

## Fording the troubled ocean of *samsāra*\*

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The beginnings of Indian philosophy take us very far back indeed, for we can clearly trace them in the hymns of the Ṛgveda which were composed by the Aryans not long after they had settled in their new home about the middle of the second millennium before Christ. The speculative activity begun so early was continued till a century or two ago, so that the history that we have to narrate in the following pages covers a period of over thirty centuries. During this long period, Indian thought developed practically unaffected by outside influence; and the extent as well as the importance of its achievements will be evident when we mention that it has evolved several systems of philosophy, besides creating a great national religion—Brahminism, and a great world religion—Buddhism. The history of so unique a development, if it could be written in full, would be of immense value; but our knowledge at present of early India, in spite of the remarkable results achieved by modern research, is too meagre and imperfect for it. Not only can we not trace the growth of single philosophic ideas step by step; we are sometimes unable to determine the relation even between one system

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\* An extract from Mysore Hiriyanna's seminal work based on his lecture notes, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1932), 13-26. This text is in the public domain.

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and another. Thus it remains a moot question to this day whether the Sāṅkhya represents an original doctrine or is only derived from some other. This deficiency is due as much to our ignorance of significant details as to an almost total lack of exact chronology in early Indian history. The only date that can be claimed to have been settled in the first one thousand years of it, for example, is that of the death of Buddha, which occurred in 487 B.C. Even the dates we know in the subsequent portion of it are for the most part conjectural, so that the very limits of the periods under which we propose to treat of our subject are to be regarded as tentative. Accordingly our account, it will be seen, is characterised by a certain looseness of perspective. In this connection we may also perhaps refer to another of its drawbacks which is sure to strike a student who is familiar with *Histories* of European philosophy. Our account will for the most part be devoid of references to the lives or character of the great thinkers with whose teaching it is concerned, for very little of them is now known. Speaking of Udayana, an eminent Nyāya thinker, Cowell wrote:<sup>1</sup> ‘He shines like one of the fixed stars in India’s literary firmament, but no telescope can discover any appreciable diameter; his name is a *point* of light, but we can detect therein nothing that belongs to our earth or material existence.’ That description applies virtually to all who were responsible for the development of Indian thought; and even a great teacher like Śaṅkara is to us now hardly more than a name. It has been suggested<sup>2</sup> that this indifference on the part of the ancient Indians towards the personal histories of their great men was due to a realisation by them that individuals are but the product of their times—‘that they grow from a soil that is ready-made for them and breathe an intellectual atmosphere which is not of their own making.’ It was perhaps not less the result of the humble sense which those great men had of themselves. But whatever the reason, we shall miss in our account the biographical background and all the added interest which it signifies.

If we take the date given above as a landmark, we may divide the history of Indian thought into two stages. It marks the close of the Vedic period<sup>3</sup> and the beginning of what is known as the Sanskrit

or classical period. To the former belong the numerous works that are regarded by the Hindus as revealed. These works, which in extent have been compared to ‘what survives of the writings of ancient Greece,’ were collected in the latter part of the period. If we overlook the changes that should have crept into them before they were thus brought together, they have been preserved, owing mainly to the fact that they were held sacred, with remarkable accuracy; and they are consequently far more authentic than any work of such antiquity can be expected to be. But the collection, because it was made chiefly, as we shall see, for ritualistic purposes, is incomplete and therefore fails to give us a full insight into the character of the thoughts and beliefs that existed then. The works appear in it arranged in a way, but the arrangement is not such as would be of use to us here; and the collection is from our present standpoint to be viewed as lacking in system. As regards the second period, we possess a yet more extensive literature; and, since new manuscripts continue to be discovered, additions to it are still being made. The information it furnishes is accordingly fuller and more diverse. Much of this material also appears in a systematised form. But this literature cannot always be considered quite as authentic as the earlier one, for in the course of long oral transmission, which was once the recognised mode of handing down knowledge, many of the old treatises have received additions or been amended while they have retained their original titles. The systematic treatises among them even in their original form, do not carry us back to the beginning of the period. Some of them are undoubtedly very old, but even they are not as old as 500 B.C., to state that limit in round numbers. It means that the post-Vedic period is itself to be split up into two stages. If for the purpose of this book we designate the later of them as ‘the age of the systems,’ we are left with an intervening period which for want of a better title may be described as ‘the early post-Vedic period.’ Its duration is not precisely determinable, but it lasted sufficiently long—from 500 B.C. to about the beginning of the Christian era—to be viewed as a distinct stage in the growth of Indian thought. It marks a transition and its literature, as may be expected, partakes of the character of the literatures

of the preceding and of the succeeding periods. While it is many-sided and not fully authentic like its successor, it is unsystematised like its predecessor.

