

## Academic Philosophy in India

*The presence of a lively and versatile philosophical tradition in a culture is part of its liberal character. An understanding of the human condition that every philosophical tradition searches for, needs a critical engagement with other dominant systems of knowledge. At the same time, a philosophical tradition to be significantly critical must develop tools and discourses to critically examine its own edifice of knowledge. This paper examines the character of philosophic practice in the academic institutions of India.*

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I

### Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of totalitarian systems is that they seldom promote active philosophical traditions as part of their high culture.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes they do advertise official philosophical doctrines, but these are typically instruments of propaganda, rather than vehicles of creative criticism. For example, the doctrinaire Marxist philosophy propagated in the erstwhile Soviet Union or in contemporary China, has very little to do with the radical, critical features of Marxist philosophy that originated in democratic Britain. In fact, apart from blocking off other philosophical traditions from the Soviet society, doctrinaire Marxism has done most damage to the living tradition of Marxist philosophy itself. Arguably, a similar picture attached to Buddhist philosophy as it became the official doctrine at a certain stage of its development. We may be witnessing a similar phenomenon as versions of Buddhist philosophy, nurtured around cult figures such as the Dalai Lama, increasingly become the favoured doctrine of a powerful section of the elites.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the presence of a lively and versatile philosophical tradition in a culture is a mark of its liberal character. Although every philosophical tradition attempts to reach a general, comprehensive understanding of the human condition, such understanding is typically routed through a critical engagement with other dominant systems of knowledge. For, given the richness and complexity of human experience, a comprehensive understanding can be approached only by relentless questioning of received positions. These positions include appeals to divine foreknowledge, religious doctrines, science, or even common sense; a philosophical tradition questions each of these forms. A lively philosophical tradition is thus necessarily sceptical and heretic in character.

Several consequences follow even from this very brief sketch of the nature of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> First, the mere presence of philosophical thought is not enough to sustain a tradition. Second, a philosophical tradition is sustained only when it is able to engage constantly with other dominant forms of knowledge. As knowledge systems become wider and more complex, the philosophical enterprise itself becomes progressively harder and sophisticated for such engagement to have any lasting value. Third, in order for a philosophical tradition to be significantly critical of others, it must develop tools and discourses to be able to critically examine its own edifice of knowledge. Constant self-examination, leading perhaps to self-rejection at times, has been a liberating feature of philosophy in any tradition since antiquity.

It is obvious that the conditions just stated could only materialise in institutional forms which are largely free from external control. Moreover, since a lively philosophical tradition, as noted, is not geared for promoting dominant systems of knowledge and practice, it fails to serve the interests of any major force in a society. Given this essential 'minority' status of philosophy, it follows that a philosophical tradition cannot be sustained unless the society as a whole is tolerant with enough space for the freedom of minority opinion.

It is well known that academic institutions of a certain liberal form have supplied those spaces in history: the Greek Lyceum, Nalanda, ancient seminaries, classical gurukuls, and of course the modern university system. The qualification 'liberal form' cannot be overstressed. As mentioned, just the availability of an academic institution, or an institution of learning, is not enough for genuine philosophical activity to flourish. Soviet Union had an Academy of Philosophy; Buddhist and Vedantin texts are routinely studied in monasteries and 'mathas' respectively. But these are not exactly the places where one expects to find a lively philosophical dialogue, with the features stated above, to ensue.<sup>4</sup> Philosophy thus depends on a rather thin margin of survivability; a liberal academic environment is likely to be its only habitat.

## II

### A Tradition 'Preserved'

Our attention is thus turned towards the character of philosophical practice in the academic institutions in India. As mentioned, there is no doubt that classical India did develop a variety of institutions which encouraged a lively philosophical tradition. The very fact that Indian philosophy branched off into a number of competing schools of thought, which questioned each other's foundational assumptions at great depth for well over a millennium, is an unmistakable sign of the presence of liberal academic institutions. The fascinating historical question of just which array of institutions and social forces made this achievement possible is seldom studied with rigorous scholarship. Yet, the sheer volume, range, quality and diversity of this work testify to the presence of a liberal mindset up to a certain point in time.

