

## WHAT WEIGHS UPON THE INHERITANCE OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE INDIAN ACADEMY?

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Looking at the world scenario of letters it is true that the encounter with theory, especially of the French variety, has brought about a significant change since the 1970s. This has especially been the case with the humanities subjects. In the face of this sweeping change Philosophy as an academic discipline has remained singularly resistant to change in most academic institutions in India and to a large extent in the Anglo-American universities. The reasons for such resistance need to be closely examined. The shift in critical method and critical vocabulary divided the intellectuals into two camps in India, those who ushered in the change were labeled as the soft-philosophers indulging in existentialism, post-structuralism or post-modernism and those who resisted the change remained mainstream intellectuals. But in Philosophy this split was never identified as the pre-theoretical and the theoretical; on the contrary theory — theory was done by the mainstream while the ‘emerging’ philosophies were perceived as samplers of soft-theory. The French influence in the 1970s also led to a re-arrangement of boundaries within humanities. Interdisciplinary studies like Film Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies emerged during this period. In the past three decades a sea change in the public domain of literate exchange has taken place in India. At the same time it is also true that no significant change has taken place in the philosophy curriculum in Indian universities nor has the ‘reading’ of the existing syllabus shifted from the domain of the text to the totality of culture; Indian philosophers still perceive philosophy as some sort of meta-discipline.

In my present discussion, I would like to address a question relating to the present academic scenario of Philosophy in contemporary India. The question is ‘what could have been the reasons for resisting the impact of the French influence of the 1970s’? After having discussed some of the possible reasons I would like to examine whether this resistance can be cashed into for the purpose of solving some of the problems arising out of the post-1970s experience.

Philosophy as a meta-discipline has had a very long tradition. Wittgenstein was not the first to say that ‘the philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas, that is what makes him a philosopher’. It has been argued that the detachment of the philosopher from history, anthropology and human exchange gives her the privileged position of sitting on judgment on the first level disciplines. Philosophy then becomes a critique of ideologies and it gains the authority to evaluate the foundations of belief and faith. In ancient India philosophy was conceived as a form of rational criticality that could review the contents of theology, political science and economics. Philosophy was considered to be the right instrument and foundation of all action and duty. It was believed that by the help of philosophy one could achieve mental balance and insight as well as linguistic clarity and behavioural competence. Even though philosophy was concerned exclusively as an instrument of rational critical review, this review was exceptionally broad-based; it included all the disciplines, the language in which the disciplines were expressed as well as the behavioural competence of the individual. There is evidence that discussions on

sexuality were also permitted under the rubric of philosophy. The philosophic encounter between Ubha Bharati, the woman philosopher and wife of Mandana Misra on the one hand and Sankaracharya (the founder of Advaita Vedanta) on the other bear evidence to this point.

Over the centuries, however, the concept of philosophy in India changed. In ancient India philosophy embraced both *para* and *apara vidya* that is, both *jnana* and *vijnana*. It was in the nineteenth century that a parallel was drawn between philosophy and *darsana*. That was when direct intuitive experience of the Reality was excluded from the realm of philosophy and placed in the fold of *sadhana*, which is conceived as a trans-philosophical activity. The nineteenth century concept of *darsana* is much more restricted in scope.

The induction of western philosophy into the curriculum in Indian universities introduced philosophy as a second-order discipline. We continue to admit new discussions into philosophy by incorporating them in the mode of ‘philosophy of . . .’ such as, philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of history, philosophy of law and so on. These are typical exercises in the practice of ‘inclusion’. The existing logico-epistemological tools are employed to incorporate new content into already existing conceptual networks; new wine is constantly being poured into old bottles. The philosopher chooses an abstract, history-neutral scaffolding and subsequently casts it onto the world. Such academic work does not require the philosopher to engage directly with concrete social issues.

Initially however, this was not the intended characteristic of Indian philosophy. Indian philosophy aimed at always remaining rooted to a life world. A priori abstractions have never been encouraged. The situation for Indian philosophy changed over the years. According to Kalidas Bhattacharyya, Indian Philosophy received a severe blow after the Second World War. He remarks that by this time pandits had degenerated into ‘mechanical textual scholars, often without any broad perspective.’

