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M. Ram Murty
Queen's University

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Book Review | *Indian Philosophy in English: From Renaissance to Independence*

M. Ram Murty

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***Indian Philosophy in English: From Renaissance to Independence*; Edited by Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 644p. With bibliography and index. \$35 pbk. ISBN 978-0-19-976925-4**

This book is an anthology of essays written in the English language by Indian scholars and philosophers in the 19th and 20th centuries during and after the British colonial rule of India. The collection represents a wide spectrum of thought ranging from aesthetics to epistemology. The “renaissance” in the title refers to the Indian renaissance, usually seen as occurring in the 19th century in response to the excesses of British imperialism. As the editors note, these philosophical writings were shaped by three historical events: (i) Thomas Macaulay’s famous “Minute on Education” which made English the medium of instruction in all Indian colleges and universities and appointed “Protestant missionary professors in charge of philosophical education” (p. xiv); (ii) the Arya and Brahma Samaj movements that advocated for social and religious reform as well as a “re-evaluation of the orthodox Hindu philosophical systems”; (iii) the British occupation itself which generated a “politico-cosmopolitan awareness” that helped to fashion the notion of the “modern Indian nation” and its place in the world (p. xv).

Thus, it may seem odd that there are essays on Indian identity in the first section of this book, but as the editors argue, national identity played a fundamental role in the shaping of modern Indian philosophy and thus, it seems relevant to study these essays first. The book consists of five sections and each section contains an essay (indicated below in italics) written by the editors that gives the reader an overview and critique of the contents of the section. Here is the table of contents:

Part One: National Identity

1. *Pundits and Professors: The Renaissance of Secular India*
2. Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism in India" (1917)
3. Aurobindo Ghosh, "The Renaissance of India" (1918)
4. A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Indian Nationality" (1909)
5. Lajpat Rai, "Reform or Revival" (1904)
6. Bhagavan Das, "The Meaning of Swaraj or Self-government" (1921)
7. K.C. Bhattacharyya, "Svaraj in Ideas" (1928)

Part Two: Aesthetics

1. A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Art and Swadeshi" (1910)
2. Aurobindo Ghosh, "The Future Poetry" (1917-1918)
3. Rabindranath Tagore, "Pathway to Mukti" (1925)
4. B.K. Sarkar, "Viewpoints in Aesthetics" (1922)
5. K.C. Bhattacharyya, "The Concept of Rasa" (1930)
6. Mysore Hiriyanna, "Indian Aesthetics 2" (1954)
7. Mysore Hiriyanna, "Art Experience 2" (1951)
8. *"An Indian in Paris: Cosmopolitan Aesthetics in Colonial India"*

Part Three: Vedānta

1. R.D. Ranade, "The Problem of Ultimate Reality in the Upanisads" (1926)
2. Vivekananda, "Jnana Yoga" (1915)
3. A.C. Mukerji, "Absolute Consciousness" (1938)
4. Ras Bihari Das, "The Falsity of the World" (1940)
5. S.S. Suryanarayana Sastri, "Advaita, Causality and Human Freedom" (1940)
6. A.C. Mukerji, "Sankara's Theory of Consciousness" (1937)
7. V.S. Iyer, "Sankara's Philosophy" (1955)
8. P.T. Raju, "Scepticism and its place in Sankara's Philosophy" (1937)
9. *Bringing Brahman Down to Earth, Lilavada in Colonial India*

Part Four: Metaphysics and Epistemology

1. *The Plato of Allahabad: A.C. Mukerji's Contributions to Indian and World Philosophy*
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4. K.C. Bhattacharyya, "The Concept of Philosophy" (1936)
5. Mysore Hiriyanna, "The Problem of Truth" (1930)
6. G.R. Malkani, "Philosophical Truth" (1949)
7. A.C. Mukerji, "Traditional Epistemology" (1950)

Part Five: A Session of the Indian Philosophical Congress at Amalner, 1950

1. Indra Sen, N. A. Hikam, Haridas Chaudhuri and G.R. Malkani, Has Sri Aurobindo refuted Mayavada?
2. Bibliography of Significant Work in Indian Philosophy from the Colonial Period and the Immediate Post-Independence Period