This is obviously a sweeping generalisation which is in need of more careful and qualified formulation. For example, explanation is needed for the fact that the original sources of the Carvaka school of thought were first obliterated, and then the school was subjected to one-sided denunciation. Yet, the very fact that the Carvakas alongwith the Buddhists, Jains and others were able to develop at all points to the abiding presence, over long periods, of what Amartya Sen calls 'intellectual heterodoxy'.<sup>5</sup>

For a variety of ill-understood historical reasons, the classical system of institutions either fell apart or their continuing forms could not sustain the tradition as it was developed earlier. In an interesting little article, the Oxford philosopher Michael Dummett traces much of this downfall to the "massive impact of Western Culture...(which) has been all the more crushing because political hegemony accompanied cultural imperialism".<sup>6</sup> Textual evidence seems to suggest, however, that active, 'heterodox' philosophical activity more or less came to a halt many centuries before the British cultural invasion. It would seem rather that philosophical practice had already lost much of its vitality for it to resist, or to come to honourable terms with, western 'cultural imperialism'. So, the real explanation here is likely to be more complex and less charitable than what Dummett proposes.

In any case, Dummett offers an interesting view, which is largely unaffected by questions regarding historical detail, on the consequences of this cultural invasion. "As a result", Dummett observes, "indigenous traditions have been, not killed, but blanketed". By 'blanketing', Dummett means that "the tradition did not die: it was, and still is, preserved". The classical tradition "was being handed down, without alteration, but not being added to; the creativity had gone".<sup>7</sup> When the instinct of preservation dominates a tradition, it begins to lose contact with the rest of the knowledge systems that subsequently arise by dint of the open-ended nature of human experience; this is what the term 'blanketing' signifies.

Moreover, the instinct of (self-)preservation is directly opposed to any form of self-criticism, which, we saw, is one of the central features of a living tradition. In such a situation, Dummett points out, the tradition would no longer be interested in asking critical questions such as: 'Are the distinctions made correct distinctions?' 'Are there other distinctions which should have been made but have been blurred?' 'Are the arguments compelling?' And, ultimately, 'Are the conclusions true?' Dummett notes that only a philosopher, not a historian, would ask these questions. Therefore, when these questions are no longer asked, we have to acknowledge that the philosophical tradition has come to an end.

The net effect of these observations is that classical Indian philosophy never adjusted itself to what is now called 'modernity' and the vast systems of knowledge it unleashed. As centuries passed and the scope of the 'blanketed' tradition became narrower, the tradition itself began to acquire features of obsolescence. It is natural thus that at least for the intellectual class, which was directly exposed to western 'cultural imperialism', the knowledge system enshrined in the tradition lost its intellectual appeal. In fact, in time, this class must have found this tradition to be perhaps more alien than the classical traditions that formed the basis of western knowledge systems.

This last point raises difficult questions about the 'Indianness' of classical Indian philosophy and, by parity of reason, 'westernness' of western philosophy. If a contemporary student of philosophy in India finds what is labelled 'western philosophy' to be more intellectually appealing than the frozen versions of Indian philosophy offered to him, does the student cease to be a part of the Indian tradition in any significant sense? I return to some of these questions in the final section.

### III

#### **Pundits and the Intellectual Elite**

The considerations just raised are crucial for understanding the recent history of academic philosophy in India. In my opinion, many features of this history are routinely misconceived. For example, Dummett ascribes, in a complaining tone, the lack of philosophical creativity to the fact that "the intellectual elite did not participate in the process; they had studied philosophy at the universities, but philosophy written in Greek, or English, or German, or Latin, or French, but not in Sanskrit". "The philosophical formation", he contends, "like the whole intellectual formation, was as it was because under the British raj an alien educational system had been imposed, and, with it, an alien intellectual tradition and orientation".<sup>8</sup>

So the picture Dummett paints has all these pundits and scholars of traditional knowledge waiting in vain with yellowing texts in hand, but the 'intellectual elite' won't show up for lessons; they ran to the universities to feast on western philosophy instead. In this, the 'intellectual elite' is viewed as a servile and gullible lot who can be easily infected with an alien structure which, like an overgrown tumour, ultimately destroys the parent body. If that indeed were the case, then the obvious prescription would be to enter into some surgical process to remove the alien structure such that, after a period of supervised nursing, the patient is able to return to the 'original' state.