The academic philosopher’s remoteness from reality has been a matter of concern both for international funding bodies like the UNESCO as well as for the national funding bodies like the UGC (University Grants Commission, India). Satchidananda Murty undertook to prepare for the UNESCO, on its request, a ‘country report’ on teaching and research in philosophy in India, in October 1981. Parts of this research were subsequently published in his book *Philosophy in India: Traditions, Teaching and Research*, published by the ICPR (Indian Council for Philosophical Research). He remarks in that book ‘The 1951-52 UNESCO enquiry noted that one of the major criticisms made regarding philosophy teaching in various countries was that it was “too remote from reality”’. Murty goes on to say that ‘according to the UGC *Philosophy Review Committee Report* of 1966, ‘philosophers should concern themselves with the urgent issues of the times’. This shows that the principal funding agency for colleges and universities in India was especially concerned and it had made a definite prescription for the institutions of higher learning. The prescription, however, had little impact and the UGC continued to worry over the problem. Murty reports that ‘the 1978 *UGC Report*

frequently spoke of the need to reorient philosophical studies in such a way that they become relevant to our own life and thought’.

Whether philosophy is necessarily a meta-discipline or only a meta-discipline by choice is a *mute* question. Kant remarked in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, ‘So far, there is no philosophy that one could learn. ...One can only learn to philosophise.’ By and large this is what is taught at various institutions, we teach our students how to philosophise. Students are acquainted with the various tools of analysis as well as with their scope and limits. Having been trained in abstract philosophising this is the only option that seems natural. Academicians commonly ask, “Is philosophy something more than this?” and “If it is, can this be taught in classrooms?” The relationship of philosophy to classroom teaching, to examinations conducted on a mass scale, and its relationship to the job market has been a major factor in defining what philosophy is and what it is not. Rabindranath Tagore, who had tried to revolutionise the system of education in many ways, remarked in his article on ‘What is Art?’ that ‘In our zeal for definition we may lop off the branches and roots of a tree to turn it in to a log, which is easier to roll about from classroom to classroom, and therefore suitable for a textbook. But because it allows a nakedly clear view of itself, it cannot be said that a log gives a truer view of the tree as a whole.’ Obviously our engagement with theory is greatly influenced by our understanding of what philosophy is and what it can do.

It is true that in most all the Indian universities what is taught in philosophy consists of an exposition of various methods, doctrines and systems and their internal debates. The teaching of Indian and Western philosophy is generally compartmentalised. A comparative evaluation does not form part of the curriculum. This encourages a kind of schizophrenic way of learning how to philosophise. The present curriculum has not led to a head on confrontation of Indian philosophy with Western philosophy, nor has it led to a hybridization of philosophy in India. In the West, however, the meeting of the two philosophies has led to a conscious reprisal. A new brand of philosophy known as ‘Fusion Philosophy’ has emerged as a result of the interaction of Indian philosophy with Western philosophy. Fusion Philosophy, however, has not been very popular in India.

The present distancing of theory and practice commented upon by the UNESCO and by the UGC is perhaps the result of learning how to philosophise without learning how to use philosophy. No doubt several tool-options are available, one could for instance, opt for the Buddhist way of thinking or the way of Linguistic Analysis. There has been one point in common among all these options; each position is committed to the search of truth through a consistent and coherent path and each is committed to clarity of understanding. Each one of these philosophical practices proceeds within certain limits and in accordance with certain non-negotiable laws. The lack of openness in Indian philosophical theory is an add on feature and not a constituent feature. Amita Chatterjee made an interesting comment on the non-negotiability of philosophical positions when I presented this paper. She remarked, ‘The discussion of *pramanya* had always been a must. Even *svatah pramanyavadins* were critical about their tools. Only when in-groups and out-groups were created at the end of the Muslim period, non-negotiability of laws were emphasized as a means of self protection and became a mark of growing paranoia’.

It is generally observed that when a philosopher decides to engage with the world, as desired by the UGC and other policy planners, then the engagement takes place from their position of commitment. One who is committed to a particular viewpoint in philosophy believes that that is the only responsible way of doing philosophy. For instance, a typical analytical avowal is captured by Bernard Williams in his 1996 article 'Contemporary Philosophy: A Second Look'. Williams writes, 'It is a feature of our time that the resources of philosophical writing typically available to *analytical philosophy* should present themselves so strongly as the responsible way of going on, the most convincing expression of philosopher's claim on people's attention'(emphasis added). In spite of their repeated denial philosophers seem to be rooted in their culture, their ideology and broadly speaking in their form of life. Their philosophical commitments may not be reflected in their classroom teaching, since the norm for philosophy teaching has been neutrality. All forms of indoctrination, religious or political, or propaganda for any specific philosophical position, e.g. Marxism, Advaita Vedanta or whatever, and all forms of dogmatism are supposed to be avoided in philosophy teaching. This prescription has been scrupulously maintained in all the teaching institutions of our country ever since the introduction of the modern way of teaching philosophy. Philosophical studies in the modern way started in the University of Calcutta about 146 years ago. The teaching of Indian philosophy was introduced at a later date.