The first section entitled "National Identity" sets the stage for subsequent essays of this book. One has only to make a superficial study of the history of British India to learn about the excesses of colonial rule and how Macaulay introduced his "Minute on Education" whereby English would be the medium of instruction in all schools and colleges and the professors would all be English Protestant missionaries. In his own words, his goal was "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." (p. xxv) He seemed to have had considerable contempt for Indian thought, for in the same "Minute" he wrote, "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." But as the wise saying goes, "Man proposes and God disposes." Macaulay's policies had the opposite effect. Indeed, a new class of persons was formed, and they found that they could communicate to the entire world the quintessential wisdom of ancient India. Not only that. A new class of thinkers arose to re-interpret and re-evaluate this thought in the modern context, and philosophy was seen as touching all parts of life.

The book under review contains a small selection of "important philosophical essays written by major figures of this period" along with short essays by the editors describing their content and context. Some of the authors of these essays are familiar to every scholar: Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Swami Vivekananda. But there are others that are not so well-known such as V.S. Iyer, K.C. Bhattacharyya, Mysore Hiriyanna, and A.C. Mukerji (who was known as the "Plato of Allahabad"). Thus, the book gives us a new vista on the development of modern Indian philosophy and traces its emergence to the Indian national movement. Referring to the British rule of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, wrote in his "Discovery of India" that "paradoxically their assiduous efforts at division ignited the

movement to national unity. And paradoxically as well, their imposition of English as the language of administration and learning facilitated that movement.”

It seems fitting then that in the first section of the book, we find essays on national identity, which on first encounter, would seem out of place for a book on Indian philosophy but on closer examination give us the historical context for the development of a global philosophy. Indeed, the editors argue that “Indian philosophy of this period contributes to India what we call ‘the gift of the secular’.” (p. 3) In the first essay titled “Nationalism in India”, Rabindranath Tagore wrote in 1917, “The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you also must find a basis of unity which is not political. If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity. There is only one history—the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters to the larger one.” (p. 24) This, written almost a century ago is even true today. Time has not diminished its value. It has only added to it. Indeed, in this modern mercantile civilization, humanity faces the threat of self-destruction. Only by applying the highest philosophy and making it practical can we save ourselves from this impending doom. Tagore writes, “Beauty and her twin brother Truth require leisure and self-control for their growth. But the greed of gain has no time or limit to its capaciousness. Its one object is to produce and consume. ... But in this scientific age, money, by its very abnormal bulk, has won its throne. And when from its eminence of piled-up things it insults the higher instincts of man, banishing beauty and noble sentiments from its surroundings, we submit. For we in our meanness have accepted bribes from its hands and our imagination has grovelled in the dust before its immensity of flesh.” (p. 35)

Tagore’s essay, despite its title, is universal in its message and quite relevant in our time of “globalization.” He wrote, “Our real problem in India is not political. It is social. This is a condition not only prevailing India, but among all nations.” (p. 23) Warning us that “nationalism is a menace,” Tagore sees the problem of India is the same for the entire world. How can we find unity in diversity? How can we live together in peace? “India is too vast in its area and too diverse in its races. It is many countries packed in one geographical receptacle. ... For India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, yet fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences.” (p. 30) This passage seems relevant to the current discussions on multiculturalism taking place in Europe and North America. Thus, India epitomizes the global challenge and the experiments conducted there have relevance to the entire world. So it is fitting that it is through Tagore’s essay that we gain entry into the anthology.