Call it 'Hindutva' or whatever, in effect it would mean that the philosophical practice in India should return to what the pundits preached, and that it should stay there. There is a growing voice, usually out of print, in the academic circles in India that this roughly ought to be the case.<sup>9</sup> Given the massive presence of western philosophy in curricula and elsewhere, it is perhaps impracticable, according to this view, to banish western philosophy altogether. Yet, for the sake of national purity and indigenous initiative, steps in that eliminative direction are urgently needed.<sup>10</sup> Those who refuse to follow should be viewed as agents of western culture.<sup>11</sup>

This popular charge of almost a moral failure of the intellectual elites needs to be assessed with care.<sup>12</sup> Setting aside the wider issue of the 'whole intellectual formation' raised by Dummett, can we trace the widespread penetration of western philosophy in the Indian academic scene wholly to the imposition of an alien educational system? As a matter of geographical fact, the educational system so introduced was no doubt alien. Also, we need not ignore the vile politico-cultural motivations, if any, for introducing this system. Let us grant as well, as a matter of fact, that the intellectual class, that jostled for the fruits of occidental culture in droves, basically grew out of this educational system; some of them might even have shared the underlying politico-cultural motivations, if any.

Yet, these assumptions just do not explain the unique phenomenon of the entry and practice of western philosophy in India at such a scale. The factors listed above must have existed at many places around the globe as the British raj set about its sun-following mission. Similar phenomena must have accompanied French raj at other parts of the globe, and, as everyone knows, French political hegemony is even more directly associated with eurocentric 'cultural imperialism'. But the fact remains that western philosophy never found a lasting foothold in the last century anywhere else in the non-western world except in India.

More importantly, the proponents of the 'imposition' view need to explain the following widely attested facts. First, the resistance to the British-imposed educational system, cultural imperialism, and to the British raj as a whole basically ensued from the western-educated classes itself. The traditional Indian elites, largely dominated by a section of the Brahminical class, were generally not distinguished on that count. Second, in contrast to some of the classical acts of the orthodox Hindu society, there is no tangible record of direct imposition of the western ethos in terms of, say, destruction of texts or of centres of learning. If anything, the evidence points to the opposite. Given the limited intellectual calibre of the actual colonisers, there was some effort in continuing with the preservation of traditional culture in terms of opening of libraries, archives and colleges dedicated to the pursuit of traditional knowledge. There are thus grave doubts as to whether the political hegemony in fact wanted the educational system to foster modernity in the true sense. To believe in that is to entertain the naive belief that western imperialism would in fact be interested in creating another eurocentre out of the wilderness of Asia after the loot is over.

The reason why I am directing attention to Michael Dummett, rather than to the omnipresent 'Hindutva' advocate in the Indian scene, is politically obvious. Dummett is one of the major post-war philosophers in the world. Apart from significant contributions to many technical areas of

analytic philosophy, his career as a teacher at Oxford University helped sustain a long tradition of liberal excellence practised there. Apart from his philosophical presence, Dummett is also widely known for his work in support of the immigrants in particular and against racial discrimination in general. There is no measure, therefore, with which he could be identified with the interests of 'Hindutva'. His disinterested opinion thus supplies a powerful plank for the 'Hindutva' ideologues to spring from. That is why it is important to show that Dummett's explanation of why western philosophy took firm roots in India is, at best, simplistic; at worst, it is plain wrong.

