

Philosophy and Science : Two Interactive Forces in Indian Life

JAGATPATI SARKAR

India is uniquely rich in philosophical speculations from the earliest time of the *Rigveda*. The Rishis indulged in philosophizing, and the result of their activities are embodied prominently in the *Purusha-sukta*, *Devi-sukta* etc. The *Purusha-sukta* and the *Devi-sukta* contain the seeds of Monistic Realism while the *suktas* ascribed to Dirghatamās contain the seeds of Dualistic Realism. Thus, in course of time, six well-marked schools of philosophy had emerged. Some of these were based on Monistic Idealism, while others on Dualistic. But all of these were founded on the Vedas and held the Vedas as the supreme authority.

These systems of philosophy are generally known as the Orthodox or *Āstika* systems. Side by side, there arose some other systems that questioned the authority of the Vedas. These systems are generally known as the Heterodox or *Nāstika* systems. The results of the heterodox way of Indian speculations are found in the materialistic system of Cārvāka, nihilistic systems of the Buddhists, and the rationalistic system of the Jains.

In the cultural history of India, *Darshana* occupies the central place. The Sanskrit word *darshana* does not exactly correspond to 'philosophy' in English, but in the absence of a more appropriate expression, these words are, nowadays, being used synonymously. The various branches of sciences have supplied materials

for philosophy, which is the inner core or the ground on which the grand lofty edifice of religion is built.

In India, philosophy is the religion of religions, while in the West, philosophy is studied as the science of sciences. Many people carry a misconception that spiritualism was the only characteristic feature of India in the Vedic times. Actually many different philosophical currents were very much active during this period. One of these is called Lokāyata (sometimes also called Cārvāka) which did not believe in the existence of *ātmā* or soul. The Cārvākas refused to accept anything on the basis of belief and theorized that everything in the world is made of four constituents or *chaturbhuta*—earth, water, air, and fire (a fifth one, sky was added later). They believed that when a man dies, his body returns to these four constituents, and does not go to heaven or hell. Thus they sought to explain the world through material processes and phenomena.

The other philosophical lines of thought like those of Nyāya-Vaisheshika and Sāmkhya also existed. Notwithstanding the differences between these lines of thought, basically these were also materialistic philosophy. These philosophical currents created a healthy curiosity about the material world.

In the later part of the Vedic period, agriculture was started in addition to animal husbandry, and there arose a need for a

calendar in order to fix the timings of sowing, reaping and other agricultural activities. That provided the primary motivation for studying the motion of objects in the sky. In addition, the necessity of fixing the times of holy events like the performance of a *yajna* also induced people to look for auspicious events in the sky. The Vedic literature reveals that they counted months on the basis of the phases of the moon, and the year on the basis of the motion of the sun. Since a whole number of moon months do not make a sun-year, the extra days were counted as *malamāsa*, a period when no auspicious event could be held. The year was divided into two parts, when the sun moved towards the North (*Uttarāyana*), and when it moved towards the South (*Dakshināyana*) and they could identify the summer and winter solstice. In *Yajurveda*, a year comprising 12 solar months and 6 *ritus* (seasons) was recognized. The six seasons in the Vedic nomenclature were *Vasanta ritu*, *Grishma ritu*, *Varshā ritu*, *Sharata ritu*, *Hemanta ritu* and *Shishira ritu*. In addition they named 27 stars along the path of the sun and the moon. This is very important that in the Vedic period there was no astrology in the sense of a belief that human lives are predestined by the time of birth and the influence of planets on their lives. In that period the term *Jyotisha* was used in the sense of astronomy only. The Vedānga *Jyotisha* and the Nakshatra system came into existence later. The phase of Siddhānta was very important and we come across the name of Pitāmaha Siddhānta, the Romaka, the Paulisha, the Vashishtha and the Surya Siddhānta. Their attitude to logic and science has been depicted in the *Arthashastra*. Not only that, the scientific and technological exchange between India and Central Asia, Tibet and China may also be mentioned in this context.

Indian philosophy is not only speculative but practical in outlook since it seeks to guide and regulate our life. It does not attempt merely to solve the problem of reality unlike European philosophy that endeavours to find a remedy for the miseries of life alone. Indian philosophy is not negative or nihilistic in outlook but is as much positive as modern science, the only difference being that the latter is materialistic and the former is spiritualistic. The one ignores the Spirit and its implications, while the other emphasizes the reality of Spirit and the need for regulating one's life on a spiritual basis.

