

Chapter 1

Introduction

Indian philosophy spans more than three millennia. Some scholars date several works as far back as 3000 BCE. The most ancient of these texts is the Rig Veda and a conservative estimate for this work seems to be around 1500 BCE. It contains about a thousand hymns and consists of about 10 books (called *mandalas* in Sanskrit). We cannot attribute a single author to this work. It seems to be some compendium of the great thoughts current at that time recorded in poetic verse which enabled for easier memorization.

From those ancient times, four Vedas have been identified and they are called the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda. Each Veda in turn consists of four parts: the hymns (*mantras*), rituals (*brahmanas*), the forest teachings (*aranyakas*) and finally the philosophical portion (*the upanishads*).

The three thousand years of the Indian philosophical tradition can be divided roughly into five periods: the Vedic period (2500 BCE to 600 BCE), the Epic period (600 BCE to 200 CE), the Sutra period (200 CE to 600 CE), the Scholarly period (600 CE to 1700 CE) and the Modern period (1700 CE to the present). The writings of all the periods except for the last one are in Sanskrit. Nearly all of the writings of the Modern period are in English and we will momentarily see why. Thus, for anyone wanting to study Indian philosophy, knowledge of both Sanskrit and English (and perhaps a few other Indian vernacular languages) is essential. However, several notable scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries who were proficient in both these languages have left us valuable writings in the English language that simplify this onerous study. Beginning with Vivekananda in the 19th century, and followed by Aurobindo and Rabindrananath Tagore as well as other prominent scholars, we have a valuable anthology of writings that can be studied critically with profit.

But Indian philosophy is not a monolithic entity. It is organic and has been evolving over time. It is more accurate to speak of Indian philosophies ranging from materialism of the Charvaka school to non-dualism of the Vedanta philosophy amplified by the great sixth century philosopher,

Adi Shankaracharya. Each philosophy is called a *darśana* in Sanskrit which can be approximately translated as a “world view” or better still, a way of looking at the process of life and trying to understand it.

The Upanishads focus largely on epistemology. What is knowledge? What is perception? What is mind? What is the intellect (*buddhi*)? Is there anything higher than body, mind and intellect? In the Mundaka Upanishad, we find the following profound question. “What is that by knowing which everything is known?” Very early on, these Upanishads highlight the importance of the discovery of underlying principles as a means for understanding. For example, in the Chandogya Upanishad we find a partial response to this question. “Just as the knowledge of one slab of clay gives us knowledge of all clay, what is that, by knowing which everything else becomes known?” Later philosophies focused on social concerns, ethics, and moral principles. A large portion of Indian philosophy is also devoted to the study of art and aesthetics, music and literature, especially in the context of the philosophy of language.

This ancient philosophical tradition resurfaced in a dynamic way in 19th century India for a significant purpose. As is well-known, India was under British colonial rule for several centuries and in the 19th century, the Indian Independence movement turned to the ancient wisdom and tradition to tackle the challenge of extricating India from her political bondage. But many of the philosophers of this time did not confine their reflections to only the Indian context. They were viewing the wider world at large. In this social context, the fundamental question confronting all of them was this: can philosophy solve the problems confronting the human race? Can it meet the challenge of the modern world? Can we use the wisdom of the past and build a better world and move towards a global civilization? These are the questions addressed by the later thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Krishnamurti and Radhakrishnan. There were other thinkers but these stand prominently in the Indian landscape of the 20th century.

