BOOK REVIEW


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India has been the seat of deep philosophical engagements since the Vedic period. However, Indian philosophical wisdom, albeit different from Western philosophy in many respects, was not widely known to the rest of the world before colonial thinkers started their dialogue with Indian philosophy through their translations and academic exegeses. Western scholars, primarily the Indologists, analyzed Indian thought through the lens of Western thought in spite of the traditional insular approach of Indian pandits. Amidst this tension between traditional Indian scholars and Western scholars who encountered Indian philosophy, was born a unique breed of Indian scholars, thanks to the colonial milieu of education and thought, who developed their thought in the intersection of traditional Indian thought and Western thought. Some of these scholars looked down at Indian thought, some held Indian thought to be greater than that of the rest of the world, and some tried to develop syncretic approaches to philosophy with an in-depth understanding of both Indian and Western philosophies. Thus, cross-cultural philosophy began in India.

*Philosophy in Colonial India* traces this development of cross-cultural philosophy in India and documents the tensions between interpretations of Indian and Western philosophical systems. This is a daunting task, particularly when it is that of “tracing ... [the] evolutionary trajectory” of “hesitant transactions between unmistakably divergent world-views” (p. vii). In his Foreword to this book, Chetan Singh writes that while Indian philosophy adapted to the challenges presented by Western philosophy, “[its] foundational principles remained rooted in older indigenous traditions” (ibid.). However, he says that “an entire world of traditional Sanskrit scholarship chose to turn its back to the altered realities being forcefully fashioned by colonial rule” (p. viii). This tension between the attitudes of traditional Sanskrit scholars and modern Indian philosophers is presented throughout this book.

This volume is the result of a study week held in October 2009 in the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, and is a welcome step to fill the near-vacuum of scholarship on Indian philosophers in English, mainly in the colonial period. The editor of this volume, Sharad Deshpande, traces the beginnings of interculturality in India in his Introduction. He clarifies the difference between the
nomenclatures of “Indian philosophy” and “modern Indian philosophy.” He shows how the word “philosophy” is generally considered Eurocentric, which makes it necessary to have special identifiers for philosophies developed in the rest of the world. He also does an etymological analysis of the Sanskrit words “darśana” and “ānvīṣkārti” and compares them with the word “philosophy” to delineate the differences in the approaches of these two world views. He also shows how Western scholars do not agree about the equivalence of Indian thought and Western philosophy. Instead, he suggests a kind of fluidity in either philosophy as “there is no fixed concept of philosophy on either side” (p. 8).

Many Indian scholars starting with Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar insisted that the study of Indian philosophy in Sanskrit become “historical, comparative, and philological” (p. 5), with the result that the traditional scholarship declined while Indological scholarship was on the rise. Indian philosophical thought-traditions were conflated with religious practices. Deshpande’s Introduction sets the stage for the arguments in the book by examining key concepts like modernity, tradition, and transformation, and giving an overview of the other twelve chapters in the book. Deshpande shares interesting information with the readers such as the fact that the pandits of Varanasi knew Descartes’s thought or that many English treatises were translated into Sanskrit in the colonial era. He also explores answers to the question, “what is Indian about Indian Philosophy?” (p. 11). The entire book is, in many ways, an attempt to find answers to this question.

Deshpande is quite candid in describing the effects of Western hegemony in philosophy and shows how this affects the visibility of the work done by Indian philosophers even today. He laments that while “modern Indian philosophers belonging to the university system of the colonial era might have pursued philosophy in a creative manner to render it both accessible and acceptable to the English-speaking world abroad, as well as to the educated Indian populace at home,” “much of the academic philosophical work of this period stands largely ignored, not only abroad, but also even in India” (p. 20). However, Deshpande is optimistic that “this anthology will be a step towards overcoming the disconnect between the modern Indian philosophers and the texts they produced during the colonial era and present-day philosophical activity in the academic set-up of Indian universities” (ibid.).

In “Thought and Context: Philosophy on the Eve of Colonialism,” V Sanil argues that philosophy cannot be divorced from its history, particularly its colonial past that has disrupted the very process of thinking. He traces the “several attempts in post-independence India to bring the traditional scholars and modern academic philosophers to a dialog” (p. 43). He cites the example of Daya Krishna’s project Samvād. He also records various instances of translation of traditional Indian thought into English and also the writings of colonial Indian philosophers in international journals. Sanil’s chapter is important in that it marks the temporality, particularly of colonial, Indian philosophy. Sanil analyses K.C. 
Bhattacharyya’s *Swaraj in Ideas* (1984) and concludes that “according to Bhattacharyya, under colonialism, the Indian mind was in a state of paralysis” (p. 45). Though in his excellent Introduction, Deshpande gives accounts of the vibrant literary work that was carried out in Sanskrit in the nineteenth century, Sanil does not take note of this and, quoting Sheldon Pollock’s *Death of Sanskrit* (2001), concludes that the Sanskrit works produced at that time “were lifeless repetitions and not renewals” (ibid.).