Leaving the details of our subject, so far as they fall within the scope of this work, to be recounted in the following chapters, we may devote the present to a general survey of it. A striking characteristic of Indian thought is its richness and variety. There is practically no shade of speculation which it does not include. This is a matter that is often lost sight of by its present-day critic who is fond of applying to it sweeping epithets like 'negative' and 'pessimistic' which, though not incorrect so far as some of its phases are concerned, are altogether misleading as descriptions of it as a whole. There is, as will become clear when we study our subject in its several stages of growth, no lack of emphasis on the reality of the external world or on the optimistic view of life understood in its larger sense. The misconception is largely due to the partial knowledge of Indian thought which hitherto prevailed; for it was not till recently that works on Indian philosophy, which deal with it in anything like a comprehensive manner, were published. The schools of thought familiarly known till then were only a few; and even in their case, it was forgotten that they do not stand for a uniform doctrine throughout their history, but exhibit important modifications rendering such wholesale descriptions of them inaccurate. The fact is that Indian thought exhibits such a diversity of development that it does not admit of a rough-and-ready characterisation. Underlying this varied development, there are two divergent currents clearly discernible—one having its source in the Veda and the other, independent of it. We might describe them as orthodox and heterodox respectively, provided we remember that these terms are only relative and that either school may designate the other as heterodox, claiming for itself the 'halo of orthodoxy.' The second of these currents is the later, for it commences as a reaction against the first; but it is not much later since it manifests itself quite early as shown by references to it even in the Vedic hymns. It appears originally as critical and negative; but it begins before long to develop a constructive side which is of great consequence in the

history of Indian philosophy. Broadly speaking, it is pessimistic and realistic. The other doctrine cannot be described thus briefly, for even in its earliest recorded phase it presents a very complex character. While for example the prevailing spirit of the songs included in the Ṛgveda is optimistic, there is sometimes a note of sadness in them as in those addressed to the goddess of Dawn (Uṣas), which pointedly refer to the way in which she cuts short the little lives of men. 'Obeying the behests of the gods, but wasting away the lives of mortals, Uṣas has shone forth—the last of many former dawns and the first of those that are yet to come.'<sup>4</sup> The characteristic marks of the two currents are, however, now largely obliterated owing to the assimilation or appropriation of the doctrines of each by the other during a long period of contact; but the distinction itself has not disappeared and can be seen in the Vedānta and Jainism, both of which are still living creeds.

These two types of thought, though distinct in their origin and general spirit, exhibit certain common features. We shall dwell at some length upon them, as they form the basic principles of Indian philosophy considered as a whole:—

(i) The first of them has in recent times become the subject of a somewhat commonplace observation, *viñ*, that religion and philosophy do not stand sundered in India. They indeed begin as one everywhere, for their purpose is in the last resort the same, *viñ*, a seeking for the central meaning of existence. But soon they separate and develop on more or less different lines. In India also the differentiation takes place, but only it does not mean divorce. This result has in all probability been helped by the isolated development of Indian thought already referred to,<sup>5</sup> and has generally been recognised as a striking excellence of it. But owing to the vagueness of the word 'religion,' we may easily miss the exact significance of the observation. This word, as it is well known, may stand for anything ranging from what has been described as 'a sum of scruples which impede the free use of our faculties' to a yearning of the human spirit for union with God. It is no praise to any philosophy to be associated with religion in the former sense. Besides, some Indian doctrines are not religion at all in the commonly accepted sense. For