From the inception of the modern way of philosophy teaching in higher education there has been a strong Western influence on it. First Oxford and Cambridge and later the American universities have been considered to be the intellectual metropolises. Philosophy, as a result has been seen as an overwhelmingly cognitive and independent discipline. Philosophers are either expected to make thought experiments about possible worlds (some of them may turn out to be anticipations of the future) or they are expected to move into an area as a critic of some existing theory. Perhaps the distancing of poesy and philosophy by the Oxbridge philosophers causes the shift in the way we philosophize today. This could also partly explain why the continental influence has always been peripheral. The primary barrier to engaging with French philosophers has apparently been that of language but the real barrier has perhaps been the basic lack of respect for the French way of continuously mixing the cognitive with the non-cognitive. The lack of theory-theory in continental philosophy has stood in the way of its acceptance. The received opinion about continental philosophy in India is that it lacks both logical rigour as well as a robust argumentative form. It therefore does not fit in with the mainstream Indian traditions of Vedanta and Nyaya-Vaisesika.

There is a commonly shared belief among Indian academicians that good philosophy must be exact and accurate. The following observation of Murty is widely accepted; he says, 'If any kind of religious, mystical, poetical, psychological, political or social "talk" is considered philosophy, philosophy becomes amorphous, soft and loose'. Since the 1970s, theory in humanities has been accommodating features that are thought to be responsible for the dilution of mainstream philosophy. Theory has come closer to psychology, especially of the Freudian variety; its increased proximity to radical politics and to social issues has also been palpable. This change in the texture of theory was not

however, initiated by the philosophy departments. The literature departments took the initial initiative and that is why we find that one of Derrida's principal commentators in the English language is Christopher Norris, whose primary discipline is literature. Similarly, much of Sartre's philosophy was expressed through his plays.

The dynamics of the importation of ideas into the Indian academia were not identical for the literature departments and for the philosophy departments. The literature departments changed their critical apparatus by becoming more sensitive to semiotics, and to 'context' in the broadest possible sense of the term. It is largely through the departments of literature, sociology and in some cases the department of political science that the interdisciplinary schools and centres of studies have emerged. Cognitive science is the only instance of a school or centre growing out of the department of philosophy in India. There are however, many instances of resource persons taking on dual responsibilities, in their parent discipline of philosophy and in an emerging area of interdisciplinary studies. In cognitive science philosophy plays a double role both at the object level and at the metalevel and it also goes beyond humanities subjects. Ideally this should have been the case with other emerging disciplines like women's studies as well.

The philosophy teachers' participation in the emerging disciplines as resource persons did not lead to a confrontation with their parent discipline — philosophy. Wherever possible a comparative study between the Western concern and the Indian tradition is carried out. Indian academicians often address issues that gained prominence in the West as an appendix to the existing philosophy curriculum. For instance, some scholars have tried to find the method of phenomenological reduction in the philosophy of Nagarjuna. There have also been attempts to compare nothingness with the *Madhyamika* concept of *sunyata*. A major importation into the Indian course—content has taken place from the field of Western epistemology as well as from the field of mathematical logic. Contemporary Western epistemology is fashioned on the model of European science. Mathematical logic and the philosophy of science have been grafted onto the Indian course—content in a mechanical manner. The reason this connectivity remained lifeless was due to the absence of a vital interaction of philosophers with scientists and mathematicians.

The importation of ideas after the 1970s into Indian academia may be divided into two categories (a) the importation of analytical philosophy from England and America and the importation of Sartre's later ideas along with the notions of post-structuralism and post-modernism. Till date the first category is considered to be mainstream philosophy in the Indian academia. From the perspective of the mainstream the latter category (which like mainstream publications also comes to us through the big publication houses of England and America in English translation) is considered to be soft-philosophy. This philosophy equips one to keep abreast with what is going on in the public domain of literate exchange. However, many of the philosophers who are considered in India to be representatives of French Philosophy (after the 1968 students' revolution in France), are not accepted as representatives in their own homeland. I have met feminists in France who do not consider Kristeva to be a representative of French

philosophy; they consider her to be a creation of Routledge, Blackwell and other major Anglophone publishing houses.