Gandhi in particular, is significant. He challenged the British rule of India with his philosophy of non-violent resistance and *satyagraha*. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “Gandhi was able to mobilize and galvanize more people in his lifetime than any other person in the history of this world. And just with a little love and understanding goodwill, and a refusal to cooperate with an evil law, he was able to break the backbone of the British Empire. This I think was one of the most significant things that ever happened in the history of the world. More than 300 million people achieved their freedom and they achieved it non-violently.” (King, 129)

1.1 A short history of colonial India

Even an ephemeral knowledge of world history shows that in the 15th century, India had a global reputation as a source of wealth and wisdom. Children today study that Christopher Columbus was searching for another trade route to India and in 1492 he “discovered America”. We now know that he discovered the Bahamas. But why was he doing this? In the 15th century, we also see the rise of the Ottoman empire which included much of India and all of the land routes to India through the Middle East. These routes were essentially blocked that many European nations that were trading with India were exploring alternate sea routes. In 1498, the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama discovered the route around the horn of Africa and established trade with Calicut in Kerala on the west coast of the Indian subcontinent. Other nations quickly followed his path and also established trading outposts in India. This led to militant rivalries among the European nations between the Portuguese, the French, the Dutch and the British, all of whom vied to establish political control of the region. By the middle of the 18th century, England had a stronghold in India with its East India Company, established in Calcutta. They soon realised that they could expand their control to other parts of the Indian subcontinent, even as far as Burma. Their complete control of the subcontinent was established by the middle of the 19th century. India was regarded as the “jewel in the crown of the British Empire.” and Queen Victoria had the official title “Empress of India.”

In 1857, there was a militant response by the local population to the British rule which is often called the “Sepoy rebellion,” by British historians and “The War of Independence” by Indian patriots. In any case, it took more than six months for the British rulers to suppress the opposition with heavy loss of life on both sides of the conflict though on the Indian side the casualties were greater by a factor of a hundred since the Indians were essentially fighting with their bare hands. That year can be seen as a moment of awakening among the Indian intellectuals that physical force may not be the effective tool to evict the British from India. A series of movements such as the Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the Arya Samaj, founded by Dayananda Saraswati, began to take root.

The British realised that in order to rule over India, they needed an efficient administration recruited from the local population, spread over the entire subcontinent. To this end, they established three universities, in Calcutta (now Kolkata), Bombay (now Mumbai) and Madras (now Chennai). Their only goal was to create a fleet of civil servants knowledgeable in the English language and able to carry out the instructions from the Viceroy of India, who was seen as the Queen’s representative but really had the status of a monarch in his own right. Thomas Macaulay was commissioned to create the syllabus for these universities and his famous “Minute on Education” of 1835 decreed that its goal was to introduce the use of the English language in all the universities and “to form a class who may be interpreters

between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." (Macaulay, 1835)

Macaulay's method unfortunately worked. It succeeded in producing a large segment of the educated elite who were ashamed of being Indian. The wealthy would often send their children to boarding schools in England as was the case in the life of Aurobindo.

1.2 Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

The following year saw the birth of Sri Ramakrishna in a remote village near Kolkata, called Kamarpukur. He was the very antithesis of Macaulay's ideal of the Indian civil servant. Ramakrishna was neither interested in politics nor did he have any goal of evicting the British from India. His singular quest was what can be termed a spiritual one. When his elder brother Ramkumar tried to convince him to enrol in higher education, he replied "What will I do with a mere bread-winning education?" (Nikhilananda, 8) He was not interested in making a living. He was interested in making a life. He was obsessed with the search for truth, the meaning of existence, and in exploring the spiritual dimension of the human being. His passion for learning, not in the intellectual sense of the word, but in its deepest emotional sense attracted to him a pantheon of teachers of the highest order. These teachers were from the ancient Indian tradition of wandering sanyasins (monks) and sanyasinis (nuns) whose goal was to live the life of philosophy, not to teach it, but rather to realize it. This idea of realization runs like a bright crimson ribbon through the entire Indian philosophical tradition from the very most ancient times.

This is the characteristic feature of Indian philosophy. A system of philosophical thought is called a *darsana* in Sanskrit. The word is derived from *drs* which means to see. Radhakrishnan explains it thus. "This seeing may be either perceptual observation or conceptual knowledge or intuitional experience. It may be inspection of facts, logical inquiry or insight of soul. Generally 'darsana' means critical expositions, logical surveys or systems." (Radhakrishnan, Volume 1, p. 20) Thus the Indian tradition has always insisted on making philosophy practical in this sense of the word. It is partly for this reason some European philosophers dismissed Indian philosophy as religion.