example, early Buddhism was avowedly atheistic and it did not recognise any permanent spirit. Yet the statement that religion and philosophy have been one in India is apparently intended to be applicable to all the doctrines. So it is necessary to find out in what sense of the word the observation in question is true. Whatever else a religion may or may not be, it is essentially a reaching forward to an ideal, without resting in mere belief or outward observances. Its distinctive mark is that it serves to further right living; and it is only in this sense that we can speak of religion as one with philosophy in India.<sup>6</sup> The ancient Indian did not stop short at the discovery of truth, but strove to realise it in his own experience. He followed up *tattva-jñāna*, as it is termed, by a strenuous effort to attain *mokṣa* or liberation,<sup>7</sup> which therefore, and not merely an intellectual conviction, was in his view the real goal of philosophy. In the words of Max Müller, philosophy was recommended in India ‘not for the sake of knowledge, but for the highest purpose that man can strive after in this life.’<sup>8</sup> The conception of *mokṣa* varies from system to system; but it marks, according to all, the culmination of philosophic culture. In other words, Indian philosophy aims beyond Logic. This peculiarity of the view-point is to be ascribed to the fact that philosophy in India did not take its rise in wonder or curiosity as it seems to have done in the West; rather it originated under the pressure of a practical need arising from the presence of moral and physical evil in life. It is the problem of how to remove this evil that troubled the ancient Indian most, and *mokṣa* in all the systems represents a state in which it is, in one sense or another, taken to have been overcome. Philosophic endeavour was directed primarily to find a remedy for the ills of life, and the consideration of metaphysical questions came in as a matter of course. This is clearly indicated for instance by the designation—sometimes applied to the founders of the several schools—of ‘*Tīrtha-kara*’ or ‘*Tīrthan-kara*,’ which literally means ‘ford-maker’ and signifies one that has discovered the way to the other shore across the troubled ocean of *saṃsāra*.

But it may be thought that the idea of *mokṣa*, being eschatological, rests on mere speculation and that, though it may be regarded as the goal of faith, it can hardly be represented as that of philo-

sophy. Really, however, there is no ground for thinking so, for, thanks to the constant presence in the Indian mind of a positivistic standard, the *mokṣa* ideal, even in those schools in which it was not so from the outset, speedily came to be conceived as realisable in this life, and described as *jīvan-mukti*, or emancipation while yet alive. It still remained, no doubt, a distant ideal; but what is important to note is that it ceased to be regarded as something to be reached in a life beyond. Man’s aim was no longer represented as the attainment of perfection in a hypothetical hereafter, but as a continual progress towards it within the limits of the present life. Even in the case of doctrines like the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika<sup>9</sup> or the Viśiṣṭādvaita<sup>10</sup> which do not formally accept the *jīvan-mukti* ideal, there is clearly recognised the possibility of man reaching here a state of enlightenment which may justifiably be so described because it completely transforms his outlook upon the world and fills with an altogether new significance the life he thereafter leads in it. Such an ideal was already part and parcel of a very influential doctrine in the latter part of the Vedic period, for it is found in the Upaniṣads. One of these ancient treatises says: ‘When all the desires the heart harbours are gone, man becomes immortal and reaches Brahman here.’<sup>11</sup> It points beyond intellectual satisfaction, which is often mistaken to be the aim of philosophy, and yet by keeping within the bounds of possible human experience avoids the dogma of *mokṣa* in the eschatological sense. The latter view also, known as *videhamukti*, has survived, but it is a relic from earlier times when it was believed that the consequences of a good or bad life led here were to be reaped elsewhere in a state beyond death: and the retention of it by any school does not really affect its philosophic standpoint.