A more natural explanation of why western philosophy entered the Indian academic scene on such a scale can be easily constructed if we are prepared to shift from perspectives such as Dummett's. To begin with an obvious fact, even under the political hegemony and 'cultural imperialism' of the British raj, Indian society, as a whole, never became a totalitarian system, although the space for active liberal practices was surely shrinking. Given the massive diversity of cultures upholding heterogeneity of thought and practice, there always were some liberal spaces for the intellectual class to occupy and explore. So, for sections of this class,<sup>13</sup> engagement with a philosophical tradition was clearly a lively option. This ought to be especially true for a class whose ancestry goes back to a profound indigenous tradition within living memory. This last point alone distinguished the Indian scene from several others which came under the British or the French raj. Yet, the domestic tradition which was currently available was a blanketed one. By then, centuries of acts of preservation and blanketing had led to a situation where critical thought had been replaced with a series of mindless rituals. There was strong emphasis on restricted lifestyles, long and demanding religious practices, accurate memorisation of whole texts, great fuss over mastering 'pure' Sanskrit, absolute loyalty to the teacher and the tradition as he represented it, winning of open 'debates' with contrived hair-splitting arguments just to score points over the opponent and to impress the gathering, and the like. Needless to say, these practices were laced with a reverence for the caste system and with downright reactionary views about other cultures, women, and lesser mortals. As noted, these practices were at once the source and the consequence of features of obsolescence that infected large areas of philosophical thought itself. It is unlikely that liberal sections of the intellectual class would have found it appealing to engage with the listed modes of thought and practice.

In my opinion, it is rather important to raise and understand this scenario without any moral stick in hand: no individual or group is to be blamed for these happenings. On the one hand, the pundits and their disciples performed the salutary service of preserving the tradition for centuries against heavy odds. Scholarly documentation of their lives is hardly available. Yet, from what one can glean from some of their well-known 20th century representatives, no tribute seems adequate. In sharp contrast to the self-serving image of the current university-based academician, these pundits typically led a difficult life with unflinching devotion to scholarship and erudition. As subsistence allowances from the state dried out, most of them were compelled to take up the profession of 'purohits' to be able to maintain their families. This required long travels by foot and indiscriminate fasting for a meagre and uncertain package of money, rice and dhoti. In order to survive, the self-demeaning character of this lifestyle, which some of our outstanding scholars had to endure, was wholly internalised in the pundit culture to the point where the tradition of thought itself was sought to be identified with it. As a result, orthodoxy and ritualism inevitably seeped into philosophical thinking.

On the other hand, the liberal sections of the intellectual class can hardly be blamed for shying away from the tradition represented by the pundits. Not without reason and from what they saw, much of the ills of the society around them, including the restrictions on open-ended rational enquiry, could be traced to the knowledge systems represented by the pundits. During this tragic period in Indian history, the western philosophical tradition, supported by the complex system of universities, developed in leaps and bounds in close contact with western science. As the British- and missionary-sponsored education system supplied access to the English language and whiffs of western high culture, the intellectual class in India rushed to western philosophy as ducks to water. Although it is seldom noted, it stands to reason that this quick and mass transfer to western philosophy cannot be fully explained from the fact of 'liberal urge' alone. As noted, the classical Indian tradition itself nurtured a vigorous discourse of rational, analytical enquiry for over a millennium.<sup>14</sup> Although the practising part of the tradition had lost much of this analytical character, the memory of the discourse was still clearly documented in the texts and the commentaries.

Moreover, much of the mode of rational enquiry must have survived in the general culture due to the continued, albeit diminishing, heterodox character of Indian society. It is just that the official practitioners, i.e., the pundits, failed to uphold this character in explicit terms. In sum, there must have been close, internal links between the mindset of the Indian intelligentsia and western philosophy for the latter to attract the former.

Let me try to bring out this point from another direction. It is well known that Christian missionaries of various hues were present in India much before the advent of the British. Thus a large system of churches had existed in India for centuries; the British raj just enlarged the process manifold. With these churches and related cultural and educational institutions, western classical music must have had a substantial presence in India. It will not be surprising if the scale of 'imposition' of this music was even larger than that of the education system Dummett mentioned. Yet, even today, this form of music never took roots with the liberal intelligentsia in India. Classical music in India continues to be decisively Indian in character. The reasons are not far to seek. For one, Indian classical music, with its artful symbiosis with Islam centuries ago, continues to be a living tradition in the sense under discussion here.<sup>15</sup> So, there was no need for a mass shift in culture. For another, despite the alleged universality of music, the post-Bach musical tradition of the west with its harmonies, counterpoints and orchestral structures is markedly different in spirit, style and content from the Indian tradition to allow spontaneous formation of close links between the two. For philosophy, however, the fact of mass migration clearly suggests that there was no such watershed of cultures between classical Indian philosophy and modern western philosophy.