Ramakrishna's advent marks the genesis of the subject of contemporary Indian philosophy. Foremost among his disciples was Vivekananda, a graduate of the Presidency College of the University of Calcutta. Vivekananda was well versed in the English language and had been educated in the European tradition. He was a product of Macaulay's vision of a British India. The meeting of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda represents a fusion of the

ancient Indian philosophical and spiritual tradition with the modern scientific and rational world view. In a letter to Alasinga, written on 17th February 1896, Vivekananda wrote “to put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds – is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The dry, abstract Advaita must become living – poetic – in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology – and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life’s work.” (Vivekananda, 5.104) His writings span nine volumes and represent the chronological beginning of the theme of Indian philosophy in the English language.

In his endeavour, Vivekananda wrote books elucidating the Vedanta philosophy. Highlighting the aspect of realization as the underlying theme of the Indian tradition, he summarized his writings thus. “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control or philosophy – by one, or more or all of these and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas or rituals or books, temples or forms, are but secondary details.” (Vivekananda, 1. 124)

1.3 Aurobindo

There were others who undertook similar tasks. Aurobindo’s writings comprise more than 30 volumes and they deal with a range of topics from Upanishadic thought to the ancient theory of poetry as well as the science of *mantra*, a word which has now entered the English language. His central contribution to Indian philosophy are his writings on the nature of consciousness. In his *Letters on Yoga*, we find the following idea. “Consciousness is usually identified with mind, but mental consciousness is only the human range which no more exhausts all the possible ranges of consciousness than human sight exhausts all the gradations of colour or human hearing all the gradations of sound – for there is much above or below that is to man invisible and inaudible. So there are ranges of consciousness above and below the human range which the normal human has no contact and they seem to it unconscious, - supramental or overmental and submental ranges.” (Aurobindo, 22.234)

This passage highlights the idea of *superconsciousness*, a recurrent theme in much of Indian philosophy. It is explicit also in Vivekananda’s writings and Advaita philosophy.

Aurobindo had a strange upbringing. His father was a perfect product of Macaulay’s India. Aurobindo was the youngest of three sons born to Dr.

Krishnadhan Ghose, who had studied medicine in England and returned to India thoroughly westernized in his outlook. He felt that his three sons would be better off educated in England rather than in India and so he sent them off to a boarding school in Manchester with explicit instructions to their guardians that they should learn nothing of India's traditions and cultures. Aurobindo's experience there reads like pages out of "Oliver Twist." He wrote later, "During the whole year a slice or two of sandwich, bread and butter, and a cup of tea in the morning and in the evening a penny saveloy [sausage] formed the only food." (Aurobindo, 26.2)

At the age of 20, Aurobindo returned to India only to learn his father had died. His mother died in his youth. He had a command of English and Greek literature so he accepted a post as an instructor at the University of Baroda. Seeing the British occupation of India, he, along with his brother Barin, plotted to bomb the parliament buildings. They were both arrested. After a year, Aurobindo was acquitted but his brother Barin was sentenced to life in the Andaman Islands, off the east coast of India. Since he was still under surveillance, he went to Pondicherry, in southern India, where the French were in control. He lived there, in hiding for almost 50 years. It was at this time, he decided to take up an intense study of Indian philosophical thought and deepen his study of yoga, something his father never wanted him to do.

Amplifying the symbiotic relationship between philosophy and religion as he understood it, Aurobindo wrote, "Philosophy is the intellectual search for the fundamental truth of things; religion is the attempt to make the truth dynamic in the soul of man. They are essential to each other; a religion that is not the expression of philosophic truth degenerates into superstition and obscurantism, and a philosophy which does not dynamise itself with the religious spirit is a barren light, for it cannot get itself practiced." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 578)

1.4 Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore's writings also span a range of more than ten volumes. His collection of poems entitled *Gitanjali*— earned him the 1913 Nobel Prize in literature.

