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## CHRONICLES

### I

#### Aspects of Vedic Interpretation

Under this title the "Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit" and the "Department of Sanskrit and Prakrit Languages" of the University of Poona organized a "Winter Institute (Seminar)" during the last four days of January, 1980. R. N. Dandekar, the Dean of Vedic Studies in India and S. D. Joshi, the present Director of the Centre, deserve to be congratulated on this event which brought together the renowned Vedic scholars of India.

As the proceedings are to be published and other specialized journals may report on the contents of the papers, this note would like to comment on just two significant omissions. They represent, in my opinion, the strength and weakness of Vedic Studies in India today. The *argumentum ex silentio* is a peculiar one. Yet, I do not intend to prove anything but only to positively stimulate this important branch of knowledge, bringing it into relation with other facets of present-day studies. "Modern Hermeneutics could easily become a new *aniga* for Vedic Studies," one is tempted to say. Considering the title of this All-India Seminar and its participants, one would have expected two topics to be better represented. In fact, subjects dealt with were wide-ranging and marked by variety: from Indo-European Semantics to Sectarian Interpretations; from Variant Readings of particular texts and new interpretations of some hymns to descriptions of Vedic cults grammatical points and relations of the Vedas to Gṛhyasūtras, etc. It was a rich and lively Seminar indeed, which proves the vitality of Vedic Studies in India.

Now for the two significant omissions. There were hardly any studies on *Mīmāṃsā*, and the very problem of *Hermeneutics* did not receive sufficient attention in the papers presented.

The absence of *Mīmāṃsā* papers may be somewhat fortuitous, because there has been somewhat of a revival of interest in this area of Vedic studies in India. Yet the fact remains symptomatic.

Two causes seem to have brought disrepute to *Mīmāṃsā*: The first is the intricacies, and often artificial subtleties, of the ritualistic interpretations of the Vedas and the decline of the Vedic rites themselves. But this would not in itself explain satisfactorily the fact that scholars lose their interest in such studies. There are ruins and obscure documents of the past that still stimulate intellectual research and elicit the scholars' curiosity. The second cause lies in the fact, it seems to me, that the first three generations of Western indologists, by and large, considered *Mīmāṃsā* an exercise in futility, a 'galimatias' and a remnant of empty ritualism, barren hair-splitting and a weakness of the Indian mind. That *Mīmāṃsā* is the remnant of a primitive mind, while it is in the *Uttara-Mīmāṃsā* of Vedānta where the genius of India comes to its peak, was the near consensus of Western indologists since the last century. And obviously, with few exceptions, Indian indologists were not keen to display that shadow of the Indian mind and even tried to see that it disappeared from University curricula and other types of studies—although (and fortunately, I may add) they could not influence the more traditional *gurukulas* where the *Mīmāṃsā* philosophy was still cultivated.

It is only recently that interest in language has again awakened a curiosity for *Mīmāṃsā* in the West, and this has already made its impact in India. There are already hopeful signs of it and in recent years a good number of doctoral theses and books have appeared.<sup>1</sup>

The second omission seems to me more serious: the absence of hermeneutical awareness, in spite of many papers carrying the word "interpretation" in their titles. To be sure, one should beware of 'methodolatry' and the lesson of Biblical Studies where the interpretation often kills the text, and take it as an important warning not to follow sterile avenues of research. But these two cautions do not justify the lack of a hermeneutical and critical approach to the Vedas.

Evidently, we should carefully distinguish between (a) the *proton*, the text, the *śruti*, (b) its interpretations throughout the ages right upto modern times, and (c) the hermeneutical reflection on both the

1. Bhartrhari, Kumārila Bhatta, Sabara, Anandavardhana and others are slowly emerging as giants of Indian culture besides the classical names of the great representatives of the *darśanas*.

text and its interpretations.<sup>2</sup> But we should not ignore these three levels and speak uncritically about sectarian and non-sectarian, objective and subjective interpretations. We may still want to speak of traditional and non-orthodox interpretations, but the Vedic scholars today should be willing to offer the criteria they use to justify their language.

One may be entitled to say that the mind of the *ṛṣi* is the ultimate criterion, but then one should justify this position and also answer how we come to know his mind. Or one may assert that the 'primitive tradition', say up to Sāyaṇa, has the privilege of being the genuine interpretation, but this requires to be justified or at least stated.

