

The Continent for Circe

Nothing, to my thinking, makes the movement of the Hindu mind from the bodily suffering to the pessimistic philosophies dearer than the story of Buddhism, the first philosophy of sorrow to appear in the existence of the Hindus. Siddharta, according to the well-known legend, went out on pleasure excursions, and one after another saw a man bent with age, another stricken by malady, and a third borne on a bier. These sight weighed on his mind as a terrible nightmare until, going out a fourth time, he saw a man with a shaven head, and wearing clothes dyed with red ochre, walking along calmly. He was so struck by the bearing and countenance of this man, that he went up to him and asked who and what he was. The man replied that he was a mendicant who had left the world and its ways, forsaken friends and home, and thus found deliverance. At last, Siddharta saw a way out of the fears which had haunted him in the previous weeks, and he also decided to leave the world.

Can anyone conceive of a more pitiful failure, from the moral point of view, of courage, and from the biological of vitality? Where would a man stand in regard to faith and effort once he allowed himself to be intimidated by the commonplace lot of all flesh?

However, the connexion between this failure of the Hindus and their philosophies need not be established only by interference from legend. It is laid bare in so many words in all the texts. Our metaphysical systems were not enacted for their own sake, but for a practical end.

‘Jagad’eva dutikha-pamka-mmagnam’-uddidhirsuh par- ama-karuniko munik anviksikim praninaya.

Seeing the world sunk in the mire of sorrow, the most compassionate sage composed his philosophy in order to rescue it.’ So declared a commentator on the Vaiseshik or atomic system of Hindu philosophy.

Even more emphatic and direct is the declaration of Samkhya, which to my thinking is the most typical system of Hindu philosophy. The very first couplet of the earliest extant text of this school says that philosophical inquiry arises from the impact of threefold sorrow, with prompts the effort to discover the means of rid of it. Equally unambiguous is the later aphorism: Now, I’m putting an end to three kinds of sorrow lies the goal of human effort. The rejection of the intellectual motivation could not be more uncompromising.

After making sorrow and suffering their starting point, the philosophies go on to define these, and in doing so reveal the connexion I have in mind even more clearly. The idea of universal and inescapable suffering does not come from moral or spiritual experience, from any feeling of being abandoned by God, or from the spectacle of evil. No Hindu thinker would

have understood the agony of St. Augustine or, for that matter, even of Schopenhauer, which makes me offer the incidental remark that if the latter had any conception of Hindu philosophy it was a singularly misconceived notion. The Hindu never represented human suffering as anything but the ills, flesh is heir to. Even Hindu salvation, which is release from sorrow; is reduced to terms of the flesh. That partly explains the curious emphasis which Hindu spiritual discipline places on states of the body, metabolism, and psychoses.

According to Hindu philosophy suffering is of three kinds: that which proceeds from the 'self'; that which comes from external sources, things or other living creatures; and that which is inflicted by supernatural agencies and acts of God. It should be noted that the classification is only by the sources of suffering, and not by its nature, which is one—suffering of the body, with the mind thrown in as the agent of consciousness. All the systems agree over this, and I give by way of illustration the summing-up of a well-known commentator on Samkhya.

Suffering of the first kind, proceeding from the self, is again of two sorts—bodily and mental, the first originating in the disturbances of wind, bile, and phlegm: and the second from the emotions, e.g. lust, anger, greed, delusion, fear, envy, or sadness. Suffering from these causes occurs within the personality, and therefore these are called sufferings due to the self.

Suffering from external sources is also of two kinds: that due to other living creatures or of inanimate things; and that which is caused by supernatural agencies. In order to leave no room for doubt as to the first external source, the following are specifically mentioned: thieves, enemies, lions, tigers, buffaloes, snakes, mosquitoes, scorpions, crocodiles, trees, and stones. In the second source are placed spirits like yaksas, rakshasas, vinayakas, and planets, among the troubles inflicted by them are stormy rain, hail, heat, and cold.

I am going into all these details to show that Hindu philosophy leaves no room for doubt as to what it regards as human suffering, and from what it seeks to deliver mankind. All of it comes from checks inflicted on lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, and pride of life. To Hindu philosophy, which seeks to turn the tables on the order of nature in revenge for these attacks, these forms of suffering are not, to use a musical term, the accidentals of life, but its main key. That outlook is possible only among those who have been beaten by nature and broken in spirit. All of it boils down to one simple fact: collapse of courage and vitality. There is no hint anywhere that anything is happening in the moral or spiritual sphere. All the suffering is placed in the secular order: in one word, in the torturous Indo-Gangetic plain.

But once it is admitted that Hindu philosophy is a philosophy of failure on the bodily plane, it must also be acknowledged that it has given to that failure a grandeur of expression which no mere failure could ever hope to have. There are few systems of philosophy and religion known to me which make the proclamation of universal and inescapable sorrow so resonant.

Compared with it, *vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas* is a trifle didactic, despite the ring; and Job's lament is personal, in spite of the passion which makes it infinitely greater art than any Conscious art. In these Hebrew texts sorrow remains on the earth, but in Hindu philosophy man's suffering, arising not from his higher nature but only from his body, envelopes the whole cosmos. It is as if the dust of the Gangetic plain was rising to permeate the nebulae. Bodily suffering felt with this intensity naturally generated a passion commensurate with it.

It seems to me that the Western interpreters of Hindu philosophy, and more so their Indian imitators, have committed a great mistake and done harm by intellectualizing it too much. Much of the modern writing on the subject. Is just dry as dust, choking, and soul-stripped logic-chopping, which belabours the and until it feels sick of Hindu philosophy.