The perspective just proposed can be further substantiated with some actual case studies. Consider, for example, the work of K C Bhattacharya. As Arindam Chakravarty remarks in his illuminating essay,<sup>16</sup> this reclusive and outstanding scholar of Vedanta could well be regarded as "by far the most original, subtlest and toughest of all 20th century professional philosophers in India". As Chakravarty proceeds to elaborate: "The chapters on Bodily Subjectivity in his major work *The Subject as Freedom* anticipates some of the finest insights of Phenomenology. His *Studies in Vedantism* as well as the classic essay 'The Concept of Philosophy' allude to Kant's ideas on thinkability and knowability, albeit in a sharply critical manner, *as if Kant and Sankara were equal parts of India's intellectual traditions* (last emphasis added)".

So here was a typical Vedantin scholar who was naturally drawn, on purely philosophical grounds, to study Kant, Hegel and others to reactivate his own philosophical tradition. As a result, we find perhaps the only distinguished work in professional philosophy produced by an Indian academic in the 20th century. Although creative work of this calibre is difficult to cite, many authors can be mentioned who basically attempted to follow a similar course of enquiry.

#### **IV**

#### **Projections**

There is thus sound basis to a perspective in which much of contemporary western philosophy may be seen to have an underlying continuity with much of classical Indian philosophy. If facts of geography and other embodiments are not to clutter our vision, one may even suggest that classical Indian philosophy simply 'shifted' to the west once its space was lost in India.<sup>17</sup> The spirit of high ideas knows no boundary. If this view is even partially valid, then it follows that the practice of contemporary western philosophy in India is a practice that continues the classical Indian tradition, albeit with a detour via the west. It is unclear if the same could be said of the pundit-style practice of Indian philosophy. This unclarity prevails since, to repeat, the pundit-style practice does not naturally lend itself to interactions with current systems of knowledge. The least that is expected here is that these consequences are debated with care and scholarship, and are not brushed aside because of alleged cultural inconvenience.

A vigorous pursuit of contemporary western philosophy then is a perfectly legitimate practice in the Indian tradition even if this practice virtually ignores the classical Indian tradition. If we take even a cursory look at the actual body of current philosophical research in the west, we will find that the literature hardly mentions authors of its own classical tradition. As expected in any developing discipline, this literature is primarily concerned with its contemporary authors.<sup>18</sup> But this natural fact does not make Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, and the like, fall out of the tradition. They are all there in the living but subliminal history of the discipline. We go back to them if the need arises, otherwise we just carry on with whatever problem currently occupies us as we stand on those great shoulders. What then is the argument, if any, that the practising philosopher in India is failing in his

professional task if he is unable to mention Sankara, Nagarjuna, Prabhakar, Bhartrhari, and other stalwarts of the past?

The argument for granting legitimate autonomy to the unhindered practice of contemporary western philosophy does not prevent research programmes that attempt to directly link classical Indian philosophy with contemporary western philosophy; it only cast doubt on the validity of the practice of Indian philosophy which is not professionally informed of contemporary western philosophy. There are a number of possible points of contact that we will briefly look at in a moment. However, much caution is warranted for such research programmes if they are to be of any lasting value.

The central impediment for such projects, in philosophy rather than in history of philosophy, is the possible obsolescence of large areas of classical knowledge. It is one thing to admire the great edifice of thought that are enshrined in the texts; it is quite another to harness them for addressing current questions. In the lecture cited above, Amartya Sen rightly mentions the work of Aryabhata, Varahamihira, Brahmagupta and others to illustrate the heterodox character of classical Indian thought. It does not follow that contemporary physicists and mathematicians are failing in their jobs if they are not directly engaged with these authors. For that matter, we do not expect Amartya Sen himself to build his economic theories principally on the basis of Kautilya's work. Why should it be otherwise for philosophy in general? So, research programmes that attempt to link thoughts, which are widely separated in time, have a rather thin margin to play upon.

