *Brahma-Sūtras* had said about them. This fact assumes a radical significance if it is remembered that the *Mimāṃsā Sūtras* which try to do the same thing for the pre-Upaniṣadic part of the Vedic corpus which the *Brahma-Sūtra* attempts to do for the Upaniṣadic texts written before their composition, replaced completely for all future times the authority of the texts which they had tried to coherently summarize. There is, as far as I know, no independent commentary on those portions of the Brāhmaṇa texts which deal with the issues treated by the author of the *Mimāṃsā Sūtras* in his text devoted to those subjects.

The case of the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* and the *Nyāya Sūtras* is of course well-known, as in their case one does not even know what were the pre-existent texts or traditions which they attempt to present in a coherent, systematic manner. This itself should be sufficient to indicate that the traditions they represent have only a very tenuous link with the Vedic corpus which they do not directly disown. Indirectly, of course, the *Nyāya Sūtras* question the eternity of sound and the so-called *apauruṣeyatva* of the śruti, and the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* not only propound a radically different analysis of *dharma* than the one given in the *Mimāṃsā Sūtras*, but also, at least according to Nakamura, question the so-called Upaniṣadic doctrines in Sūtras 7.2.3, 7.2.4, 4.2.2.2 and 4.2.3.4.³ As for Sāṃkhya, it is a matter of common knowledge that, while there are no specific Sāṃkhya texts before *Saṃkhyātaṇtra* which is ascribed by Larson to 100 BC and which Potter in the third edition of his *Bibliography* has assigned to AD 100, there are ample references to Sāṃkhyan thought scattered in almost all the texts that are dated prior to that period. The first important Sāṃkhyan text after *Saṃkhyātaṇtra* is supposed to be *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* which is ascribed to around AD 350. However, there seems to be a peculiarity in the case of Sāṃkhya in that though the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* did enjoy some sort of a pre-eminence after it was written, independent works differing from it continued to be composed and it never occupied the status which the Sūtras of other schools of philosophy normally did in the Indian philosophical tradition. The *Sāṃkhya Sūtras*, as is well

known, are a later work and never enjoyed the authority which the foundational Sūtras of other philosophical traditions enjoyed.

The *Yoga Sūtras* composed around AD 400 are a compendium of the yogic practices prevalent in India from primordial times and have little philosophical interest, except for the fact that they provide a common background for the existential realization of the various truths propounded in the diverse philosophical traditions of India. Hardly anybody has raised the question as to how almost the same meditational practices would lead to the realization of different existential truths so elaborately argued and defended by the protagonists of the conflicting schools of philosophy which show a tradition of extreme polemical intolerance verging sometimes on unbelievable abuses against one another.⁴

The story of the crystallization of the diverse schools of Indian philosophy around the first century AD is well known and their subsequent development during the first millennium AD is fairly well documented in the texts devoted to that subject. However, by and large, the story of the development of these schools is treated in relative isolation as if they had nothing to do with one another and had no influence or impact or interaction resulting in a modification of their positions under the influence of the criticisms they received from others. This, of course, is generally true only of the so-called 'orthodox' schools of Indian philosophy which are supposed to be derived from the Vedic tradition, for Buddhism is generally treated as the adversary whose critical responses led to significant developments primarily in Nyāya and secondarily in some other schools of Indian philosophy. In fact, Gaudapāda's *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* is supposed to have been profoundly influenced by Buddhism, while Śaṅkara's thought is regarded as having assimilated significant insights of Buddhism in his reconstruction of Advaitic thought on the basis of the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*.

But in whatever way the story is told, the chief protagonists on the philosophical scene of India during the first millennium AD are the so-called 'orthodox' schools of Indian philosophy, that is, the *Mimāṃsā*, the Vedānta, the *Nyāya*, the *Vaiśeṣika* and the *Yoga*, without anyone ever realizing that the total number of works produced by all these schools together bear hardly any comparison with those which have been produced by the Buddhists or even the Jains both in quantity and quality during this period. The Buddhist thinking continued unabated from Nāgārjuna onwards, that is, from around AD 150 till about AD 1200, when it suddenly stopped in India due to the destruction of Nālandā by Bakhtiyar Khilji in that year. Nāgārjuna not only shows as much sophistication in his argumentation as any of the thinkers who are supposed to have been the authors of the foundational texts relating to the 'orthodox' schools of Indian philosophy, but his radical critique of

all the *pramāṇas* regarding their capacity to grasp the nature of ultimate reality appears to have centrally grasped and formulated the issue between intellectual ratiocination and spiritual realization which has hardly caught the serious attention of any other thinker in the Indian tradition including Samkara. The problem seems to have been evaded or camouflaged by raising the issue of the relation between *śruti* and *yukti* or *tarka* in its non-technical sense, as the *śruti* was supposed to proclaim the ultimate truth.

