CHAPTER ONE

Three Myths about Indian Philosophy*

I

Indian philosophy, like Indian culture, seems peculiarly prone to arouse either violent antipathy or fervent enthusiasm. Rarely does it engender an attitude which tries to present and assess it coolly and calmly, without positive or negative emotion. Nothing perhaps stands more in the way of such an attitude than the universally accepted ideas which I wish to explore in this essay. These three ideas are treated as indubitable facts about Indian philosophy. They seem so self-evident to enthusiasts and detractors alike, that to question them is to question the very concept of Indian philosophy as it has been traditionally conceived and presented by almost every writer on the subject. Yet, it seems to me that the time has come to question the traditional picture itself, to raise doubts about the indubitable, to investigate the sacrosanct and the self-evident. Myths have always masqueraded as facts and many a time the emperor's nudity has only been discovered by a child's disingenuity.

The self-evident claims about Indian philosophy are legion. First and foremost is the claim to spirituality. Who does not know that Indian philosophy is spiritual? Who has not been told that this is what specifically distinguishes it from western philosophy, and makes it something unique and apart from all the other philosophical traditions of the world? The claim, of course, is never put to the test. In fact, it seems so self-evident as to require no argument or evidence on its behalf. Nobody, neither the serious nor the casual student of the subject, deems it worth questioning. Yet, the moment we begin to doubt the claim

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and examine it for what it is worth, we find it spurious and mythical, to say the least.

After all, what exactly is meant by describing a whole philosophical tradition as 'spiritual'. The term, in the ontological context, means that the nature of ultimate reality is held to be the same or similar to that of mind or spirit. Its distinctive feature lies in the assertion of the primacy of consciousness as opposed to the inertness associated with and displayed by objects that are purely material in their nature. Spirit is opposed to matter and the spiritualist metaphysics implies that spirit alone is real and what appears as matter is only an appearance, something illusory, something unreal. The qualifying terms 'alone' and 'only' are of the utmost importance, for without them the view held cannot be characterized as 'spiritual' in the ontological sense of the term.

Viewed in this perspective, Indian philosophy can hardly be characterized as spiritual in character. It certainly is true that most of the schools of Indian philosophy do recognize the ultimate reality of spirit in some form or other. But so do they also recognize the ultimate reality of matter in some form or other. The Jainas, the Vaiśeṣikas and the Sāṁkhyans recognize it so openly that it can hardly be missed by even the most starry-eyed student of the subject. The Cārvākas need not be mentioned in this connection, as they are regarded as 'unmentionable' for this very reason by everybody except Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya and Walter Ruben who turn the tables, and regard all others as the 'untouchables' of Indian philosophy. The Naiyāyikas are usually supposed to accept the Vaiśeṣika metaphysics, but it is seldom noted that they go a step further in the Cārvāka direction. Unlike the Cārvākas, they certainly believe in the ontological reality of soul but they then deny to it the essential characteristic of consciousness which alone, according to everybody else, differentiates it from matter. Consciousness, according to the Naiyāyikas, is not an inalienable quality of the soul but rather, as the Cārvākas say, a quality which arises in it when a collection of circumstances accidentally comes to pass. In a radical sense, then, the Naiyāyika thinker comes closer to the classic position of materialism as propounded in the history of thought. He, of course, believes in the ontological reality of God also, but that is another story.

There remain the Buddhists, the Mīmāṁsakas, the Vedāntins and the followers of the so-called Yoga school of philosophy. Among these, the Mīmāṁsakas subscribe to the metaphysical reality of all the substances which the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers hold to be real, while adding a few of their own. Anyone who contends for the ultimate reality of earth, water, fire and air among other things, can hardly be considered to believe in the reality of spirit *alone*. As for the Buddhists, their fundamental denial is of substantiality, whether it be that of spirit or of matter. In fact, two of the traditional schools of Buddhism assert the reality of the external world while denying its substantiality. It is only the Yogācāras who explicitly contend for the ideality or mentality of whatsoever exists. The Mādhyamikas, like the Advaita Vedāntists of a later date, accept phenomenal reality and deny the ultimate reality of anything that can ever possibly be asserted.