Given this restriction, such interactions can take either of two forms. Although we have suggested a perspective in which contemporary western philosophy is seen as a continuation of classical Indian philosophy, the strands of this continuity remain largely unexplored. So, the first form that an interactive research programme could take is to reconstruct the uncharted classical territory with tools of contemporary western philosophy. In time, with sufficiently rich reconstructions in hand, the programme could be conducted even in the reverse direction: "to interpret and critique some very fundamental concepts of western thought in the language of Indian philosophy".<sup>19</sup>

To be a bit more specific on how this programme might work, one may cite the curious fact that, for reasons that are just beginning to come under research, classical Indian philosophy at least since the 'Mimamsakas' had been deeply concerned with questions regarding the nature and function of languages. Understanding the conditions of articulation were seen to be essential for understanding the conditions of valid knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Despite great internal differences, reflections on language dominated much of the debates in epistemology and metaphysics even when some proponents, such as the Buddhists, denied any significant role to language. In a general sense then, studies on language, thought, reality and knowledge, and their relations thereof, formed much of the content of Indian philosophy. To use a term popularised by Richard Rorty, this decisive 'linguistic turn' took place in western philosophy only around the turn of the century with the work of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, and many others.<sup>21</sup> So, when we are seeking underlying connections between classical Indian philosophy and contemporary western philosophy, it is no wonder that the more direct connections are likely to be found right here. Research on these possible connections is in its infancy. Yet, a number of recent publications do seem to substantiate the point.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, despite its philosophical interest, this form of research is likely to be historical in character for some time.

**V**

### **From Things to Needs**

However, the first form of research just outlined might prepare the way for a second form of research which has direct philosophical significance. This form has not yet taken off the ground to my knowledge. So, I wish to spend some time on this. This form of research begins with some questions about the status of philosophy as it relates to other systems of knowledge. Given that the most profitable area of work is likely to be centred around topics such as language and knowledge as suggested above, philosophical enquiry must open itself, albeit critically, to vast developments in the adjacent sciences. By now, studies on language, cognition, consciousness, and the like are growing areas of scientific research.<sup>23</sup> Unless there is critical engagement between philosophy and these scientific disciplines, philosophy, in either tradition, is likely to acquire features of obsolescence.

Going by recent proclamations, the prospects are not absurd at all. To take one quick example, Daniel Dennett says, after a fascinating account of virus replication, that "an impersonal, unreflective, robotic, mindless little scrap of molecular machinery is the ultimate basis of all the

agency, and hence meaning, and hence consciousness, in the universe".<sup>24</sup> Thus, to understand more about, say, agency, we need to understand more about 'molecular machinery'. Contemporary western philosophy is already looking for ways to adjust itself to these new developments.<sup>25</sup>

Although no research idea can be ruled out in advance, it seems unlikely that the study of 'molecular machinery' could be interestingly linked to classical Indian thought. Given the typical facts of underdevelopment, it is even more unlikely that these scientific studies could be pursued in India at their cutting edge. Roughly then, the scenario is that since the study of 'molecular machinery' neither fits in with Indian philosophy nor can it be fruitfully conducted from here, meaningful philosophical practice is doomed in central areas such as epistemology, language, cognition, emotions, and the like. Philosophy shrinks to a 'spiritualistic' discipline, just as the revivalist, 'orientalist' view would want it to be.

So, the task is to confront Dennett's dangerous idea by examining the scope and the limits of current 'molecular machinery', i.e., current science. In my opinion, there are principled reasons that current science cannot advance beyond a point in these domains [Mukherji forthcoming b]. The basic reason is that classical philosophical issues arise at a level of complexity that no 'molecular machinery' can hope to reach from what we can gather from the current character of science. This is not to rule out, of course, the possibility of what Chomsky (2000) has recently called 'Ethnoscience': systematic, perhaps 'naturalistic', inquiry into human common sense. Whether an envisaged ethnoscience will take the form of an account in terms of 'molecular machinery' is something we cannot even speculate upon for now.