Unlike Vivekananda and Aurobindo, Tagore had a pampered childhood. He was born into an aristocratic and educated family in the year 1861. He was a contemporary of Vivekananda and in fact, they shared a passion for music. A little known fact is that Vivekananda wrote a book on music before he became a monk and that book includes 12 of Tagore's songs. At the age of 8, Tagore began to write poetry, first in Bengali and later in English. Since his father was very scholarly and also well versed in yoga, he learned much

of the Indian tradition at home. He admired Valmiki and Kalidas, two great poets of antiquity and attempted to imitate their style

In 1910, he wrote *Gitanjali* or “Song offerings” in Bengali, which was a collection of about 150 poems. At the insistence of many, he himself translated them into English in 1912. Later that year, this book got the attention of William Butler Yeats who found the poems so sublime, he nominated it for the Nobel Prize. In 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and became the first non-European to win the prize. With the prize money, he built Shantiniketan and Visvabharati University, modeled on the Upanishadic ideals fostering creativity in arts and sciences.

Here is a sample verse from *Gitanjali*:

My poet’s vanity dies in shame before thy sight.

O Master Poet. I have sat down at thy feet.

Only let me make my life simple and straight.

Like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music. Like Aurobindo, Tagore delved into Upanishadic poetry. And like Aurobindo, with his two volume epic *Savitri*, Tagore gave poetic expression to much of the ancient philosophical thought. Together with the underlying theme of making philosophy practical and living, he saw the role of humanities, especially poetry, art and literature, as a means to this end. His philosophy can be summarised as aesthetic humanism.

On the eve of India’s independence from colonial rule, he wrote the following poem:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action—

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

1.5 Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi was neither a philosopher nor a writer in the formal sense of the word. Yet by far, he was the most voluminous of writers. His works are recorded in more than 100 volumes and they are now available on the internet. He was called a great *karma yogi*, and the architect of a new political philosophy.

Gandhi was born in Porbandar, Gujarat in 1869 and was the youngest of three sons. He came from a middle class family and after high school, was sent to England to study law at the age of 18. After four years of study, he returned to India with his law degree. He took up a year-long assignment in South Africa to defend Indian indentured labourers. There he faced racial discrimination in all its forms and shapes and ended up staying there 20 years to deal with problems of these labourers. During that time, he took up the study of Indian philosophy, especially the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita and forged out a new philosophy of non-violent resistance.

Many of the indentured labourers were illiterate and were being exploited. To counter their oppressors, he had to study the laws and determine a viable way to correct injustice. He began a weekly journal to galvanize his thoughts and chart out a new political philosophy based on *satyagraha*, which means holding on to truth.

He saw writing as a vehicle to clarify his own understanding and to reach out to others in a spirit of co-operation. In his *Autobiography*, he wrote, "Through these journals I now commenced to the best of my ability the work of educating the public in satyagraha. These journals reached a very wide circulation . . . The journals helped me also to some extent to remain at peace with myself, for whilst immediate resort to civil disobedience was out of the question, they enabled me to freely ventilate my views and to put heart into the people. Thus I feel that both the journals rendered good service to the people in this hour of trial and did their humble bit towards lightening the tyranny of martial law." (Autobiography, 395)

In 1915, Gandhi returned to India and took up the cause of India's independence movement from British colonial rule. His experience in South Africa enabled him to formulate a new approach of non-violent resistance. He dreamt of Hindu-Muslim unity on a national scale and this against the background of two world wars. In this, he was not completely successful since India was partitioned into India and Pakistan. However, the British realized that they could no longer continue to occupy India in the face of this movement and world opinion. India achieved independence on August 15, 1947.

Unfortunately, Gandhi died shortly thereafter. An extreme faction felt that Gandhi gave too many concessions to Pakistan to appease them and prevent partition. On 30 January, 1948, while he was on his way to a prayer meeting, he was shot by a Hindu assassin.