Vedānta, of course, is not only Śaṁkara-Vedānta. It is merely a name to suggest that the philosopher who chose to call himself or his thought by that name consciously assumed the added responsibility of showing that that is exactly what the Upaniṣads really meant. Any doctrine, therefore, can call itself Vedānta, provided it is prepared to sustain that it alone expresses the true and authentic meaning of the Upaniṣads. There are frank dualists such as Madhva who regard matter or *prakṛti* as an eternal, independent principle in its own right, who call themselves Vedāntins. There is Rāmānuja, who believes in the ultimate distinction in the nature of matter from God, but denies its independence in the sense of its not being subordinate to Him. And, then, there is the great Śaṁkara who believes that the assertion of anything is in itself the surest sign of its ultimate unreality. For him, the individual soul and God are as unreal as *prakṛti* or matter.

Matter, thus, is not unreal for Vedānta either. It is clearly asserted to be ultimately real by the two major schools, those of Rāmānuja and of Madhva. For the only remaining major school, that of Śaṁkara, it is as real as anything else. As for Yoga, it is perhaps counted among the traditional schools of Indian philosophy only as a matter of courtesy. There seems little reason to do so, as it is entirely a system of practice, and no one contends that it has any distinctive philosophical views of its own except

the Sāṁkhya view of the independent reality of *prakrti*. It thus constitutes no exception to the almost universal acceptance of the ontic reality of matter among the various schools of Indian philosophy.

Ontologically, then, the characterization of Indian philosophy as 'spiritual' is completely erroneous. The only other context in which it may be regarded as 'spiritual' is that of morals or ethics. Here, it is certainly true that Indian thought has held spiritual salvation to be the highest goal of individual effort. But this, it should be remembered, is a generalized feature of traditional Indian culture as a whole. Philosophy, as it were, only accepts this goal which culture in general had set for the individual. It articulates, accentuates, defines and redefines the goal in a clearer and more conscious manner.

Even here, it would be interesting to point out that it was not until later that *mokṣa* as a distinctive separate goal was accepted in Indian thought. As is well known, the early formulations of the goals of human seeking limited them to three in number. These were *dharma, artha* and *kāma* which may roughly be described as the realms of law, rule or the prescribed, on the one hand (*dharma*), and those of the things desired (*kāma*) and the instrumentalities for their realization (*artha*), on the other. The introduction of a fourth goal was not so much the result of philosophical speculation, as of the emergence into prominence of certain trends which were already present in the religious atmosphere of India. The so-called *Śramaṇa* tradition of Sāṁkhya, Bauddha and the Jains, is the root source of the ideal of *mokṣa* in the orthodox Vedic traditions of India.[1] These traditions, at the time of their origins, were primarily religious, and their importance lay rather in the spiritual exploration of man, than in philosophical speculation. However, in the course of their evolution, they produced philosophical thinkers who articulated and argued for the theoretic and conceptual position supposed to be relevant to the specific differential insights of the original religious founders of their traditions.

The ideal of *mokṣa* was, thus, a later incorporation from the non-Vedic religious and spiritual traditions of India. In this process, it was given a more positive content than it had in the relatively more negative traditions of Buddhism, Jainism and Sāṁkhya. The philosophers, now as then, defined and redefined,

pointed out the difficulties of the concept and tried to meet these difficulties. But in the initial discovery of the concept they were not the initiators or innovators, but only followers who worked and reworked what they had taken over, or what had been handed down to them.

It may equally be remembered in this connection that there are few philosophers in any of the great historic traditions whose views on the ends of human life are not idealistic in some sense or other. The only distinctive feature of the Indian philosophers in this context seems to lie in their emphasis on the spiritual as against the moral, and the creation of a dichotomy or division between the two. The addition of *mokṣa* as the fourth and final end of human seeking and striving was not a fulfilment of the original three, but ultimately their denial or negation.

Many later thinkers have striven to bridge the gulf between morality and spirituality, but the original dualism has persisted unchanged. The baffling paradox of a country which is felt by almost every foreigner to be, at one and the same time, the most spiritual and the most immoral, can perhaps be rendered intelligible only in this way.