Strangely, neither for Nāgārjuna, nor for any of the subsequent thinkers in the Buddhist tradition, do Buddha's discourses, as handed down and accepted in the Buddhist tradition, play a similar role as the Vedic corpus seems to have done in the case of those who try to align themselves with it. There appears to have been an obsession with the original texts amongst those who belonged to the Vedic tradition, whether directly or indirectly. And, perhaps it is for this reason that the foundational Sūtras of the various schools of Indian philosophy are accorded almost the same status as the one given to the *śruti* in the Vedic tradition. On the other hand, neither had the work of Nāgārjuna nor that of any of his successors ever acquired the same authority as the works produced by the thinkers belonging to the so-called 'orthodox' schools of Indian philosophy. It is of course not the case that commentaries were not written on the works of the Buddhist masters, but somehow they never achieved the kind of status that those in the non-*śramanic* schools of philosophy did.

The Buddhist philosophical position is generally divided into four schools which are known as Śūnyavāda, Vijñānavāda, Vaibhāṣikas, and Srautāntrikas. However, while there are outstanding thinkers belonging to all these schools of Buddhist philosophy, there seems to be no one who is given the same status as, say, Gotama or Jaimini or Kaṇāda or Bādarāyaṇa. This itself is a significant difference which has seldom been noted as the Buddhist thinkers appear to have a more individual stamp of their own and are known for their outstanding contribution to philosophical thought rather than as exemplars of some primordial schools of philosophical thought arising from a foundational text which not only has an over-riding authority but also a finality in the formulation of the school's philosophical position. A Nāgārjuna, an Asaṅga or a Vasubandhu do not obviously have the same status; nor for that matter, do a Dignāga or a Dharmakīrti. These appear to be thinkers on their own and are not just carriers or explicators of a prior tradition of philosophizing to which their own philosophies are subservient.

The story of the Buddhist traditions of philosophizing in the first millennium AD has to be written differently and not seen merely in the context of the debate with the non-*śramanic* traditions as has been done up till now. The need for this will be realized even more if we try to see the presence of Buddhist philosophers and their works in the first

millennium AD and compare them with the works of all other schools of philosophy in that period. If we take the third edition of Potter's *Bibliography* in his well-known *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* as our source of information, we find that in the first millennium AD there are more than 400 entries relating to Buddhist works and thinkers as against 83 entries relating to all others, including even Kāsmīra Śaivism and Śaiva Siddhānta.⁵ If we include Jain works the situation does not change very much as the total number of Jain entries add up only to 39. Thus, even if we include the Jain thinkers the situation does not change substantially as the number of all non-Buddhist thinkers and works will not be more than 122. The Buddhist works are in a ratio of 4 to 1, thus clearly indicating their dominance on the philosophical scene of India during the first millennium AD, a picture which one would hardly get from any of the histories of Indian philosophy that have been written till now. It is surprising that this fact which should have been so obvious to anyone who had looked into the extant material of philosophical texts in India should not have been noticed. The only reason one can think of is the overwhelming obsession with the picture of Indian philosophy as it obtained in the second millennium AD when Buddhism had practically disappeared from the Indian scene after the destruction of Nālandā in AD 1200 and the rise of non-Advaitic schools of Vedānta, starting from Rāmānuja (AD 1120), and their debate with the Advaitins who swept the philosophical scene in India by their radical advocacy of the denial of all difference, both in terms of ontology and epistemology. The radicalism of Buddhism was replaced by the radicalism of Advaita Vedānta which thus became the main centre of controversy in the second millennium AD. Along with this, there was the dramatic rise of Nyāya whose total number of thinkers matches those of Advaita Vedānta and even outnumbers them.