In “Philosophy in Colonial India: The Science Question,” S.G. Kulkarni shows how Indian philosophy encountered modern science and technology in the colonial period by explaining three points of view of “unqualified acceptance … qualified acceptance and … qualified rejection” (p. 55). He counters the idea that modern Indian philosophy is neither modern, Indian, nor philosophy. Kulkarni loses no time in establishing that subjugation to the colonial rule had made India materially deprived, which led her condition to worsen in all the human sciences including philosophy. Kulkarni shows that science education was introduced in India by the British to make Indians feel inferior in scientific knowledge to the British. Indians responded to this project by trying to record a history of science in pre-colonial India, by starting an Indian tradition of modern science, by completely accepting modern science education, by accepting it with some qualification, and rejecting it with some qualification. Kulkarni traces the de-materialization of science and the effort to make it an extension of Vedanta by Indian thinkers like Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda in order that the Western hegemony could be removed and modern science could be internalized. Though Kulkarni tries to make his point by giving some quotations from Aurobindo, and he includes the name of Vivekananda in the school of qualified acceptance of modern science, he fails to prove it; he does not at all cite Vivekananda. Kulkarni shows that the British ensured that Vedanta was seen as the main religion of the Hindus to weaken the influence of the other Hindu cults of the masses, which strategy however backfired in that the masses felt pride in Vedanta.

Nirmalya Narayan Chakraborty in “The Self and Its Knowledge: The Legacy of Rasvihary Das,” explains Rasvihary Das’s theory of self-knowledge. For Das, knowledge of an object includes the knowledge of the object as a thing and its character. Das focused on the criticality of philosophy that extended to all experiences in life. He does “not think that the place of subject and object are interchangeable” (p. 73). Chakraborty takes the reader through different ideas of Das on self-knowledge and avowal. Based on Das’s thoughts, Chakraborty concludes that it is impossible to not identify or wrongly identify oneself and that self-knowledge is natural. Of course, this view is contrary to the various traditional views that one should strive for self-knowledge.

Amita Chatterjee presents Brajendra Nath Seal’s analysis of Hegelian thought in “Brajendra Nath Seal: A Disenchanted Hegelian.” Seal was instrumental in creating the Indian philosophy syllabi taught in Indian universities
till today. She shows how Seal could, through a careful study of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, see the limitations of Hegelian thought, and how Seal developed an eight-point philosophy of education based on his understanding of Eastern and Western thought. Chatterjee quite easily brings out the brilliance of the polymath that Seal was. It is unfortunate that his life and works have not been studied in depth and while philosophy students across the world vouch by Derridas and Foucaults, Seal’s genius is not talked of, and if discussed, only as a faded page of history. This is precisely why this book becomes timely and should be given a wider audience.

Engagement with Hegelian thought continues in Tathagata Biswas’s “The Notion of Absolute: Hegel and Hiralal Haldar,” where Biswas “discusses the notion of Absolute as developed by Hiralal Haldar in response to Hegel and British neo-Hegelians of late 19th and early 20th century” (p. 103). This is another revelation that this volume has to offer. It is anybody’s guess how many modern-day philosophers around the world know of Haldar and his version of Absolute Idealism. Though Haldar followed Hegel and neo-Hegelians, he had to give up Hegel’s thought because of his differences on the connection between thought and reality. Haldar developed a particular kind of realistic idealism, where the mind is both the all-including spirit and also the finite subject, while mind and matter are opposite to one another.

In “G.R. Malkani: Reinventing Classical Advaita Vedānta,” the editor of this volume, Sharad Deshpande, shows how Advaita Vedanta was seen by colonial Indian philosophers as the philosophical system that was a natural choice for creating a national identity and also for engaging with Western philosophies. He also details how Advaita was reinvented under various nomenclatures to stress that there was a change in perception on account of negotiating with Western thought. Analyzing the works of another forgotten Indian philosopher, G.R. Malkani, Deshpande says that “Malkani was perhaps the only one to boldly declare that keeping the spirit of classical Vedānta alive and its free rendering independent of the age-old tradition need not conflict with each other” (p. 124). Deshpande argues that Malkani and other Indian philosophers of his time wanted to understand Indian thought as a living system. Malkani characterized a group of philosophers who did not engage in philology, Indology, or the history of philosophy, but were bold enough to venture into new and independent interpretations of Indian thought.