II

Indian philosophy, however, is not uniquely and distinctively characterized in terms of 'spirituality' alone. There are other characterizations which are almost as universally current and which, on examination, are found to be as mythical as the one regarding spirituality. The other such characterization is in terms of 'authority'. Almost invariably, each writer on Indian philosophy begins his account by drawing a distinction between the 'orthodox' and 'unorthodox' schools of Indian philosophy. This distinction is drawn in terms of their acceptance or non-acceptance of the authority of the Vedas.

This is a commonplace fact about Indian philosophy, one which is repeated with such assurance of its self-evident nature, that no possible doubt could be entertained about it. But what exactly is meant by the acceptance of the Vedas as an authoritative basis for one's philosophical system? As far as I can see, the only legitimate meaning of such a claim in the philosophical context would be to maintain that the Vedas

contain the ultimate philosophical truth, and that the test of the truth of a philosophical position is whether or not it is in accordance with what is written in the Vedas.

If this really was the case, then the differences between the so-called 'orthodox' schools of Indian philosophy would arise from their varying interpretations of what the Vedas really meant. But, is this really so? Is it true to say that Sāṁkhya or Yoga or Nyāya or Vaiśeṣika differ regarding the exact meaning which is to be put on the Vedic texts? Are they, so to speak, schools of interpretation which clash over what the Vedas really mean? This obviously is not the case. The classical texts of the various schools are not, even in form, a commentary upon the Vedic texts. The two schools which seem to be an obvious exception are Mīmāṁsā and Vedānta. The former specifically upholds the authority of the Vedas and the latter ostensibly champions a genuine interpretation of the Upaniṣads, which are supposed to be a part of the Vedas. The various schools of Vedānta may be said, with some justification, to be schools of interpretation, in the technical sense of the term. But even if they may legitimately be so designated, it would not do to interpret the differences between Mīmāṁsā and Vedānta in the same way. They appear rather to differ as to what is to be regarded as really constituting the Vedas.

What is to constitute the Vedas, then, seems to be the crucial question which has to be first answered if one is to have a meaningful discussion over their authority in regard to Indian philosophy in particular, and to Indian culture in general. The authoritative Vedas themselves were originally thought to be only three in number. Later, the authority of a fourth Veda began to be accepted. In any case, the Vedas, it should be remembered, were always plural in number. Moreover, their authority was not equally or securely established even during the times of their composition. Further, on the most conservative estimate, it took them at least a thousand years to assume their present form. During this time at least, their authority was never such as to preclude the possibility of making further additions to them. This obviously does not speak very much for their authority in those times. Even among those who have upheld their authority, there has always been a difference of opinion regarding the portion of the Vedas which was to be regarded as

authoritative, and regarding which subject matter, and for what purpose.

The latter, it has not always been noted, is almost as important as the former. The Mīmāṁsā, for example, does not only deny the Upaniṣads the privilege of being counted among the corpus of Vedic authority, but also contends that any utterance which is not a pure injunction, that is, either a command or a prohibition, is not to be considered as Veda. This, it should be emphasized, is a revolutionary position whose implications for the issue of Vedic authority for philosophy in India have hardly noted. The Vedas, according to this view, have no philosophic content whatsoever. Being pure injunctions, they have nothing to do with epistemological or metaphysical speculations, or even with ethical reflection. A command or a prohibition, however moral, is not a reflection on the nature and problem of morals which ethics undoubtedly is. The Mīmāṁsaka's own philosophy, thus, is not a Vedic philosophy at all, since according to him, the Vedas do not contain any philosophy, whether of their own or of any other kind. Vedic philosophy, strictly speaking, is a contradiction-in-terms and is thus the purest type of non-being that we can imagine.