(ii) A necessary corollary to such a view of the goal of philosophy is the laying down of a suitable course of practical discipline for its attainment. Philosophy thereby becomes a way of life, not merely a way of thought. It has been remarked with reference to Jainism that its fundamental maxim is ‘Do not live to know, but know to live’<sup>12</sup> and the same may well be said of the other Indian schools also.<sup>13</sup> The discipline naturally varies in the two traditions; but there is underlying it in both an ascetic spirit whose inculcation

is another common characteristic of all Indian doctrines.<sup>14</sup> Sureśvara, a famous disciple of Śaṅkara, remarks<sup>15</sup> that, though systems of thought including heretical ones like Buddhism may differ in the substance of their theories, they are all at one in teaching renunciation. It means that while agreeing with one another in regard to the necessity of renunciation, they assign different reasons for it. That the heretical systems which in general were pessimistic should have commended absolute detachment is quite intelligible, for they were pervaded by a belief in the vanity and nothingness of life. What is specially noteworthy here is that the orthodox schools also, some of which at least were optimistic, should have done the same. But there is a very important difference between asceticism as taught in the two schools. The heterodox held that man should once for all turn away from the world whatever his circumstances might be. But the orthodox regarded the ascetic ideal as only to be progressively realised. As Dr. Winternitz observes,<sup>16</sup> it is in their opinion to be approached 'only from the point of view of the āśrama theory according to which the Aryan has first to pass the state of Brahmācārin, the student of the Veda, and of the householder (gṛhastha) who founds a family, offers sacrifices and honours the Brāhmaṇas, before he is allowed to retire from this world as a hermit or an ascetic.' The contrast between the two ideals is set forth in a striking manner in a chapter of the Mahābhārata known as the 'Dialogue between Father and Son.'<sup>17</sup> Here the father, who represents the orthodox view, maintains that renunciation should come at the end of the āśrama discipline, but is won over to his side by the son, who holds the view that it is the height of unwisdom to follow amidst the many uncertainties of life such dilatory discipline and pleads for an immediate breaking away from all worldly ties.<sup>18</sup> That is, detachment according to the former cannot be acquired without a suitable preliminary training undergone in the midst of society; but, according to the latter, it can be achieved at once, any moment of disillusionment about the world sufficing for it. The one believes social training to be indispensable<sup>19</sup> for the perfection of character; the other looks upon it as more a hindrance than a help to it. But the social factor, it should be added, is disregarded by

the heterodox only as a means of self-culture, and their attitude towards it is neither one of revulsion nor one of neglect. For we know as a matter of fact that they attached the greatest value to society in itself and laid particular stress upon the need for sympathy and kindness for fellow-men. There are other differences as well such as the pursuit of ascetic morality by the heterodox, as the sole mode of practical discipline, and by the orthodox as only a preparation for a fresh course of training which may itself be different in different schools. But whatever the differences in matters of detail, asceticism as such serves as a bond of union between the two traditions. Even systems which do not at first appear to countenance it are, as a little reflection will show, really favourable to it. Thus ritualism with its promise of prosperity in a world to come actually results in complete self-denial so far as this world is concerned, because the fruit of the deeds it prescribes is to be reaped not here, but elsewhere and amidst conditions totally different from those of the present life. The principle of detachment implicit in such doctrines was, as we shall see, rendered explicit, and even the ulterior motive of self-love which is involved in striving for reward hereafter was eliminated by the Gītā with its teaching of disinterested action.

Owing to the spirit of renunciation that runs through them all, the way of life which the Indian doctrines prescribe may be characterised as aiming at transcending morality as commonly understood. In other words, the goal of Indian philosophy lies as much beyond Ethics as it does beyond Logic. As however the *rationale* of the ascetic ideal is explained in two different ways by Indian thinkers, the supermoral attitude bears a somewhat different significance in the several schools; but this distinction does not, like the previous one, correspond to the division into orthodox and heterodox traditions. Some schools admit the ultimacy of the individual self while others deny it in one sense or another. Buddhism for example altogether repudiates the individual self as a permanent entity, while Absolutism takes it as eventually merging in the true or universal self so that its individuality is only provisional. Theism on the other hand like that of Rāmānuja and pluralistic systems like Jainism or the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika recognise the individual self to be ultimate, but point out

that the way to deliverance lies only through the annihilation of egoism (*ahai-kāra*). Now according to the systems which deny the individual self in one form or another, the very notion of obligation ceases to be significant finally, the contrast between the individual and society upon which that notion is based being entirely negated in it. Referring to a person that has attained to such a super-individual outlook, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* says<sup>20</sup>: ‘He is not troubled by thoughts like these: Have I not done the right? Have I done the wrong?’ In the other systems which admit the ultimacy of the individual self but teach the necessity for absolute self-suppression, the consciousness of obligation continues, but the disciple devotes himself to its fulfilment with no thought whatsoever of his rights. That is, though the contrast between the individual and society is felt, that between rights and duties disappears; and so far, the motive is lifted above that of common morality. According to both the views, the essential duality of the moral world is transcended on account of the total renunciation of personal interest; in neither is it merely an adjustment, however difficult or delicate, of rights and duties between the individual and his social environment.