In addition to the lifeless importation of theories the Indian universities have also been plagued by the lack of a standard for judging philosophic perfection. Indian universities have been enjoying a great deal of autonomy in respect of their formulation of the course curriculum; this in turn has led to a regional variance of philosophy teaching. As a result, the neat categorisation of the forms of adoption of western ideas stated above are not uniformly instantiated. Yet this has been the trend of adoption. The relatively flourishing departments of philosophy in India have been more receptive to the post-1970s turmoil vis-a-vis theory. In the past year the UGC has taken an initiative to revise the course curriculum throughout India. The UGC is also trying to standardise the teaching of philosophy throughout the country. Each institution has been directed to revise and update its syllabus according to the guidelines circulated by the UGC. The result of this exercise is still to be evaluated. One thing is clear that the new prescriptions do not demand a shift from examining how the text is constructed to examining the way the text is read. As long as the teaching of philosophy is tied to a monolithic job market that is related to teaching posts at the high school level or to teaching posts in institutions of higher learning the stereotypes are not likely to change. Most institutions of higher learning are trying to train prospective candidates for the IAS (Indian Administrative Service) examinations or for the NET/ SLET (National Eligibility Test/ State Level Eligibility Test, for college and university teachers) examinations. In all probability the new syllabus will be introducing courses on the history of new ideas.

The philosophers did not take the onus of domesticating the influx of the importation of ideas since the 1970s; the major importations were done by the humanities departments. The subsequent responsibility of adjusting the existing state of disciplines to imported theory was therefore undertaken independently of the Philosophy departments. The departments of English, Film Studies, Comparative Literature are not only engaging with philosophers like Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida to name a few; they are also engaging with mainstream philosophers like Kant, Davidson and Parfit. There is nothing wrong in this. Through such appropriation it is quite possible that a discipline will prefer to inherit/ appropriate Kant's legacy minus his notions of conceptual space and concepts, or one may want to be an heir to Davidson's philosophy minus his notion of coherence. Such selective engagement may be required by one's purpose at hand or it may be a result of one's partial acquaintance with a system. The former exercise could be rewarding but the latter could be dangerous. In most cases what is happening is that philosophical ideas are borrowed and put in a totally unrecognisable context. For instance, it would be disastrous if someone chose to appropriate Kant's notion of the numena and positioned it in a social context. The way the inheritances of theory are being translated into the vocabulary of various emerging disciplines and the way they are being subjected to mutations has been extremely challenging for mainstream philosophy. We could rephrase a Kantian expression and say that the new interdisciplinary studies have awoken the mainstream philosopher out of his dogmatic slumber.

Undoubtedly these experiments are making major contributions to the field of theory. Their major contribution has been in showing the relevance of local context to theory; they have also shown how apparent neutrality in the realm of theory could be a camouflage for various 'hidden agenda'. They have highlighted the relevance of the mindscape to theory too. The emerging theories have efficiently demolished many of the central notions of theory—theory but they have not been very effective in their constructive role, in offering alternatives to theory—theory or in developing a different voice, a different logic. Derrida wrote in 1981 that 'there is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language — no syntax and no lexicon — which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of what it precisely seeks to contest.' (Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', trans. A. Bass, in *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 pp. 280 - 1). This amounts to the strategy of trying to break the master's house with the master's tools.

The conservative and somewhat insulated stance maintained by the Indian academia so far has a promising silver line. Presently theory in the hands of the non-philosopher has come to a point where it is getting increasingly self-reflective. A genuine need is felt for another critical departure. Going back to the repertoire of theory-theory may provide a storehouse of provocative options. Since the new wave of 1970s has decapitated many repositories of scholarship the scope for a dialogue with serious scholars of theory — theory may not be easily available. There is no reason to think that progression in the history of theory building will take a linear path. While speaking to Theory from its freshly visible margins, one need not confine oneself to the post-1970s theories alone; one could also profitably address pre-1970s theories. An additional suggestion could be to look around for alternative theoretical models as well and not remain confined to the continental/Anglo-American theories alone. The Chinese and Japanese theories may not be easily accessible but the Indian heritage is. Many Indian systems may give clues for non-hierarchical theory building. The Jaina Logic of alternatives or some of the Buddhist theories may provide useful options.

We must assert our intellectual property rights before they are smuggled, hybridised and patented by some foreign university and then exported to us; fusion philosophy when conned to Western universities could be perceived as such a threat. The juncture at which theory is being looked at from its freshly visible margins could create an appropriate occasion for advertising the theoretical apparatus available in Indian philosophy. Needless to say we shall be looking at pure theory from a post-1970 perspective. The parallel that comes to mind is that of Botany. Botanists have realised the importance of conserving the genes of all the indigenous wild strains of plants along with a focus on diversity. The preservation of a primitive identity clubbed with a commitment to plurality can provide fertile context for research.