In “K.C. Bhattacharyya and Spivak on Kant: Colonial and Post-colonial Perspectives, Lessons, and Prospects,” Kanchana Mahadevan analyses the Kantian engagements of colonial philosophers like K.C. Bhattacharyya and postcolonial thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Analysing Śaṅkarā and Kant, Bhattacharyya concludes that philosophy is symbolic and is not connected to objective science. The philosophical has the spiritual embedded into it, according to Bhattacharyya. The transcendental subject is the center of
philosophy. Bhattacharyya reads Vedānta into Kant and Kant into Vedānta. Spivak sees Kantian thought as a colonial device to suppress indigenous thought.

While analyzing G.N. Mathrani’s contributions to engagements with Western philosophy in India by studying and reconciling Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy to the Indian metaphysical framework, P.G. Jung in “The Road Not Taken: G.N. Mathrani’s Wittgensteinian Transformation of Philosophy,” argues that after the British colonizers introduced education on the lines of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s suggestion, they also created a paradigm where the terms “Western” and “Indian” were not merely distinguishers of different categories of philosophy, but the former was legitimate while the latter was considered impossible. This led to a situation where Indian philosophers had to present their thoughts in the Western framework and had to look up to the West for the legitimization of Indian philosophy. Mathrani introduced Wittgenstein to the academic Indian philosophy and perhaps wrote the first-ever book on Wittgenstein. Mathrani was more aligned to a method of doing philosophy, specifically the Wittgensteinian method, than to a particular philosophy or philosopher.

In “Radical Translation: S.R. Rajwade’s Encounter with F.W. Nietzsche,” Mangesh Kulkarni details how S.R. Rajwade through his Marathi translation of and commentary on Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche’s The Antichrist, reinvented Nietzsche’s thought in an Indian context. Kulkarni also gives a brief life-sketch of Rajwade, another Indian philosopher who has not yet been given his credit. In “Tagore’s Perception of the West,” Shefali Moitra argues that Rabindranath Tagore’s idea of education was one that gave dignity to a person and also paved the way for creativity and freedom. Moitra shows how Tagore critiqued the formal educational system and argues that he wanted to put in place an educational system that would be free in spirit and lead one to spirituality. However, Moitra argues that it is possible to derive a non-metaphysical philosophy out of Tagore’s oeuvre. In “Bankimchandra on Morality,” Proyash Sarkar elaborates the ideas of justice and equality as found in Bankim’s works, and examines his problematic views on pleasure and morality and argues that Bankim is not a conventional utilitarian.

Most Sanskrit texts are today available to Anglophone readers primarily through the translations of Anglo-German scholars, translations that suffer from severe colonial hegemony and a break from the epistemology and received understanding of the traditional scholarship. These texts need to be retranslated and the existing translations have to be scrutinized through a thoroughly incisive philosophical lens, argues Mohini Mullick in her essay “Colonialism and Traditional Forms of Knowledge: Then and Now.” Mullick uses sarcasm in questioning the validity of the project of translating Sanskrit texts and themes into languages and contexts accessible to the Anglophone world, and she equates this artificial urgency to translate with schizophrenia. She argues that the colonial conquest was also a conquest of the word and language. Mullick gives a call for
urgently preserving the nearly-lost world view preserved in traditional Indian texts in Sanskrit and vernaculars. She is concerned that what “is at stake here is the very survival of many Indian languages in which this thought tradition has been given varied expression down the centuries, an expression which remained largely oral” (p. 252).

This volume mirrors the many contrasting views on the colonial influence on Indian philosophy. While most chapters make strong and well-reasoned arguments, some have lopsided views to present. It is an excellent compendium of the philosophical deliberations of Indian philosophers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose work has not been academically presented to a wider audience in recent times. The copyediting could have been much better and errors on almost every page could have been avoided. This book traces the history of the gradual decline of the traditional and indigenous Indian thought-systems and the emergence of a new kind of syncretic cross-cultural philosophizing. This book is a wonderful account of the distancing of Indian philosophical world views and the colonial Western coloring of the Indian philosopher’s mind. This book also records with clarity the history of the pedagogical evolution of Indian and Western philosophy in India. This volume would be a resource book for scholars of Indian philosophy, cross-cultural philosophy, colonial and postcolonial studies, Indologists, Sanskritists, and Indian historians.

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