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence has found expression in other movements around the world. Martin Luther King Jr. writes that he became familiar with Gandhi's writings in 1950. "As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my scepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. . . . Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. He was able to break the backbone of

the British empire. This, I think, was one of the most significant things that ever happened in history." (King, 129)

1.6 Krishnamurti

Krishnamurti's life was as paradoxical as Aurobindo's but perhaps in the reverse direction. He was born in 1895 in Madanepalli, Andhra Pradesh in South India. At that time, theosophy, a strange mystical combination of theology and philosophy, found a foothold in India. Essentially, it was a religious cult with Annie Besant as their leader.

In 1909, Krishnamurti and his younger brother Nitya, were noticed by the theosophists for their "spiritual auras". Since their parents were illiterate, it was easy to convince them to hand over the custody of the two boys, so that they can be trained to become "world teachers." Annie Besant then sent both of them over to England to be educated. Nitya had trouble adjusting to the new environment and constantly had health problems. He died there at the age of 27 in 1925

Nitya's death was a turning point for Krishnamurti that led to deep philosophical reflection. Annie Besant groomed him to be the messiah and much to her shock, in August 1929, at the meeting of the society, he announced to her and the world at large that he was no messiah and that he was leaving her society.

At that meeting, he said, "I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. That is my point of view, and I adhere to that absolutely and unconditionally. Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organised; nor should any organisation be formed to lead or coerce people along any particular path." And then he walked away.

In many ways, he was an independent thinker. And unlike his predecessors who studied the ancient wisdom and gave new interpretations of it, he emphasized independent thought. He later wrote, "Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind remains under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, etc. I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if only I can pay – others will undertake the work for me." (Luytens, 83) He died in 1986 at the age of 90 in Ojai California.

1.7 Radhakrishnan

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan wrote extensively on Indian philosophy and his two volume magnum opus on the topic earned him the Spalding Chair of Philosophy at Oxford University which he held from 1936 to 1952. Thus, there is a considerable volume of literature for any sincere student to study.

Radhakrishnan's childhood was not as turbulent as the others we have discussed. Born in 1888 in Tirutani, Andhra Pradesh, he was one of eight children born in extreme poverty. His parents didn't have money to buy books but did want to give him a good education and so enrolled him in the Madras Christian College in 1908.

When asked how he became a philosopher, he replied: "To all appearances this is a mere accident. But when I look at the series of accidents that have shaped my life, I am persuaded that there is more to life than meets the eye. Life is not a mere chain of physical causes and effects. Chance seems to form the surface, but deep down other forces are at work. If the universe is a living one, if it is spiritually alive, nothing in it is merely accidental. 'The moving finger writes and having writ, moves on.'" (Murty and Vohra, 3)

From 1909 onwards, he dived into an intense study of both eastern and western philosophies. He initiated a comparative study of philosophy. He wrote: "The comparative method is relevant in the present context, when the stage is set, if not for the development of a world philosophy, at least for that of a world outlook." (Schlipp, 13) In 1923, he completed his two-volume tome on Indian philosophy, and thus began a period of prolific writing.

From 1936-1952, he held the Spalding professorship at Oxford University during which time he worked on the Sourcebook with Charles Moore. In 1952, he was appointed as the Vice-President of India and in 1962, the President of India. He died in 1975 in Chennai, India at the age of 87.

Charles Moore paid the following tribute after his death. "In all phases of philosophy, he reveals a synthesizing ability which enables him, in conformity with the essence of the great Indian tradition, to avoid all extremes. In this spirit, Radhakrishnan resolves the traditional oppositions between the Absolute and the non-absolute, God and the world, appearance and reality, intuition and reason, philosophy and religion, and philosophy and life, as well as contradictions and oppositions among various religious and philosophical systems." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 610)

Perhaps the British rule of India marks the opening of a philosophical and spiritual dialogue between the East and West. The 20th century saw the end of colonial rule not only in India, but in the entire world. It seems that we are moving towards the vision of a global civilization.

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