The Vedāntins, for their part, certainly recognize the authority of the Upaniṣads, but not of the Upaniṣads alone. They also recognize the authority of the Gītā and the *Brahma-Sūtra*, which are definitely not regarded as a part of the Vedas by anybody. Equally, they give scant recognition to the authority of the non-Upaniṣadic portion of the Vedas. Their attitude to Vedic authority is quite casual, almost pickwickian in manner. Śaṁkara, for example, in his commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtras*, explicitly implies that they are not to be taken seriously when they deal with empirical matters of fact.[2] They are deemed authoritative only when they deal with transcendental matters. Thus, for Vedānta as well as for Mīmāṁsā, the term Veda is restricted not only to certain portions of the classical Vedic literature, but also to some of their contents or subject matter. The Vedas, in this way, enjoy only a very circumscribed authority, even for Mīmāṁsā and Vedānta, the only schools which seem to take them seriously.

The notion of 'Vedic' authority, then, is a myth. It certainly cannot be held to be the dividing line between the schools as has

been stated by almost every text book on the subject. Yet, it may be contended that the issue of authority in Indian philosophy is far broader than the question of the authority of the Vedas. Even if it be conceded that the Vedas hold little authority for most schools of Indian philosophy, is it not true that something else fulfills that function? Do not the *Sūtras* hold the same position, and does not the time-honoured way of writing philosophy in the form of commentaries on the traditional texts prove this? And is not *śabda* or testimony regarded as an independent *pramāṇa*, that is, both a criterion and a source of valid knowledge?

These two contentions seem so obviously convincing as to finally clinch the question of authority in Indian philosophy. But is it really so? Would not a closer look reveal something entirely different? Why should philosophers, of all people, be taken in by appearances without critically examining them? After all, does not one of the so-called 'orthodox' schools of Indian philosophy, that is, the Vaiśeṣika not accept *śabda* or testimony as an independent source of valid knowledge? Why should these things be glossed over as if they were of no importance whatsoever? As for the authority of the *Sūtras*, one may legitimately ask what is the authority of the *Nyāya-Sūtras* after Gaṅgeśa?

This, we should realize, is not just a rhetorical question asked to save a desperate situation. Rather, it should be seen as a plea for looking at the facts from a different angle. After Gaṅgeśa, Nyāya does not merely take a new turn, which was recognized as such by his contemporaries and the thinkers who came after him, but enters on a path of continuous development which leads later to such giants as Viśvanātha, Gadādhara and Raghunātha Śiromaṇi. Such a continuous development and its proliferation into other schools provides decisive evidence against the view which gives to the *Sūtras* an unquestionable authority for the whole school itself. Authority goes on changing and as soon as some new thinker appears on the scene, the mantle of authority falls on him, and his ideas become the point of departure for further thought.

This, it should be remembered, is not the case for Nyāya alone. The situation is not very different for Vedānta, Mīmāṁsā, Vaiśeṣika, or Sāṁkhya. Yoga, as we have said earlier, is hardly a school of philosophy, and thus need not be considered in this connection. It may, for example, be reasonably asked what is the

authority of the *Brahma-Sūtras* after Śaṁkara for Advaitic Vedāntins? The numerous Advaita thinkers after Śaṁkara take their point of departure from him, and not from the *Brahma-Sūtras*. Is this not true for such outstanding post-Śaṁkarite figures as Padmapāda, Sureśvara, Prakāśātman, Citsukha, Prakāśānanda, Vācaspati Miśra and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī? Even the famous *Brahmasiddhi* of Maṇḍana Miśra is an independent work and not a commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtras*. There is, in fact, hardly any significant Advaitic commentary directly on the *Brahma-Sūtras* after Śaṁkara. They were just not seriously taken into account and if, in the present century, Radhakrishnan has chosen to write a commentary once again, it is due to the desire to follow in the steps of the great ācāryas than due to any real belief in their overriding authority for his own philosophical thought.