The power of philosophy emanates from reflection and introspection. Through a dispassionate view of events and their causes, the philosopher can predict their trajectory and if this trajectory would lead to destruction, can suggest a remedy. Thus philosophy is essential for survival of the human race, especially now when technology has unleashed gargantuan forces and energies that may engulf us. Intellectual development is insufficient to meet this challenge. It is in this context that aesthetics is essential. Art and poetry are the means to take the mind higher and rescue us from the present crisis. In his essay on “The Future Poetry” written in 1917, Aurobindo notes that “Vision is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist.” Emphasizing that the great poet is not merely a juggler of words but rather should embody a vision of a higher dimension, he writes, “this inner sight must have been intense in him before he can awaken it in us.” (p. 143)

The struggle for identity could also be seen in the domain of art. The editors contrast the works of Raja Ravi Varma and Abanindranath Tagore (a nephew of Rabindranath Tagore) on the one hand and Amrita Sher-Gil on the other. The former artists achieved a notoriety by representing Indian mythological themes but using western techniques. Scholars such as Coomaraswamy and Aurobindo were critical of these works and dismissed them as imitative. Coomaraswamy wrote, “Ravi Varma’s pictures...are such as any European student could paint, after only a superficial study of Indian life and literature.” Thus these paintings, from the perspective of the pundits lacked a certain “Indianness.” By contrast, Amrita Sher-Gil and her art is represented as conveying a new originality that differed from the European styles. The editors hasten to point out that all three had an impact in forging a national consciousness and they chose one of Ravi Varma’s paintings for their cover to represent, I suppose, this aesthetic struggle in the emergence of modern Indian art and philosophy.

The third and fourth sections of this anthology dealing with Vedānta, metaphysics and epistemology would be the familiar landscape to many who have studied Indian philosophy. Here the word “Vedānta” is being interpreted as one of the systems comprising the traditional six systems of Indian philosophy. The editors have chosen an exemplary sample of essays dealing with this topic seemingly in its narrow sense. However, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan’s use of the term was wider and similar to the usage of the word “science” which includes all departments of knowledge that investigate nature using the time-honoured scientific method of careful observations to establish causal relationships. In fact, in his essay “The Absolute and Manifestation” included in this anthology, Vivekananda writes, “We cannot force the great hearts of the world into narrow limits and keep them there, especially at this time in the history of humanity, when there is a

degree of intellectual development such as was never dreamt of even a hundred years ago, when a wave of scientific knowledge has arisen which nobody, even fifty years ago, would have dreamt of. By trying to force people into narrow limits you degrade them into animals and unthinking masses. You kill their moral life. What is now wanted is a combination of the greatest heart with the highest intellectuality. ...We want harmony, not one-sided development. And it is possible to have the intellect of a Shankara with the heart of a Buddha.” (p. 322) Thus we see here Vivekananda’s view of the Vedānta philosophy including all arts, all sciences and all religions, which is very much in tune with the original meaning of the word. The same viewpoint is evident in Aurobindo’s philosophy and this is amplified in his masterpiece, “The Synthesis of Yoga.” Describing Radhakrishnan’s philosophy, Charles Moore wrote, “he reveals a synthesizing ability which enables him, in conformity with the essence of the great Indian tradition, to avoid all extremes. In this spirit, Radhakrishnan resolves the traditional oppositions between the Absolute and non-absolute, God and the world, appearance and reality, intuition and reason, philosophy and religion, and philosophy and life, as well as contradictions and oppositions among various religious and philosophical systems.” (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 610) Yet, academics of all climes have categorized their thought under non-dualism (*advaita vedānta*) or “neo-vedānta” when in fact, Vedānta had been emphasizing a harmonious development of the individual and is broader in its scope. It is an error to limit Vedānta to be merely *jnana yoga*. This is manifest in the writings of Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan and their stress on the four *yogas*: namely, *jnana yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *karma yoga*, *raja yoga* (the *yogas* knowledge, love, action and psychic control) to deal with the four-fold processes of the human mind of thinking, feeling, willing and restraining respectively. For life does not seem to fit into convenient categories, and yet the mind struggles to form them. In science, the division into mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and so on, is a human construction so that we are not overwhelmed by the enormity of Nature. The scientist is keenly aware of this. At the same time, these disciplines are interdependent but the concept of science is the overarching framework that unifies these diverse disciplines. The same is the case with the Vedāntic perspective. Rarely do these philosophers use this term in its narrow sense. Often it is being used in its widest sense.