There is a sense, we may add, in which the practical training, even in its preliminary stages, may be said to aim at transcending morality as ordinarily conceived. The individual’s obligations, according to the Indian view, are not confined to human society, but extend to virtually the whole of sentient creation. To the common precept ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself,’ it adds, as has been observed by one than whom nobody now is better fitted to interpret the Indian ideal of life, ‘And every living being is thy neighbour.’<sup>21</sup> Such an extension of the world of moral action accords well with the spirit of Indian ethics whose watchword is devotion to duties rather than assertion of rights. Beings that are not characterised by moral consciousness may have no duties to fulfil, but it does not mean that there is none to be fulfilled towards them. This ideal of the fellowship of all living beings is best illustrated by the principle of non-injury (*ahiṃsā*), which forms an integral part of every one of the higher Indian faiths and was practised not only by saints and sages, but also by emperors like Aśoka. It may minimise the importance of human

society. That is because the ideal has not less regard for it but more for the wider whole which comprehends all animate being. It does not thereby ignore the spirit of human unity. Only it conceives of that spirit as consisting not in striving for human well-being alone, but also in discharging towards all living creatures the obligation corresponding to the position of privilege which mankind occupies in the scheme of the universe. Social morality, however much it may widen our outlook from the individual’s standpoint, really keeps us isolated from the rest of creation. In addition to personal egoism, there is what may be called the egoism of the species which leads inevitably to the belief that the sub-human world may be exploited for the benefit of man. That also must be got rid of, if man is to become truly free; and he will do so only when he has risen above the anthropocentric view and can look upon everything as equally sacred—whether it be, in the words of the *Gītā*,<sup>22</sup> ‘a cow or elephant or dog, the cultured Brahmin or the outcaste that feeds on dogs.’

These are the two elements common to all Indian thought—the pursuit of *mokṣa* as the final ideal and the ascetic spirit of the discipline recommended for its attainment. They signify that philosophy as understood in India is neither mere intellectualism nor mere moralism, but includes and transcends them both. In other words it aims, as already stated, at achieving more than what Logic and Ethics can. But it must not be forgotten that, though not themselves constituting the end, these are the *sole* means of approach to it. They have been represented as the two wings that help the soul in its spiritual flight. The goal that is reached through their aid is characterised on the one hand by *jñāna* or illumination which is intellectual conviction that has ripened into an immediate experience and, on the other, by *vairāgya* or self-renunciation which is secure by reason of the discovery of the Metaphysical ground for it. It is pre-eminently an attitude of peace which does not necessarily imply passivity. But the emphasis is on the attitude itself or on the inward experience that gives rise to it, rather than on the outward behaviour which is looked upon as its expression and therefore more or less secondary. The value of philosophic training lies as little in inducing a person to do what otherwise he would not

have done, as in instructing him in what otherwise he would not have known; it consists essentially in making him what he was not before. Heaven, it has been remarked, is first a temperament and then anything else.

