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Is Indian Philosophy Pessimistic?

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Abstract:

Philosophers are the torchbearers of a society. They not only engage themselves in armchair speculations rather analyse and try to understand the age old problems like what is life, life beyond and so on. Indian Philosophy in general deals with the common philosophical problems and human life in particular. There is a common agreement among the different schools of Indian Thought that life is full of suffering and perhaps that is the main reason for thinking Indian Philosophy to be pessimistic. On the contrary, both Prof. S.C.Chatterjee and Prof. D. M. Dutta maintain that pessimism is only initial and not final. Pessimism is due to the ignorance of the distinction between para vidya and apara vidya (The Upanisads), Jnana and vijnana (The Gita) and the vyavaharika and the paramarthika (Vedanta). Elimination of sufferings is possible through the dawn of the right knowledge and further it is possible by self-help and self-effort. Therefore, Buddha rightly said "Be a light to yourself (atma dipa bhava)." To know is to become. Knowledge gets its fruition in the practice of what is taught. Further, both these knowledge and action culminate into a state of Bliss. Therefore, pessimism, in Indian philosophy is phenomenal which helps one to reach at the goal i.e., optimism.

1. Introduction

Philosophers are not only engaged themselves in making armchair speculations rather make attempts to analyze, understand and re-understand the age old concepts. Enough water is already flown in the river Philosophy. Philosophy literally means love (philo) of wisdom (sophia). In India, philosophy is termed as 'darshan' which means seeing or vision of truth. Knowledge of truth presupposes love of Truth, meaning sincere pursuit of truth leading to the vision of truth. Man, being inquisitive, is endowed with the natural tendency to find out the Truth behind Appearance. Further, Indian philosophy, is inextricably bound up with human life. Indian philosophy in general is value-centric and life-centric. Like western philosophy, Indian philosophy does not discuss different problems of metaphysics, ethics, logic, psychology and epistemology separately as independent concepts. It deals with all these problems coherently and pragmatically on the adherence of the existence of human life. Western philosophy gives emphasis on human knowledge and treats human knowledge as the paradigm of all possible development ever achieved by human efforts. On the other hand, Indian philosophy gives emphasis on human life as a whole including human knowledge. For Indians, knowledge is not only informative rather a means for higher knowledge. Here, knowledge is treated as an instrument for perfection. It is the door way to liberation. It is based on values as truth, beauty, goodness and justice etc. These are the values for which a man can go to the extent of sacrificing his ordinary objects of desirability like mental comforts, pleasure and gain. Knowledge is pursued not for the sake of knowledge with an urge for theoretic curiosity rather it is pursued for ananda (bliss), peaceful living and deep concern for human life and after life. Knowledge is not pursued for the sake of knowledge but knowledge for liberation. In other words, knowledge is liberative. "Sa Vidya Ya Bimuktaye". The achievement of western philosophy in the field of knowledge can be treated as empirical knowledge or apara vidya which helps one to address the problems and challenges of human life. But in addition to that Indian philosophy is enriched with para vidya which helps one to move ahead on the path of righteousness (dharma) and ultimately attains liberation from bondage caused by ignorance. Thus Indian philosophy gives equal justice to both theory and practice and there is no hiatus between the two.

All most all systems of Indian philosophy admit the fact that human life is full of suffering and perhaps that is the main reason for thinking of Indian philosophy to be pessimistic.

2. Explanation

In Samkhya, we are introduced with three kinds of sufferings like adhyatmika, adhibhautika and adhidaivika. The adhyatmika dukha is due to intra organic causes like bodily disorders and mental abnormalities. It includes both bodily and mental sufferings such as fever and headache, the pangs of fear, anger, greed etc. The adhibhautika dukha is due to extra organic natural causes like men, beasts, thorns etc. Instances of this kind are experienced in case of murder, snakebite, prick of thorns and so forth. The adhyatmika dukha is due to extra organic supernatural causes like the pains inflicted by Ghosts, demons. According to Samkhya, no pleasure is pure and absolute. Every unit of pleasure brings pain in disguise, because pleasure and pain constitute two different sides of the same existential stance.