One cannot object to personal interpretations, like those of Dayānanda or of Sri Aurobindo for instance. A tradition is alive not when it produces analytical hermeneutics, but when it allows creative interpretations. But in studying the Vedas we cannot bypass hermeneutics if (a) we try to understand what others have said about them, (b) we want to situate our opinion in the very tradition about which or from which we speak, and (c) we still think, that the text may be meaningful for our times.

As a *curiosum* it may be reported that there was a paper on Vedic Interpretation based on Science. Apart from the merits or demerits of such an approach (the Rg Veda, incidentally, was supposed to be 20,000 years old), if it has to be accepted or rejected at all, it cannot bypass a discussion on the grounds and assumptions on which such an interpretation is based. The truly scientific attitude is not so much concerned about whether the ancient *ṛṣis* had such wonderful insights which tally with the discoveries of Modern Science, but about how they might have acquired such knowledge. Modern Science does not make any mystery of its method : measurement. To discuss the foundations of their opinions is what the ancients had in mind when they offered their own commentaries. This is what the moderns should also do, whether as continuators of a living tradition, or as researchers of an old document. In both cases hermeneutics becomes unavoidable.

The two omissions, although due to different immediate causes, nevertheless go together. *Mīmāṃsā* is already Hermeneutics. And here the Indian unconscious and passive resistance to modern Hermeneutics may become plausible. If the study of *Mīmāṃsā* were to

2. Cf. my five hermeneutical *sūtras* in my essay "The Texture of a Text", *Point of Contact*, New York, II, 1 (April-May 1978), pp. 51-64.

mean a hermeneutic of hermeneutics there would be no end to it. What is needed is a *para-pūrva-mīmāṃsā*, an up-to-date science of interpretation which having learnt from tradition is not satisfied by merely repeating it, but goes on re-enacting it in the present situation of our times. I venture to state that from this point of view Vedic Studies may throw light not only on the nature and contents of the *Samhitās*, but play an important role in a cross-cultural study of civilizations. If Homer has been at the basis of more than one culture, perhaps the Vedas, *apauruṣeya* as they are, could also be an important fecundating element in the present cultural junction.

## II

### A Meeting on Comparative Theology

The Indian Theological Association celebrated its annual meeting in Bangalore from June 13 to 15, 1980. "Understanding the Meaning of Salvation in the Indian Context" was this year's theme. It is not the purpose of this note to summarize the contents of the different papers on that occasion. I would like only to stress the over-all important fact that Christian theologians met to discuss such a theme, and to comment on the general consensus that prevailed. It shows how the Christian philosophico-theological approach has changed in India in the past few decades.

Since there is hardly any sharp distinction made between theology and philosophy in India, this brief note can also be of interest to those engaged in the study of Comparative Philosophy.

Much has been written on the subject of salvation and we have countless publications on the Christian concept of *sōtēria*, the Hindu *mokṣa*, and the Buddhist *nirvāṇa*. A few comparative studies have also appeared, but what is relatively new is the Christian philosophical effort to understand its *own* conception of salvation in the light of the Indian tradition. This meeting was Comparative Philosophy in actual practice and not a mere reflection on what this discipline is or should be. The methodological novelty of such an approach is quite evident. It does no longer project the categories of one particular philosophy on another, nor is it an aseptic academic effort at comparing world-views, but an attempt at asking what one tradition could learn from another. This may well become the most appropriate way of carrying on the needed mutual fecundation of traditions.

This meeting could be considered a turning-point in Christian theological reflection in India. The problem was not at all how to 'pass on the Christian message', but how to understand one's own beliefs in the light of another tradition which has not shaped them and which, however, was considered equally their own by most of the members of the Indian Theological Association.

I report here on what was taken for granted and literally went without saying—the consensus referred to. I would call it the emerging myth. I may sum it all up under three headings :

- (a) Salvation is a religious category and is not tied to a single understanding of it, nor is it in any way a Christian monopoly. *Mokṣa* is as valid as *sōtēria* and liberation as *nirvāna*.
- (b) Salvation is not tied essentially to traditional cosmologies which used to put it either on a higher level for the selected few or on a future stage for the lucky ones. Salvation needs to be meaningful here and now, in whatever sense these here and now may be understood.
- (c) Salvation is not equivalent to the rescue of only one part of the human being, however central or valuable this 'soul' or 'ātman' may be, but it relates to the integral and complete Man, his body and his material needs not excluded.