Nevertheless, the present point is that, ethnoscience or not, we do have some tacit account of the world around us for us to lead our lives in the first place. Whether this account will stand the test of naturalistic scrutiny is an entirely different issue. Perhaps, the account we tacitly entertain is full of falsities. It is an account that we find personally and socially useful, nonetheless. The task of philosophy, in one sense of this catch-all nominal, then is to subject this account to critical reflection to see whether they can be – rather, what needs to be done such that these can be viewed as – rationally justified. To take a quick example, we tend to believe what we see from close quarters under normal lighting. Is that belief justified? What are the boundary conditions? What account of perceptual belief can we rationally furnish such that it turns out that it is not irrational to entertain such beliefs? Needless to say, issues become vastly more complex as we examine common entertainments of self and other minds, rules and obligations, durability of objects, repeatability of processes, and so on.

Now, it may turn out, as seems to be the case from recent findings, that formation of perceptual beliefs can be explained entirely on 'internal' grounds, i.e., from properties of visual stimulation alone. In other words, there need not be an 'external' world for these beliefs to form. There is then a possible conflict between our common suppositions and the findings of naturalistic inquiry. Yet, the common supposition itself is an overriding fact. How do we justify it? The only course here is to seek some route to justification from within the network, so to speak, of common suppositions themselves; e.g., suppositions regarding truth, validity, agreement, and action. In that sense, this form of justification – call it 'philosophy' – demands a certain autonomy from naturalistic routes of justification, though the naturalistic route, if there is one, may be right about how the world is like.

It follows that classical philosophical issues in these domains reflect human needs rather than the 'order of things'. The study of human needs – what Wittgenstein called 'philosophical clarification' – arises precisely at the limits of science, in the sense outlined. Study of concepts like 'knowledge', 'belief', 'meaning', 'truth', 'consciousness', etc., are not studies of properties of things such as mental/brain states; these are concepts that humans need and, therefore, construct, to carry on with their personal and social selves. If that is the case, then no development in science can overthrow these corners of philosophy.<sup>26</sup> As noted, this study of needs requires to be done at each phase of scientific advancement to redraw the boundaries of philosophy.

The supposed autonomy of philosophy, however, has no historical privilege; it preserves its autonomy by constantly adjusting itself to other systems of knowledge, especially science. When this dialogue comes to a halt, the chances are that the falsities will now be promulgated even without an internal justification. A philosophy without engagement with other systems of knowledge is thus self-stultifying. Yet, the irony is that this very engagement of dialogue with other systems of knowledge might give rise to the illusion that philosophy is getting submerged in such systems. Uncritical openness could mean loss of autonomy. Ever since the advent of modern science,

western philosophy might have wavered uncertainly between these conflicting pulls of philosophy even though there has been a clear underlying distinction throughout.

One way to test the hypothesis just proposed is to examine the philosophical inquiry conducted in traditions where modern science did not play any role at all, and where the study of needs – misleadingly called ‘ways of life’ – had been explicitly advocated. That ‘noise-free’ environment will tell us how to strip away the scientific vestiges of western philosophy, and to situate the rest for perennial human reflection.<sup>27</sup> This is where the study of classical Indian philosophy takes centre-stage. That philosophy itself must have interacted with other systems of knowledge, including forms of ancient Indian science, at certain stages of its development. It is doubtful though if the interactions were as frequent and thorough as in the case of western philosophy. In any case, Indian philosophy stopped growing, as noted, before the entry of modern western science in the Indian scene. So, the philosophy that the pundits preserved for centuries has remained untarnished – in a ‘natural’ state, so to speak – from the pulls just mentioned. We thus have an example of philosophy that retains a certain purity of form.

Here the fact that Indian philosophy stopped growing some centuries ago will not prominently affect the point of the enquiry, since it has been delinked from the factors which contribute to its apparent obsolescence. We will also learn how to continue to philosophise with those reflective tools once the barriers of era and mode of expression are carefully removed with scholarly study. Questions thus arise regarding whether the current academic structure of philosophy in India is prepared to face the demanding tasks sketched above. An examination of them however is a topic for another essay.

#### **Notes**

1 I am viewing totalitarian systems, roughly as in Popper (1962), as closed systems of thought promulgated by some authority. In many ways, this view is different from, say, Noam Chomsky’s view of totalitarianism as a system of tyrannical organisation, although the two views coincide for prominent joints of history. Chomsky’s list consists exactly of Bolshevism, Nazism, and Corporations. My list includes these and extends to most of religious cultures, tribal cultures, etc, though many of these cultures need not be viewed as tyrannical.