Buddha, after attaining enlightenment, realized four noble truths of which the opening truth is that life is full of suffering. Birth, old age, disease, death, sorrow, grief, wish, despair and all that is born out of attachment is misery. The second noble truth of Buddha elaborately depicts the chain of causes and effects that leads to suffering in the world. The origin of the suffering is explained by Buddha in the light of his special conception of natural causation known as *pratityasamutpada*. Buddha concluded that ignorance of the knowledge of *pratityasamutpada* and desire (*kamana*) are the fundamental causes of all types of sufferings.

The Nyaya thinkers also maintained that man finds himself to be governed by two sovereign masters, i.e., the desire to obtain pleasure (*sukhaprapiti*) and avoid pain (*dukhaparihara*). The highest good is not the enjoyment of pleasure, for pleasure is always mixed up with pain. Samsara which is of the nature of suffering is due to the false knowledge (*mithya jnana*) about the nature of pain and pleasure.

Almost all the philosophers of Indian philosophy are of the same view that ignorance is the root cause of suffering which captivates man into bondage. According to Advaita Vedanta, the so called empirical knowledge is not knowledge proper; rather it is the knowledge of appearance. According to Advaitins, the world is not real but appears to be real as long as one remains under the spell of ignorance (*avidya*).

On one side, Indian philosophy is man-centric and on the other side, the description of the peculiar position of human life as full of suffering, despair and ignorance tempt the critics to think that Indian philosophy is pessimistic. Man being the highest creature of the divine creation cannot enjoy his life if he would be guided by such philosophical speculations. Indian philosophy has often been criticized as pessimistic and, therefore, it influences our practical life. The statements like everything is momentary, nothing is permanent, desire leads to bondage, all pleasant things are unpleasant in disguise, actions cause bondage, one who perceives dualities or diversities remains in bondage, the world we perceive is an appearance, not real, human knowledge is relative or partially true, whatever is pleasurable may not be preferable, real pleasure comes out of sacrifice, the world is an illusion- *Jagat mithya* and so on stimulate the critics to make a stubborn statement that Indian philosophy is out and out pessimistic. Professor S. C. Chatterjee and Professor D. M. Dutta in their book "An Introduction to Indian Philosophy" unanimously affirm that pessimism in the Indian philosophy is only provisional but not final. They suggest that philosophic quest begins with the knowledge of ignorance and the feeling of disquiet. They again add that Indian philosophy discovers and strongly asserts that life is a mere sport of blind impulses and unquenchable desires and it inevitably ends in misery. Both the proposals suggested by general critics that 'Indian philosophy is predominantly pessimistic' and by Prof Dutta and Prof. Chatterjee that 'Indian philosophy is initially pessimistic and finally optimistic' are not acceptable.

Some scholars argue that Indian philosophy is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, rather it is neutral. The statement, for example, 'life is full of suffering' is a descriptive statement and a description is either true or false. If it is true, one must accept it and if it is false, one must reject it. If a doctor diagnose the disease of a patient then the patient should be grateful to the doctor without being pessimistic because the diagnosis of the doctor is a matter of fact, is a hard reality which is discovered by him in time so that it can be cured. Indian philosophy being called *darsana* or vision of truth; and any visualization of truth cannot be pessimistic or optimistic, rather it is neutral. The expression '*Jagat Mithya*' underlines the relative and contingent character of the world which is nothing but a matter of fact as experienced by the great seer Samkara. Facts remain facts no matter how they are interpreted by the viewers. Value judgements may vary dramatically between individuals, even when judgements of fact are undisputed. The most common example of this phenomenon is the situation 'is the glass half filled or half empty?' Optimists have a tendency to see the glass as half-full when it is half-empty and pessimists have a tendency to see the glass as half-empty when it is half-full. The degree in which situations vary as something good or something bad can be described as one's perspective (optimistic and pessimistic) from which you are looking at the subject of the situation. Pessimism and Optimism are two psychological dispositions which have effects on all major areas of thinking. Nihilism, agnosticism and inadequate linguistic communicability are the results of pessimistic dispositions. Similarly, the beliefs that we are living in the best possible world and there is life after death and so on are results of optimistic dispositions. Thus it is argued that Indian philosophy is a neutral philosophy and it is neither pessimistic nor optimistic.