It appears therefore that the philosophical perception of the historians of Indian philosophy has been profoundly shaped by the situation as it obtained in the second millennium AD which has made them see Indian philosophy right from the beginning in a certain way, disregarding the facts as they actually occurred. This seems to have been facilitated further by the emergence of neo-Vedāntism in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through works written mostly in the English language which re-interpreted India's cultural past in a certain light to make it acceptable to the modern mind, primarily shaped by western influences which became increasingly dominant from the middle of the nineteenth century in this country. In fact, even the domination of Nyāya was underplayed by these thinkers who practically dismissed it as unnecessary hair-splitting. Not only this, they even ignored the dominant Jain presence in the second millennium AD which has about 180 thinkers in this period and which had already outnumbered the Vedāntins and the Naiyāyikas even in the first

millennium AD. In fact, the Jains are only second to the Buddhists in the first millennium and the total number of thinkers in each of the schools of Indian philosophy is substantially less than theirs in this period. The historians of Indian philosophy, then, seem to have been not only greatly biased but almost blind to the reality which stared them in the face.

The fiction that goes in the name of the history of Indian philosophy has thus to be recognized for what it is and needs to be replaced by a more authentic, objective and balanced picture of the way philosophy in India developed over the last two-and-a-half millennia, doing justice to each and every school of Indian thought as it has developed over a period of time in interaction and inter-relation with other schools of thought in this country.

The trans-civilizational linkages of India's philosophical thought have also to be kept in mind, as the history of Buddhism in the first 750 years of the first millennium AD is a story of its spreading in West Asia, Central Asia, China and Tibet and it is unlikely that it would have been a one-way affair only. Buddhism itself must have been influenced by this international expansion. In fact, if Nālandā was an international centre for over 500 years where students from all over Asia came to study, it is unlikely that they would not have influenced the development of Buddhist thought to some extent. The untold story of Buddhism in the first millennium AD has thus still to be written and its influence on the other schools of philosophy has to be seen in a different way than it has been seen until now. It is not just that it makes a marginal impact on Nyāya and Advaita Vedānta by its criticism, but that it plays a central role in terms of which the other schools of Indian philosophy are developing and defining their position with respect to it. The story is, however, far more complex as the inter-relationships between the other schools of Indian philosophy are far more variegated than it has been thought until now. All in all, we need a new history of Indian philosophy and not the fiction that goes under its name.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The literal translation of the phrase used in the *Gītā* would be 'those who say that nothing else exists'.
2. On the question of the authorship of the *Mimāṃsā Sūtras* and the *Brahma Sūtras*, see Nakamura, *History of Early Vedānta Philosophy*.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 330.
4. Sādhu Śāntinātha is perhaps the only exception to this statement. His book entitled *Sādhanā* tries to explain and explore this phenomenon. However, nobody seems to have taken it seriously, perhaps because of his negative conclusion that the very structure of meditational practices ensures that whatever the theoretical truth with which one starts it is bound to be realized as existentially true because of the very nature of the meditative practices through which its truth is sought to

be actualized and realized in consciousness. The positive counterpart of this contention is perhaps more explicitly exemplified in the life of Shri Ramakrishna which has attracted more attention and appreciation without any attempt at its epistemological analysis or comparison with Sādhu Śāntinātha's negative conclusions.

5. It may be said that the predominance of the Buddhist texts during the first millennium AD may be due to the availability of Buddhist texts outside India where they were better preserved. But this can hardly explain the overwhelming discrepancies in the proportion of the texts or the fact that even the Jain texts during this period outnumber those of the Vedānta, the Nyāya, the Mīmāṃsā, the Sāṃkhya, etc. The Jains, of course, were confined to India alone and hence the question of their texts being preserved outside India does not arise.

CLARIFICATION

It has been brought to our notice that the article entitled 'Fallibilism and Putnam' by Professor Tirthanath Bandopadhyaya published in the *JICPR* Vol. XII No. 1, has also been published in the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 4, 1995. The incident is unfortunate and the author of the article has sent the following clarification explaining how such a thing has occurred.—Editor

'I did send the article entitled "Fallibilism and Putnam" to *IPQ*, but then subsequently I had totally forgotten the matter. As no letter of acceptance from *IPQ* did really reach me (perhaps because of postal fault), the whole thing remained absent from my memory. I don't know whether you would trust me or not. Anyway, the responsibility lies entirely with me. The only thing I can say is that this will never happen in future. I do sincerely apologise to you.'