It is, of course, true that Rāmānuja, Madhva and Nimbārka wrote their independent commentaries on the *Brahma-Sūtras* after Śaṁkara. But they did this simply because they wanted to deviate fundamentally from the Advaitic interpretation of the *Brahma-Sūtras*. The great subsequent thinkers of these schools cared little for the *Brahma-Sūtras*. There is no difference in this respect between the post-Śaṁkarite thinkers of the Advaitic school, and, the post-Rāmānuja, the post-Madhva and the post-Nimbārka thinkers. Thus, even where a great thinker tries to buttress his new thought by an appeal to the traditional texts, his immediate successors take him as the point of departure, and not the text from which he presumably derived his ideas. The same may be said about Mīmāṁsā, the other great school which ostensibly argues a great deal in favour of the authority of the traditional texts. The *Sūtras* of Jaimini hold little interest or authority after Prabhākara and Kumārila. It is they who are discussed, argued, assented to or differed with. Sāṁkhya and Vaiśeṣika have no major independent lines of outstanding thinkers around them. The first has hardly any original *Sūtras* which could even reasonably be construed as providing the authoritative text for the system. Īśvarkṛṣṇa's *Sāṁkhya-Kārikā* is the oldest known text of the system. But, as everybody recognizes, the system is much older than this text, and Īśvarkṛṣṇa can hardly be said to enjoy any exceptional authority, except as a clue to some of the main tenets which the thinkers belonging to this school generally held. As for the

Vaiśeṣika, it is Praśastapāda who provides us with a real perspective on Vaiśeṣika thought. Subsequent Vaiśeṣika thinkers generally start from Praśastapāda's work. *Sūtras* themselves, it should be remembered, are only summaries of previous thought. They are, thus, simultaneously the end of a line of thought, as well as the point of departure for a fresh philosophical enterprise. It is only thus that they make sense, and not as the final arbiters of what may legitimately be thought by a philosopher in India. The latter manner of presenting them is usual, but it is so totally false that one wonders how it ever came to be propagated and accepted.

The Buddhists and the Jainas have no sacred philosophical texts, except the *Abhidharma*, which may be regarded as vested with the type of authority that the Vedas and the *Sūtras* are supposed to enjoy in the so-called 'orthodox' tradition of Indian philosophy. There are important thinkers and important books but none is vested with a divine or superhuman authority. This is as it should be, and my contention is that it is the same with the so-called classical schools of Hindu philosophy.

III

The myths of spirituality and of authority are not the only myths about Indian philosophy. There is a third one which is even more subtle. This is the myth of the schools without which no book on Indian philosophy has yet been written. The myths of spirituality and authority are stated on the opening pages and then conveniently forgotten. The schools, however, are in a different category. They are the very stuff, out of which, and around which the whole story of Indian philosophy has been woven. Indian philosophy is divided first into 'orthodox' and the 'unorthodox' schools, and then these are subdivided into Buddhism, Jainism and Cārvāka on the one hand, and into Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṁkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṁsā and Vedānta on the other. This is the common classification that one finds. The only attempt at a different classification is that of Karl H. Potter in his *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*. But Potter has only tried to diversify the picture a little, and not to question its very foundations.

The classification into schools is time-honoured and accepted even by the classical thinkers themselves. Why, then, should we

attempt to question it? But it is equally obvious that the veil of authority and the veil of spirituality were also woven and accepted by the classical thinkers. So there is nothing distinctively different in this respect which may be said to apply to the problem of 'school's alone.

The concept of 'school' is closely connected to the concept of 'authority' in Indian philosophy. If the authority of the Vedas or the Upaniṣads or the *Sūtras* is final, then what is presumed to be propounded in them as philosophy is final also. Thus, there arises the notion of a closed school of thought, final and finished, once and for all. This may seem fantastic, but most presentations of the various schools of Indian philosophy are so non-historical in nature that they believe the title *History of Indian Philosophy* under which they are usually presented. History is always the story of change, development, differentiation and innovation. How can there be any real history if some primordial authority is posited at the very beginning of thought? If, therefore, we deny the 'authoritative' character of Indian philosophy then, in an important sense, we deny the concept of 'schools' also. There is no such thing as final, frozen positions which the term 'school', in the context of Indian philosophy, usually connote. If 'schools' change, develop, differentiate and divide, then they are never closed, finished or final with respect to what they are trying to say. There could, then, be no fixed body of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṁkhya, Mīmāṁsā, Vedānta, Buddhist, Jain or Cārvāka positions except in a minimal sense. These would, on the other hand, rather be styles of thought which are developed by successive thinkers, and not fully exemplified by any. Nor would these styles be treated as exhausted by any group or groups of thinkers belonging to any particular historical epoch.