Indian philosophy is also visualized as value-centric. Value judgments may vary between individuals but cannot be value-neutral. The uniqueness of Indian philosophy lies in the fact that it is enriched by its world-views and life-views giving equal justice to both facts and values. It is pragmatic and value-centric. It is only optimistic and in no sense can be regarded as pessimistic. Pessimistic views and impressions are stimulated within us when we are merged in parts ignoring the whole, when we mistake the means as the end and when we suffer from any psychological dispositions like judging the half-glass of water as half-empty or half-full. Premises are meaningful only if that lead to a conclusion and when the conclusion is established. The diagnosis of the doctor is a matter of fact, no doubt, but for what the doctor is interested to diagnose the disease? The motive of doctor is to cure the patient and to restore his normal health. Thus the diagnosis of the doctor is not simply a fact but it is value-centric and his announcement of the critical condition of the disease is also not pessimistic. It is purely optimistic because it involves the end in itself. Indian philosophy being life-centric and value-centric undertakes three common faculties of discussion. Its content or subject matter is the problems of human life such as problem of existence, problem of knowledge etc., its goal is as to make man free from these problems such as being free from errors and being free from bondage and sufferings and finally its method is as the introduction of ethical disciplines to attain perfection and freedom from sufferings. However, Indian philosophy while explaining away the amount of pain and pleasure in this life as determined by the result of the actions of the past life; centers around the Law of Karma. All the systems except Carvaka believe in Law of Karma. Act one must. And the maxim is –"as you sow so shall you reap". For each good act there is reward and for each bad act there is punishment. It does not leave room for fatalism. Rather, it affirms the role of freedom and self-determination.

Buddha's world-views and life-views are synoptically presented in his four noble truths. The first noble truth is about the problem of life i.e. suffering. The second noble truth is about the cause of suffering. The third noble truth is about the cessation of suffering. The fourth noble truth is about ethical disciplines of eight fold paths to attain nirvana or freedom from suffering. In this complete scheme

of philosophy there is no room for pessimism at all. If ignorance and desire (kamana) are the causes of suffering then right knowledge and nonattachment to desire can help one attain nirvana. Like Buddhism, Samkhya darsana also admits that ignorance is the cause of suffering. So freedom from suffering is to be attained through right knowledge of reality. Right knowledge is the knowledge of the distinction between purusa and prakriti, self and not-self. This knowledge is not mere intellectual understanding of the truth. It must be a direct knowledge or clear realization of the fact that the self is not the body, the senses, the mind and the intellect. Once we realize that our self is the unborn and undying spirit in us, the eternal and immortal subject of experience, we become free from all misery and suffering. From the speculation standpoint there seems to be certain gaps in the samkhya philosophy. Still it does not underrate its value as a system of self-culture for the attainment of liberation. So far as the practical end of attaining freedom from suffering is concerned, it enables the religious aspirant to realize the highest good of his life, viz. liberation. Like Samkhya and Buddhism, Jainism is a religion of self-help and self-effort. Worship, for the jaina, is not seeking for mercy and pardon. The Jaina believes in the inexorable moral law of karma. The consequences of the past misdeeds can only be counteracted by generating within the soul strong opposite forces of good thought, good speech and good action. This is why the liberated soul is called a victor (jina), and a hero (vira). According to the Jainas, the passions or cravings of the soul germinated by ignorance lead to the association of the soul with matter. Our ignorance about the real nature of our souls leads to anger, vanity, infatuation and greed. This can be removed by right knowledge or the knowledge of the reality. Right knowledge consists in the detailed knowledge of all truths. As in the case of faith, so in the case of knowledge the existence of certain innate tendencies (karma) stands in the way of correct knowledge. For the attainment of perfect knowledge the removal of these karmas should be attempted. Perfection in this process ends in the attainment of absolute omniscience (kevalajnana). Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brhmacarya and Aparigraha are the five vows of right action which supplement right knowledge towards the attainment of perfection. Thus Jainism being a religion without God is credited as a religion of self-help and self-effort to attain the fourfold perfection (ananta catustaya), namely, infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power and infinite bliss.