Therefore, Indian philosophy is not merely a view of life but a way of life. Philosophy is the complement of religion in India, whereas it is a supplement of science in Europe. All the schools of Indian Philosophy seek to remind us about the highest goal, the summum bonum, and offer a panacea for the evils of life. In the process, the consideration of metaphysical questions comes in. On the other hand, the European philosophy considers metaphysics or the study of reality as the chief aim of philosophy and does not recognize its practical bearing on life. Here we should like to quote the view of an eminent thinker, Dr Monier Williams. He says, 'Earnest thinkers on a subject, equally interesting to all, will often think in the same way and there is nothing to wonder at, if the truths flashing on their minds from common source, find similar expression in both'.

The earliest exposition of the tenets of the Vaisheshika school of Indian Philosophy is contained in a book of aphorisms called the *Vaisheshikasutra*, ascribed to Kanāda. The name Vaisheshika is due to the atomic theory based mainly on the category of *Vishesha* (particularity) conceived first by Kanāda.

From a very ancient time Nyāya also

came along with the Vaisheshika School of philosophy as a sister system professing the atomic theory and many other things in common. In course of time both the systems were clubbed together into a single whole and called the Nyāya-Vaisheshika system, finally giving rise to what is now called the Navya-Nyāya school. It is, however, very difficult to ascertain which of these two sister systems was prior to the other.

Shivāditya's Shaptapadārthi marks a new epoch in the history of Indian philosophical literature. This is the earliest work that we have for the authority of the joint school of Nyāya and Vaisheshika. This has for the first time hit upon the conception of negation and added 'abhāva' or the non-entity as the seventh category to the list of six categories originally enumerated by Kanāda. Shivāditya cannot be identical with Vyomshiva. *Shabda pramāna* is included in *anumāna* in the *Shaptapadārthi*. Vyomshiva's explanation shows that he recognized three *pramānas*—*pratyaksha*, *anumāna* and *shabda*. They are independent of one another. After Shivāditya we find many treatises on the Nyāya-Vaisheshika system on the model of the *Shaptapadārthi*, the most important of which are *Tarkabhāshā* of Keshava Misra, *Tarka Kaumudi* of Laugakshi Bhāskara, *Tarkāmrita* of Jagadisha, *Bhāshā pariccheda* of Vishvanātha and *Tarkasamgraha* of Annam Bhatta.

Shukrācārya defines the differences between a science (*Vidyā*) and an art (*Kalā*). He says,

*Yad yat syāt vācīkam samyak karma
vidyābhi sangakam;
Sakto mukoapi yat kartum kalā sangam tu
tat smritam.*

It means 'that which can be entirely

explained with the help of words is a science, while that which even a dumb man can do is an art'.

So from the very beginning India started drawing the distinction between truth and myth or falsehood. India even valued the scientific method of studying history. Historiography in her view is also a science.

Albert Einstein clearly affirms that all physical concepts are 'free creations of the human mind'. This is also true that referring to the death of his friend, Besso, he remarked 'For us who are convinced physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, however "persistent".' To a Vedantin Einstein's remark seems to be an echo of the metaphysical voices of the past masters.

Lastly, I refer to the discussion based on 'Development of Social Thought' (chap xx), by Emory S. Bogerud in which the author comments: 'Spencer is best known for his treatment of the organic analogy. He set up the hypothesis that Society is like a biological organism and then proceeded to defend his thesis against all objections with great logical force'. In 1893 Sir Charles Elliot said in the annual meeting of the Asiatic Society that 'Babu Bhudev Mukherjee's *Samajik Prabandha* compares the Hindu social system with that [of the] west and teaches that the Hindus have very little to learn in this respect from foreigners. . . . No single volume in India contains so much wisdom and none shows such extensive reading. It is the result of the lifelong study of a Brahmin of the old class, in the formation of whose mind eastern and western philosophy have made an equal share'.

I think India is the place where this synthesis has occurred in a very meaningful manner. ■

* Dr Sarkar is at present Guest Teacher, Department of Library and Information Science, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata.