

Pythagoras in India*

Voltaire†

All the world knows that Pythagoras, while he resided in India, attended the school of the Gymnosophists and learned the language of beasts and plants. One day, while he was walking in a meadow near the seashore he heard these words:

‘How unfortunate that I was born an herb! I scarcely attain two inches in height, when a voracious monster, a horrid animal, tramples me under his large feet; his jaws are armed with rows of sharp scythes, by which he cuts, then grinds, and then swallows me. Men call this monster a sheep. I do not suppose there is in the whole creation a more detestable creature.’

Pythagoras proceeded a little way and found an oyster yawning on a small rock. He had not yet adopted that admirable law by which we are enjoined not to eat those animals which have a resemblance to us. He had scarcely taken up the oyster to swallow it, when it spoke these affecting words:

‘O Nature, how happy is the herb, which is, as I am, thy work! Though it be cut down, it is regenerated and immortal, and we, poor oysters, in vain are defended by a double cuirass; villains eat us by

* Edited version of Voltaire, ‘An Adventure in India’, *The Works of Voltaire. A Contemporary Version. Romances*, Vol. III, ed. Tobias Smollett, transl. William F. Fleming (New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901). This work is in the public domain.

† François-Marie Arouet, a.k.a. Voltaire (1694-1778) is one of the most influential Enlightenment writers. He is famous for defending tolerance and attacking the abuses of power by church and state. He lived in Paris, France.

dozens at their breakfast, and all is over with us forever. What a horrible fate is that of an oyster, and how barbarous are men!

Pythagoras shuddered; he felt the enormity of the crime he had nearly committed; he begged pardon of the oyster, with tears in his eyes, and replaced it very carefully on the rock. As he was returning to the city, profoundly meditating on this adventure, he saw spiders devouring flies, swallows eating spiders, and sparrowhawks eating swallows. 'None of these,' said he, 'are philosophers.'

On his entrance, Pythagoras was stunned, bruised, and thrown down by a rabble in ragged clothes who were running and crying: 'Well done, he fully deserved it.'

'Who? What?' said Pythagoras, as he was getting up.

The people continued running and crying: 'Oh, how delightful it will be to see them boiled!'

Pythagoras supposed they meant lentils or some other vegetables, but he was in error; they meant two poor Indians. 'Oh!' said Pythagoras, 'these Indians, without doubt, are two great philosophers weary of their lives; they are desirous of regenerating under other forms; it affords pleasure to a man to change his place of residence, though he may be but indifferently lodged; there is no disputing on taste.'

He proceeded with the mob to the public square, where he perceived a lighted pile of wood and a bench opposite to it, which was called a tribunal. On this bench judges were seated, each of whom had a cow's tail in his hand and a cap on his head, with ears resembling those of the animal which bore Silenus when he came into that country with Bacchus, after having crossed the Erythraean sea without wetting a foot, and stopping the sun and moon, as it is recorded with great fidelity by the Orphics.

Among these judges there was an honest man with whom Pythagoras was acquainted. The Indian sage explained to the sage of Samos the nature of that festival to be given to the people of India.

'These two Indians,' the sage said, 'have not the least desire to be committed to the flames. My grave brethren have adjudged them to be burnt; one for saying that the substance of Śākra¹ is not that of Brahma, and the other for supposing that the approbation of the

Supreme Being was to be obtained at the point of death without holding a cow by the tail.² “Because,” one of the men reasoned, “we may be virtuous at all times, and we cannot always have a cow to lay hold of just when we may have occasion.” The good women of the city were greatly terrified at two such heretical opinions; they would not allow the judges a moment’s peace until they had ordered the execution of those unfortunate men.⁷

Pythagoras was convinced that, from the herb up to man, there were many causes of chagrin. However, he obliged the judges and even the devotees to listen to reason, which happened only at that time.

He went afterwards and preached toleration at Crotona,³ but a bigot set fire to his house and he was burned to death—the man who had delivered the two Hindus from the flames! Let those save themselves who can!

Notes

These notes are provided by Synkrētīc to clarify references and other details of interest.

- 1 *Śakra*: Voltaire's *Xaca* is the French spelling for *Śakra* or *Sakka*: the ruler of the gods in the *trāyastriṃśa* heaven in Buddhism, and an epithet of the god Indra in Hinduism. Traditionally, Indra and Brahma jointly protected Buddha. The theological dispute Voltaire posits between the 'substance' of Śakra and Brahma is thus likely a nonsensical play on European debates on the nature of God for polemical reasons. Voltaire is using Hinduism as a vehicle to attack what he called *l'infâme*, that is religious obscurantism in Europe. See D.T. Devendra, 'Brahma and Indra with the Buddha', in *The Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Vol. 14 (1970): 55-57.
- 2 *Holding a cow by the tail*: A reference to a Hindu custom according to which a dying person held onto a cow's tail, which animal was believed to then guide the dead person's soul across the terrifying Vaitarani river. The belief is based on the following verses from a Hindu holy text: 'I have presented this to you, being desirous of crossing that river...Salutations to Vaitarani. O Cow, look upon me, for the sake of my passing through the gateway of Yama on the great path.' *Garuda Purana*, transl. Ernest Wood and S.V. Subrahmanyam (Allahabad: Panini Office, 1911), 71.
- 3 *Toleration at Crotona*: Regardless of whether the story of Pythagoras' visit to India is true, which scholars still debate, he did settle in Crotona where he founded a community. Pythagoras was driven out but perhaps not for preaching tolerance, as Voltaire imagines after his own image, so much as for being perceived as meddling in local politics. See George P. Conger, 'Did India Influence Early Greek Philosophies?', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jul. 1952): 116-117.