The editorial essay included at the end of the section on Vedānta gives the impression that some hypothetical philosopher or philosophers sat around trying to figure out what philosophy to adopt to take on the British empire and that in their depth of wisdom chose Vedānta, interpreted in its narrow sense as non-dualism. To this, they counter with Aurobindo’s *Lilavada* interpretation of Vedānta. The word *līla* can be translated as “play”; the scientist would translate it as “mystery.” Shankara’s use of the term would be nearer to the scientist’s view. What this world is, is a mystery. It cannot be completely grasped through the categories of logic and thus the aesthetic, artistic view is an essential

supplement. *Māyā* is a statement of fact. We view the world through the dense fog of our own mental prejudices and projections and thus jump to conclusions. This is *māyā*. It is not a “doctrine.” It is a statement of the inherent defect of our mental apparatus, our singular instrument of knowledge and understanding. This perspective comes through quite clearly when one reads the five masterly essays of Vivekananda under the heading of *jñāna yoga* included in this volume. It is dominant in the essay of V.S. Iyer on Sankara’s philosophy. He writes, “*Māyā* is only a statement of fact, the most stubborn of facts. It is no theory. And there is no philosopher of the past or present who is more opposed than Shankara to imaginary, hypothetical and mythical assumptions or inference in the search of the Absolute truth. *Māyā* which is beyond dispute explains this duality to be of the nature of ideas or thoughts which disappear when you seek their cause, i.e., when you seek to know the stuff of which they are made; for ideas or thoughts disappear in 'being' when you seek their cause.” (p. 419)

In summary, this anthology is a very welcome addition to students of philosophy outside of India and inside India as well. For those outside of India, it first dispels the notion that Indian philosophy can be studied only if one is a Sanskrit scholar (though some knowledge of Sanskrit is helpful to appreciate the poetic and literary value of the writings). Second, it brings to the foreground a wide spectrum of thinkers who, on the one hand were well versed in both Sanskrit and English and on the other, could interpret the ancient wisdom in the context of the existential crisis confronting modern man. In all of their introductory essays, the editors lament that some of the names of these academics are not so well-known, the most notable in their list being A.C. Mukerji, who was called the Plato of Allahabad. They write, “While the community of artists and art critics were bound by well-known journals and enjoyed a receptive public, there was no analogous visible community of Indian academic philosophers. Sri Aurobindo, Nobel Laureate Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and Swami Vivekananda all worked outside the academy, and those within the academy who came into public consciousness, like Dr. Radhakrishnan, were few in number, standing as prototypes of philosophy rather than as members of a community of academic philosophers.” (p. 457) While this passage hints at problems of communication afflicting philosophy departments in Indian universities during colonial rule and post-colonial rule, it also brings to the foreground the characteristic feature of Indian philosophy that it is meant to be practiced and tested in daily life and the world at large. A dramatic example of this is seen in the life of Mahatma Gandhi and his political philosophy of non-violence. At the same time, the singular academic in their listing, namely Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who made a difference on the national and international stage did so because he liberated philosophy trapped in the halls of academe and made it relevant to the concerns of modern man. It behoves on the academic to do that even now. In this context, the last section of this book reproduces a lively discussion

among four philosophers that took place in the Indian Philosophical Congress in 1950 at Amalner, India. The topic of discussion is whether Aurobindo had refuted Shankara's theory of Māyā. The discussion is enlightening and instructive.

To close, this anthology is ideal as supplementary reading in an introductory course on Indian philosophy. It can also be used for an advanced seminar on modern Indian thought. It cannot be used as a text for a first course in Indian philosophy since the arrangement of topics and the anthology of essays require greater familiarity with the standard nomenclature and the historical contexts. (The most expedient introduction to these topics can be found in the reviewer's *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction* published by Broadview Press, 2013.) There are other works that can be consulted. They are *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, edited by S. Radhakrishnan and J.H. Muirhead (George Allen and Unwin, 1952), and *The Basic Writings of S. Radhakrishnan*, edited by R.A. McDermott (Jaico, 2008). These books also require considerable scholarly background. Nevertheless, the student will find here a valuable resource for the study of modern Indian philosophy.