Another feature of the Meeting was the close contact between philosophical speculation and the concrete situation of the people. The general atmosphere was neither in favour of imitating, say, the Latin American Theology of Liberation, nor one of philosophizing *in vacuo*, from general and abstract premises, but it favoured a fundamental reflection both within the Indian context and for the Indian people. This was, in my opinion, the thrust of the meeting. As for the value of the single presentations, this would require another note in probably a less optimistic tone. Much remains to be done. My concern is only this : to draw attention to the emerging *myth* and not of describing the dominating *logos*.

### III

## International Seminar on 'Literature and Evolution of Consciousness'

### An East-West Encounter without a Meeting

In February 1980 a Seminar was held in Delhi under the joint auspices of the Sri Aurobindo Centre, the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Delhi. Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman and Founder of the Sri Aurobindo Centre, delivered the inaugural address under the chairmanship of Sri Hidayatullah, the Vice-President of the Indian Union. Some 50 delegates came from all over the world, of whom some two-thirds were, logically, from India. The overwhelming majority of the participants were university professors, mostly of English Literature. The occasion was the celebration of the Birth Centenary of the Indian poet Sarojini Naidu. Roughly, one-third of the papers centered on Sri Aurobindo's views (Sisir Kumar Ghose, Santiniketan; S. Krishna Sharma, Nagarjuna University; Devadoss, Madras, etc.); another third on English Literature (C. D. Narasimhajah, Mysore; Gopalan; H. W. Piper, Macquarie University, Australia; R. A. Dave, Sardar Patel University, Gujarat; D. K. Barua, Burdwan; Lakshmi Raghunandan, Bangalore; K. Gandhi, Aurobindo Centre; Kandaswami, Calicut; V. Sena, Delhi; J. S. Neki, Chandigarh; Cheyne, etc.); and the remaining ones on topics related to the general subject of the Seminar (H. Misra, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu; M. Nanny, Zürich; R. W. Krutzen, Saskatoon, Canada; A. Vidyalandkar, New Delhi; O. O. Leslie, Ibadan, Nigeria; M. Boertien, Amsterdam; R. Artigiani, Annapolis, U.S.A.; Duggal; D. S. Izevbye, Ibadan, Nigeria; Prem Kirpal, Delhi; R. Panikkar, Santa Barbara, California; etc.).

This is not a review of the Seminar or an evaluation of the many good papers that were read and discussed on the occasion, but just a reflection on the Meeting under the general perspective of 'Comparative Philosophy'. In fact, this topic was one of the most salient features of the Seminar itself.

In point of fact, Dharma Vira, Vice-Chairman of the Centre, spoke about the Crisis of Man and the Crisis of Consciousness asking which of the two is the effect or the cause. Karan Singh gave a typology of contemporary forms of the Evolution of Consciousness (the

Supramental, the Kundalini, the Survival Mutation, the Biological). Also, India's Vice-President Hidayatullah asked the ultimate philosophical question of *who* studies the evolution of the mind. Kishore Gandhi, Convener, linked the topic of the Crisis of Consciousness to the Literature portraying it.

Three reflections may be interesting from a viewpoint of the Sociology of Knowledge. I am not analyzing the contents of the papers or the value of the opinions contained in them, but the overall framework in which they were operating and recognizing this framework as offering both the context over against which most of the papers have to be understood and the second degree text for a reading of the 'signs of our times' or the certain 'Zeitgeist' still operating in academic circles. My contention is that in spite of the substantial changes made in some specialized but very restricted circles, the majority of intellectuals of our times still operate with the common categories of half a century ago, *i.e.*, of pre-colonial times. And they may be right that this is the prevalent mood, which may serve afterwards in understading much more practical problems as they constantly emerge in bodies like UN, UNESCO, UNIDO, UNCTAD, WHO, FAO, UNICEF and similar organizations.

I shall limit myself to underscoring three points without extracting from them the more practical consequences :

(1) In spite of the fact that there were some philosophers among the participants, and although the majority were professors of English Literature, the general atmosphere of the papers and specially of the discussions seemed to assume that there is a profound and abysmal chasm between East and West. Constantly, explicit references and innuendos were made: "You of the West will, of course, not agree"; "I am defending and representing without apologies a Western standpoint"; "We of the West, obviously, will say..."; "We Indians will logically not put it this way, but..." "...and never the twin shall meet"!