The difference between a 'school' and a 'style' of thought is not merely a verbal one, as many may think. The question centres on the issue of how one is to conceive these so-called schools of Indian philosophy. Are they something like the various schools that one meets with in western philosophy? Are they something of the same kind as, say, 'empiricism', 'realism', or 'idealism'? If so, there is no problem, for while each of these has a recognizable identity of its own, it has had, and is still capable of continuous development in new and varied directions. No single thinker or group of thinkers could ever exhaust what is signified by any of

these schools of western philosophy. The case of Indian philosophical schools would then be similar.

However, the traditional presentation of the schools of Indian philosophy is hardly ever along these lines. They are treated as something finished and final. No distinction, therefore, is ever drawn between the thought of an individual thinker and the thought of a school. A school is, in an important sense, an abstraction. It is a logical construction springing out of the writings of a number of thinkers who share a certain similarity of outlook in tackling similar problems. On the other hand, it is also some sort of an ideal governing the direction of thought as well as a Platonic Idea, more or less exemplified in one thinker rather than another. In more modern terms, it may also be conceived as a morphological form which both governs the evolution of species and is intuited from a continuous and varied observation of them. These different ways of understanding the concept of 'school' should be treated not as exclusive alternatives, but rather as complementary to one another.

Basically, this is the reality of the 'schools' of Indian philosophy. Yet it is never presented as such. Śaṁkhya, for example, is identified too much with Īśvarakṛṣṇa's work, or Vedānta with the work of Śaṁkara. But this is due to a confusion between the thought of an individual thinker and the style of thought which he exemplifies and to which he contributes in some manner. All that Śaṁkara has written is not strictly Advaita Vedānta. Nor is all that Īśvarakṛṣṇa has written, Sāṁkhya. Unless this is realized, writings on Indian philosophy will continuously do injustice either to the complexity of thought of the individual thinker concerned, or to the uniqueness of the style of thought they are writing about. If such an injustice is to be avoided, then the history of Indian philosophy will either have to be the history of individual thinkers in relation to one another, or the history of styles of thought as they have grown over a period of time. In this it will be no different from the history of western or any other philosophy which can be, and has been, written in either of the two ways.

IV

Indian philosophy, therefore, is neither exclusively spiritual nor

bound by unquestionable, infallible authority, nor constricted and congealed in the frozen moulds of the so-called 'schools' which are supposed to constitute the essence of Indian philosophy by those who have written on the subject. These are just myths, and unless they are seen and recognized to be such, any new or fresh look at Indian philosophy would be impossible. The dead, mummified picture of Indian philosophy will come alive only when it is seen to be a living stream of thinkers who have grappled with difficult problems that are, philosophically, as alive today as they were in the ancient past. Indian philosophy will become contemporarily relevant only when it is conceived as philosophy proper.[3] Otherwise, it will remain merely a subject of antiquarian interest and research, which is what all the writers on Indian philosophy have made it out to be. It is time that this false picture is removed, and that the living concerns of ancient thought are brought to life once more. The destruction of these three myths will be a substantial step in this direction.[4]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See G. C. Pande, *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism* (Allahabad: Allahabad University, India).
2. 'A conflict of statements (in Vedānta-passages) regarding the world would not even matter greatly, since the creation of the world and similar topics are not at all what the scripture wishes to teach . . . the passages about the creation and the like form only subordinate members of passages treating of *Brahman.' A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, (eds.) Radhakrishnan and Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 516.
3. See my article 'Three Conceptions of Indian Philosophy' in this book. It has been asked what I mean by 'Philosophy proper.' The only thing I wish to make clear in this context is that the Indian philosophical tradition is 'philosophical' in the same sense as the western philosophical tradition is supposed to be.
4. I have been greatly helped in this paper by discussions with Dr. G. C. Pande, the outstanding scholar on Indian philosophy and culture, at present Tagore Professor of Indian culture at the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India. I am also thankful to Dr. S. K. Gupta of the Sanskrit Department in the University for bringing to my attention the different meanings of the term 'Veda' in the tradition of clasical Indian thought.