2 However, the conservative, dogmatic character of much of Indian philosophy is a wholly different phenomenon to which we return.

3 See Mukherji (forthcoming a) for more details and case studies.

4 This is not to suggest that no useful work ever came out of these institutions.

5 See Sen (2001).

6 See Dummett (1996), p 14.

7 Dummett, op cit, p 15.

8 Dummett, Ibid.

9 See Mukherji (1996) for some indication as to the sources and the character of the issue here. At least one influential voice, complaining about the ‘exaggerated importance’ to western analytic tradition and suggesting major ‘revision and updating of the syllabuses’, is cited and examined there.

10 Interestingly, if by ‘western philosophy’ we mean western analytic philosophy, which in fact we do in what follows, then the opinion just sketched is likely to be shared by many academicians in the general area of humanities and social sciences. They would rather endorse that part of western philosophy which is commonly labelled ‘continental thought’. I will not examine this angle since it does not have a very large following within academic philosophy, as yet. In any case, practitioners of this angle in India, especially those outside of professional philosophy, are not known for their understanding of classical Indian thought beyond lip service. Their attention is squarely focused on the likes of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and others. Mention of Vedanta or the Upanishads seems to be just a matter of political convenience. At issue also are dictums such as ‘the enemy of an enemy is a friend’.

11 For now, I am concerned only with the factual and the philosophical basis of this opinion. So, I am ignoring other matters such as where this opinion is coming from, how it is sought to be put into practice without any debate at all, the location of this opinion in the power hierarchy of academic philosophy, the lure of the growing market for a revivalist view of classical Indian thought in the west, the role of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, and the like.

Also, I am not suggesting that everyone upholding the revivalist view has a vested interest of the kind listed above. Some obviously do; most are just confused about how to understand the complex relationships between issues of cultural identity and contents of professional disciplines in a post-colonial set-up.

12 For, if the charge was valid then, it ought to be largely valid even now since nothing much has changed; in fact, the scale and the power of Dummett’s ‘intellectual elite’ has increased manifold in the meantime. So, if that is the case, it would be difficult to find a way out of mass moral failure.

13 Which really is the only class at issue here given that academic philosophy has always been a part of high culture.



- 14 See Mohanty (1992).
- 15 This is not to deny that there were, and are, pockets of questionable practices in the musical tradition as well. Mukherji (1997a) contains some reflections on forms of decadence in Indian classical music in the late 19th century and Rabindranath Tagore's creative response to the problem.
- 16 See Chakravarty (1996), p 1.
- 17 Following interesting work by the linguist B N Patnaik, Mukherji (1997b) contains some hints towards a similar way of relating the ancient work of Panini and contemporary generative grammar.
- 18 Except, of course, when the focus is on the history of ideas.
- 19 J N Mohanty, cited in Chakravarty, op cit, p 9.
- 20 See Mukherji (2000b) for some preliminary speculations on possible connections between the two in the Indian tradition. Needless to say, much more needs to be done.
- 21 See Rorty (1967). See also Dummett (1992, 1993).
- 22 For some explorations along these lines, see Matilal and Shaw (1985), Zilberman (1988), Matilal (1990), Siderits (1991), Mohanty (1992), etc. Some of J F Staal's work is also of related interest; in particular, see Staal (1996). I have only listed some of the more prominent works of a general nature. See the references in these works for more focused pieces, as well as for some rather incomplete list of the original sources.
- 23 See Pinker (1995, 1997) for a popular review of these developments. See also Leiber (1991) for a lucid introduction to connections between these recent developments and classical philosophy.
- 24 See Dennett (1995), p 203.
- 25 See Goldman (1985) for a classic statement in these matters. See Boden (1990), Hookway and Peterson (1993), Casati, Smith and White (1994), among others, for more detailed explorations of philosophical issues with the tools of cognitive science.
- 26 For example, it is sometimes suggested that a naturalistic inquiry into human mental life will not require the concept of belief [Stich 1983]. Yet, we cannot do without this concept in common life. See Mukherji (2000a) for an analysis of the concept of belief from this direction.
- 27 See Mukherji (forthcoming b) for connections between literature and philosophy from this direction.

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