Readers of this Journal may tend to think that this kind of talk belongs to the past and may tend to forget that this 'myth' is still very much alive precisely not among ignorant people or illiterates. The political situation of the world today may be another sign of the existing gap between East and West. What is sad is that, with the exception of philosophers specialized in Comparative Studies, academicians in other fields of learning have not yet overcome this gap. A painful

warning, but a useful reminder! The anti-North American phenomenon in a great part of the world, the events of Iran, the Middle East, North Africa and also South-east Asia, not excluding The Afghanistan (USSR) and Pakistan (USA) problems, are ultimately related to this over-simplified dichotomy between the East and the West. My thesis is that the East-West tension can no longer be a geographical, historical, religious and cultural split once we have come to such an intertwined relationship, but that it is an anthropological category within every human being. This may be useful to trigger a healthy evolution. But this philosophical observation that the polarity is within ourselves is not yet a sociological fact which has dawned upon the consciousness of the majority.

(2) Some over-simplifications like the word 'East' for India alone and the word 'West' for the English world alone could—and should—be easily overlooked if interpreted within the context of the Seminar. It is amazing that after almost 30 years of independence "January first" is in India the "English New Year" and pharmaceuticals of all sorts (*i.e.*, allopathic) are called "angrezi dawai" (English medicines). To forget to mention Ryle or Ayer in Indian Philosophical Departments is almost a sin, but obviously Zubiri, Abagnano, Romero and Lavelle are non-entities. The case is even more striking when dealing with Western Literature. Experts certainly know that Azorin did not write in English and Maragall might have been a great poet, but I felt the unconscious paradigm that English is to European languages what Hindi is to the Indian vernaculars!

Continuing now my reflections 'ex argumento silentii', in the analysis of papers and discussions I found the following underlying assumptions operating:

- (a) The East stands for Unity and the West for Plurality;
- (b) the East defends higher states of Consciousness, the West is based on Reason;
- (c) the existence of Cosmic Consciousness is an Eastern dogma while the Western tenet is Scientific Humanism;
- (d) the East is religious and the West secular; or again, the East believes in Mysticism and the West in Phantasy. The forte of the Eastern poet is religious experience while the Western counterpart relies on the power of the word.



This may suffice to give an idea of the general atmosphere regarding our problem. Since these points were not the direct topic of the Seminar they were never *as such* brought under discussion. Otherwise such statements might have been more carefully qualified. They were, however, more or less taken for granted.

(3) One might have expected that poetic language might have helped to bridge that gulf, but the *semantic cliff* seems to have been dominating throughout the Seminar. Often one could feel that the divergencies were not so basic, but words were taken to mean just what they connote in a particular context and could not be made bearers of perhaps similar experiences. In short, although with one single exception in Hindi, all the papers and discussions took place in English one could detect that the participants were not speaking the same language.

Two observations seem here pertinent.

(a) In spite of speaking one single English idiom, the different cultural groups of today do not speak the same language : the meanings differ, the connotations are worlds apart, the contexts are various and not taken into account, the approach is nominalistic, but not verbal *i.e.*, the meaning and power of the words is not first elaborated in the very dialogue and encounter. In Indian music before the composition proper is played or sung, the artistes perform an introduction (*ālāp*) without rhythm, developing slowly the *rāga* in its purity, so as to offer the bed, the basis, the net on which the artistic creation can not only be understood but also assimilated and fully participated — and this introductory part is sometimes as long as the part of the composition with the rhythm. Language is not only a tool of communication, it offers at the same time the very basis of that communication. The meeting of two persons is not only with words, but also *in* the word. In academic discussions we often lack the introductory part, the *ālāp*. And this leads me to the second remark.

(b) Perhaps due to my first point of the *a priori* East-West dichotomy, the atmosphere was not propitious for the emergence of a *dhvani* in the very meeting, which would have created the necessary climate to bridge from the 'I mean to say' to the real 'saying what I mean'. To be sure, it was not lack of cordiality or politeness which could be blamed for this. Almost on the contrary. We were not put to work to explore in common the central concern of the Seminar. Even first class monologues, with some amendments here and there, do not

produce the living and creative dialogical dialogue in which the ground of understanding is created by and in the encounter itself. I wonder if our consciousness evolved after the meeting.

I would like to repeat that the Seminar had high quality, but I have here to restrain myself from quoting papers and participants. I wanted only to stress that as this was an occasion for a practical application of the philosophical problem of cross-cultural studies, one became acutely aware that in the present-day global context, these studies and perspectives are at their very beginnings and that an immense task lies still ahead of us all.