The Yoga philosophy of Patanjali is an invaluable gift of Indian philosophy which aims at preventing the self from identifying itself with mental modifications (cittavrttinirodha). So long as there are changes and modifications in citta, the self is reflected therein and in the absence of discriminative knowledge, identifies with them. As a consequence, the self feels pleasure or pain out of the objects of the world and love or hates them accordingly. This means bondage for the self. Hence in order to attain liberation, we must somehow restrain the activities of the body, the senses and the mind and finally suppress all the modifications of citta. When the waves of the empirical consciousness (karya-citta) die down and leave citta in a state of perfect placidity (karana-citta), the self realizes itself as distinct from the mind-body complex and as free, immortal and self-shining intelligence. The Samkhya-Yoga system holds that liberation is to be attained by means of spiritual insight (prajna) and spiritual insight can be attained when the mind is free from all impurities and rendered perfectly calm and serene. For the purification and enlightenment of citta or the mind, the Yoga gives us the eightfold means which consists of the disciplines of 1) yama or restraint, 2) niyama or culture, 3) asana or posture, 4) pranayama or breath control, 5) pratyahara or withdrawal of the senses, 6) dharana or attention, 7) dhyana or meditation, and 8) Samadhi or concentration. If this eightfold steps of Yoga are practiced regularly with devotion, they must lead to the attainment of liberation. Thus, Indian Philosophy advocates not for suppression but sublimation.

According to Samkara, realization of the identity between the self and Brahman is liberation from bondage. Liberation is possible even while the soul is associated with the body as Buddha says nirvana is attainable in this very life. Liberation is not the production of anything new, nor is it the purification of any old state; it is the realization of what is always there, even in the stage of bondage. Liberation is not merely the absence of all misery that arises from the illusory sense of distinction between the self and Brahman. It is conceived as positive bliss (ananda). A pragmatic critic, for whom practical utility is the highest value, often complains that Samkara indulges in visionary speculation which reduces the world to an empty show, deprives life of all zest and causes failure in the struggle for existence which indicates the symptom of pessimism. The reply to such a charge is that if man chooses to live the unreflecting life of an animal, or of primitive man, he need not go beyond the world of practical reality. But he choose to use his reason and to think of the contradictory and unreal nature of the world and search for its real ground. Reason demands again that he should reshape his life on a rational basis as a child grows into an adult he has to remodel life gradually in accordance with his changing outlook. Social qualities like love, unity, self-sacrifice and rational conduct possess greater survival value than egoism, jealousy, selfishness, and blind passionate conduct. The beliefs in the unity of all men, all creation, and all existences can supply the best foundation of such superior qualities. It is a misunderstanding to suspect it of baneful effect on practical life.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be synopsisized that Indian philosophy entertains three possibilities of human existence such as 1) ignorance, 2) knowledge, and 3) applied knowledge. In other words not-knowing, knowing and becoming are three human possibilities which every human being undergoes. In India, ignorance or not-knowing is considered as a privileged possibility because it keeps man standing in a cross road looking for a right path for right direction and it is better than being misguided by false knowledge. In Isa Upanisad avidya is given higher status than apra vidya. Avidya is non-discriminative knowledge which gradually leads to discriminative knowledge or viveka jnana. Knowledge helps one to discriminate between dharma and adharma, karma and akarma, bhakti and asakti, papa (demerit) and punya (merit). Knowledge also helps to understand the values of peaceful living like sympathy, apathy, love, forgiveness, tolerance, non-violence and so on. But mere awareness, understanding and realization of these values qualify a subordinate human possibility. The final and finest human possibility is to embody or become these values in practice. Buddha was the embodiment of love and compassion. All great seers had lived what they believed and preached to common mass. Thus knowing the truth means becoming the truth or living with that truth and knowing the value means becoming the values or living with those

values. Indian philosophy is out and out optimistic for its four teachings, such as, 1) suffering is a fact and a part of human life, 2) ignorance is a human possibility which opens the doors of knowledge, 3) Knowledge culminates in becoming or to know is to becomes, and 4) knowledge itself becomes a state of bliss or ananda. Real happiness lies not through acquisition (Bhoga) but through renunciation (Tyagah).

4. References

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