To me, on the contrary, it gives a different feel, which I shall try to communicate with the help of an image. It seems to me that the authors of the various systems ' of Hindu philosophy are captains of ships passing through a storm. All of them evoke in my mind the figure of Captain MacWhirr in Conrad's story, *Typhoon*. There is. no contradiction between this simile and the relentless logic of the Hindu metaphysical constructions. Can the captain of a ship passing through a cyclone afford to be illogical? Please remember that Captain MacWhirr walked into his chart-room and consulted his barometers, and also his remark about the mate who had become hysterical: 'Don't listen to him. He is not on duty.' The philosophical systems lose none of their passionate character by being drily argumentative in form. Perhaps this is best seen in the Nyaya system, a system of logic usually ridiculed even by the Hindus for its quibbles, but which basically remains passionate, and rides on the current of Hindu sorrow.

A little thinking will show why the passion had to come. The suffering of the Hindus in everyday life was so drab and even sordid, and again- it was so continuous and irritating that no man, if he knew he was condemned to live with it for ever, could hope to save himself from utter degradation except by raising the suffering to a level at which it could be borne without shame, and on which it would not be so cowardly, squalid, and repulsive as it was in life.

It was the perpetual sight of an oozing of uncleanness into the consciousness, taken with the visible fact: of the proneness of all things to decompose in a tropical country, that created the characteristic Hindu concept of *tamas*, as the lowest of the *grata* or attributes. The word *tamas* literally means darkness, but in Hindu thought and feeling it stands really for a very comprehensive term for all kinds of squalor—material, biological, intellectual, moral, and spiritual. Suffering his *tamas* was the Hindu *hubris*.

Yet the Hindu Idealists saw that it was to this that their people were being driven by the relentless environment. They did not identify the power behind the degradation as Nature herself as she was in their country but even without discovering the cause they were sufficiently frightened by the

effect, and realizing that total escape from physical and mental suffering was impossible, tried at least to redeem it—to take it from its Indian inferno a Hindu purgatory, where it could be chastened. They succeeded in that.

But the purgatory was also terrible. Dante's is an idyll in comparisons. The ways of deliverance recommended by the philosophers were more difficult to tread than even the *via dolorosa* of worldly existence, from which they sought to divert men. The tragedy of all the systems of Hindu philosophy is that they confront man with only one choice: Remain corruptible and corrupt flesh, or become incorruptible and incorrupt stone. The alternatives presented were both cruel, but in a country which was excruciatingly cruel, could there be any kind of life which was not so? The only improvement that could be brought about was that which lay between the cruelty of degradation, and the cruelty of ennoblement.

Thus there is nothing to be surprised at if Samkhya, which (let me repeat) is in my view the most typical of Hindu philosophies, is also the most cruel in the presentation of the alternatives. There is no end to the sorrow of hunger, it declares, for it is ever-recurring; there is no respite from bereavement, because after the death of one son another might the; does it appear to you that death will release you from sorrow for you will be reborn and come again into its grind mill; there is no hope in that salvation which is identified with absorption in the Absolute Brahma—none at all. because a drowned man may rise again. Where then is the end of suffering? The Answer of Samkhya is awful, when taken seriously. It lies in the total severance of the bond between Purusha and Prakriti—two highly technical terms which have, been elaborately explained, but which in sum are fairly simple notions. Prakriti is all - that a man can feel, yearn for, and even be; Purusha is an absolute which for all human purposes is annihilation, Nirvana or extinction. Even the Nyaya system defines salvation in such terms. It is, according to Nyaya, the sleep of the dreamless man who never wakes. What happiness!

Of all the Hindu philosophies it was Vedanta alone which did not face man with a double tragedy. It denied the reality of worldly joys but put another kind of joy before men. Salvation, it said, was to be found by regarding the manifested and changeable world, which was subject to destruction, only as Maya or illusion, and trying to be united in spirit with the unchanging Absolute Soul, which was infinite and eternal. In the union was eternal and indestructible joy.

Even such a promise of joy could not come from an Aryan of the Gangetic plain. He was too exhausted. So the Vedanta philosophy in its most typical form, which offered some kind of joy and contained a certain amount of positivism, had to come from a colonial Aryan of the South, Samkara. It was as if an Australian were to offer a revivification and re-interpretation of the English spirit to an England which was passing from her present silver age to a state of ossification in culture. It had passed beyond the mental resources and capacity of the Aryavarta to formulate and develop even the most exiguous of optimistic philosophies.

And exiguous Vedantic optimism was. The system did indeed offer joy in the Absolute Being, but it could not define that Being in any terms which were comprehensible to men who knew life as lived. Not only Samkara, but all the revealed scriptures on whose interpretation by himself he based the authority of his personal philosophy, failed to define the Universal Soul as anything but a negation of all that was accessible to the senses, to thought, and to feelings even. 'Neti, Neti. 'Not that, not that'—was all that they could say about it. So by a devious way, even Vedanta came back to tire negation of Samkhya, with only an exalted autohypnosis induced by continuous suggestion. '

No wonder then that the Vedantist who regarded the world as an illusion was himself held up to ridicule in Hindu society as an illusionist. To ordinary Hindus he and his fellow-philosophers appeared like men who were devoid of common sense, if not even sense. The philosophers were not credited even with being able to speak grammatical Sanskrit. The idea that the Hindus had great love and reference for philosophy and respect for philosophers is a figment of the European mind. What we respect are the Sadhus, possessors of occult power, not philosophers who professed to possess only knowledge, and that useless in our eyes.

Thus rejecting their own philosophies for two reasons —the intrinsic negation and the queerness of the philosophers, the Hindus in their suffering remained as unsupported in spirit as they were in the body. They lived on in pain but they never discovered that it sprang from their inability to accept their new home and their nostalgia for the old but forgotten home.