We have so far spoken about the main divisions of Indian tradition, which, though exhibiting certain common features, are fundamentally different. The history of Indian philosophy is the history of the ways in which the two traditions have acted and reacted upon each other, giving rise to divergent schools of thought. Their mutual influence, however much desirable as the means of broadening the basis of thought, has led to a considerable overlapping of the two sets of doctrines, rendering it difficult to discover what elements each has incorporated from the other. It is impossible, for instance, to say for certain to which of the two traditions we owe the ideal of *jīvan-mukti* to whose importance we have drawn attention. In the course of this progressive movement, now one school and now another was in the ascendant. The ascendancy at one stage belonged conspicuously to Buddhism, and it seemed as if it had once for all gained the upper hand. But finally the Vedānta triumphed. It has naturally been transformed much in the process, although its inner character remains as it was already foreshadowed in the Upaniṣads. We may indeed regard the several phases in the history of the heretical tradition as only so many steps leading to this final development. The Vedānta may accordingly be taken to represent the consummation of Indian thought, and in it we may truly look for the highest type of the Indian ideal. On the theoretical side, it stands for the triumph of Absolutism and Theism, for whatever differences may characterise the various Vedāntic schools, they are classifiable under these two heads. The former is monistic and the latter, though avowedly pluralistic, may also be said to be governed by the spirit of monism owing to the emphasis it places on the entire dependence of everything on God. On the practical side, the triumph of the Vedānta has meant the triumph of the positive ideal of life. This is shown not only by the social basis of the ethical discipline which the Vedānta as an orthodox doctrine commends, but also by its conception of the highest good which

consists, as we shall see when we come to consider the several systems in detail, not in isolating the self from its environment as it does for the heterodox schools but in overcoming the opposition between the two by identifying the interests of the self with those of the whole. Both ideals alike involve the cultivation of complete detachment; but the detachment in the case of the Vedānta is of a higher and finer type. Kālidāsa, who, as the greatest of Indian poets, may be expected to have given the truest expression to the ideal of practical life known to the Indians, describes it<sup>23</sup> as ‘owning the whole world while disowning oneself.’ The Vedāntic idea of the highest good also implies the recognition of a cosmic purpose, whether that purpose be conceived as ordained by God or as inherent in the nature of Reality itself, towards whose fulfilment everything consciously or unconsciously moves. The heretical schools, except in so far as they have been influenced by the other ideal, do not see any such purpose in the world as a whole, though they admit the possibility of the individual freeing himself from

## Notes

- 1 Introduction to *Kusumāñjali* (Eng. Translation), pp. v and vi.
- 2 SS. p. 2.
- 3 It is usual to state the lower limit of the Vedic period as 200 B.C., including within it works which, though not regarded as ‘revealed’ (*śruti*), are yet exclusively concerned with the elucidation of revealed texts. We are here confining the term strictly to the period in which Vedic works appeared.
- 4 Cf. RV. I. 124. 2.
- 5 We may perhaps instance as a contrast the course which thought has taken in Europe, where the tradition of classical culture, which is essentially Indo-European, has mingled with a Semitic creed. Mrs. Rhys Davids speaks of science, philosophy and religion as being ‘in an armed truce’ in the West. See *Buddhism* (Home University Library), p. 100.
- 6 Indian philosophy may show alliance with religion in other senses also, but such alliance does not form a common characteristic of all the doctrines.
- 7 Cf. NS. I. i. 3.
- 8 SS. p. 370.

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- 9 See NSB. IV. ii. 2; NV. I. i. 1. *ad finem*.
- 10 See SB. IV. i. 13.
- 11 *Kaṭha Up*, II. iii. 14.
- 12 OJ. p. 112.
- 13 Compare in this connection Professor Whitehead's characterisation of Buddhism as 'the most colossal example in history of applied metaphysics': *Religion in the Making*, p. 39.
- 14 The Cārvāka view is an exception; but it is hardly a system of philosophy in the form in which it is now known. See Ch. VIII.
- 15 BUV. pp. 513-15. st. 405-411.
- 16 'Ascetic Literature in Ancient India': *Calcutta University Review* for October 1923, p. 3.
- 17 xii. 277.
- 18 This does not mean that there is no place for the laity in heterodox society, but only that lay training is not viewed as obligatory before one becomes a monk.
- 19 The rule relating to the discipline of the *āśrama* was, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, much relaxed in later times by the orthodox; but even thus the option to become an ascetic is to be exercised only after one has passed through the first stage of *brahma-carya*. It should also be stated that the relaxation, to judge from current practice, is mostly in theory and that early renunciation is the exception, not the rule.
- 20 ii. 9.
- 21 See Romain Rolland: *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 33.
- 22 v. 18.
- 23 *Malavikāgnimitram*, i. 1.