



On Matilal's Understanding of Indian Philosophy

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I. A Personal Prelude

I met Bimal Matilal for the first time when I joined the faculty of Calcutta Sanskrit College's Postgraduate and Research Department in 1960 (I had known of him earlier at the University of Calcutta as a brilliant student in the Sanskrit Department). He came to my office one day to ask if I would like to read and comment on an essay he had written on the Nyāya analysis of empty terms (such as "rabbit's horn"). As I was looking through it, I was struck by the way he had succeeded in showing how the Nyāya paraphrasing of the sentences containing empty terms had anticipated, by many centuries, Russell's attempt to do the same. (I am not sure if that essay was ever published, but I now recognize it as the ancestor of chapter 4 of *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*.)¹ That occasion was the beginning of our friendship. Quine's *Methods of Logic* came out, I believe, in 1961, and we worked through it together. At that time, I was studying Gangeśa's *Tattvacintāmaṇi* with Pandit Ananta Kumar Tarkatīrtha. Although his principal mentor was Pandit Madhusudana Nyāyācārya (who replaced Pandit Ananta Kumar as Professor of Nyāya upon the latter's moving to the Research Department of the College), Matilal was also studying some texts with Pandit Ananta Kumar. (Among the others there, Gaurinath Śāstri was reading *Kiraṇāvālī*, and Kalidas Bhattacharyya was reading *Advaitasiddhi*. We all would stay on to attend each other's classes. What a great time we had!) Then, he left for Harvard. Although I did not see much of him for a number of years, he was in our minds as one who, already a Tarkatīrtha, was learning modern logic with Quine, and was soon going to be a star among us. And a star he became.

As I remember from our conversations during those years, conversations we would recall some thirty years later when he spent some time with me in Philadelphia, we were looking for some way of doing Indian philosophy that would steer us clear of the paths that lay before us and with which many of us had already become disenchanted. Our professors in Calcutta—with perhaps the two exceptions of Rash Vihary Das and Kalidas Bhattacharyya—talked about Indian philosophy in edifying language. Not that they did not know the texts. They wanted to instill in us the perception that Indian philosophy was superior to Western philosophy in many ways, one of them being that Indian thought was practical (aiming at the removal of pain and suffering, leading eventually to *mokṣa*) and spiritual (in a rather undefined sense of that term, and we all felt we knew what it was about), culminating in a mystic intuition of the truth. All this was contrasted with the perception that Western philosophy was theoretical, intellectual, and removed from deep existential problems. (It struck me much later as strange that Husserl, in his Vienna lectures, drew

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a similar contrast, but used the alleged theoretical character of Western philosophy to show its superiority over the practicality-oriented Eastern thought. This only confirmed my suspicion that such contrasts must be spurious.) We did not want edifying discourse. Navya-Nyāya convinced us that Indian thinking was rigorously theoretical and relentlessly intellectual.

Both Matilal and I had developed a dissatisfaction also with the way the Western Indologist, trained admirably in philological methods and making important contributions to philology, sat in judgment on Indian philosophy—if they believed at all (as many of them do not, and, following them, many Western philosophers also do not believe) that Indian philosophy was truly philosophy. For us, the situation was exactly analogous to a scholar in *Mittlehochdeutsch* who, by virtue of expertise in that language, claimed to be an authentic Kant scholar and a true judge of Kantian philosophy.

In his Preface to *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*, Matilal points out both these misleading paths. He regards it as unfortunate that Indian philosophy “has remained identified with mysticism and mistakenly thought to be inseparable from religion.”² And he insists that for the purpose of philosophical studies, philological research “should be treated not as an end but as a means to an end.”

Matilal, without doubt, did more than any one else to foster, promote, and validate the conception of Indian philosophy as a rigorous, theoretical, logical, and analytical enterprise. He was not alone in doing this.³ But he was the foremost advocate and did analytic philosophy very well—with his unique combination of training in the Sanskrit Nyāya tradition and in the Harvard Philosophy Department. He also had an advantage in that, at Oxford, he was able to befriend some of the best analytic philosophers—among them Strawson and Dummett; but he also got to know at first hand such sharp thinkers as J. L. Mackie, Gareth Evans (both of whom succumbed as he did to cancer), and Derek Parfit (whose work on personal identity bears the mark of what he learned from Matilal about Buddhism). They all found in him an authentic and admirable exponent of Indian philosophy, one who did not preach, but was eager both to learn from them and yet to philosophize with them about *their* problems, but using the tools of Indian philosophy.

II. Methodological Considerations

In the Preface to his first book, *The Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation*,⁴ Matilal writes: “[T]he age of my material seems to justify a philological treatment, whereas the content of the material pleads for use of philosophy. It is this method of combined philology and philosophy that I claim to have employed here.”⁵ These remarks imply that when a text is very old and there are reasons to suspect that we have lost the living

sense of the language in which it is written or that new layers of interpretation have come to cover up the meanings of key words as they obtained then, philological research is necessary to lay bare the lost meanings. This is as true of Sanskrit as it is of Greek or of eighteenth-century German. Such research has to settle, for example, such questions as, what the Vedic texts meant by 'ṛta', or what Kant meant by 'deduction'. I need not rehearse the principles of research securely established by philology over the last two hundred years. Invaluable as it is to tell us how a word was being used at one time, or also before or after the age of the text, philological research alone cannot establish the nature of the philosophical thesis that is being asserted in the text. For example, learning that Kant took his use of 'deduction' from the way it was used in the legal proceedings of the time, one still cannot establish the exact nature of the Kantian deduction. Philosophical concepts develop a life of their own, just as philosophers often pick up ordinary words and use them in technical senses. To understand what they are doing with it, it is equally necessary to have a feel for their *problems*.

But is this not already making an unwarranted assumption that, in the case of Sanskrit texts, they are *philosophical* texts? Stereotypes and clichés have long prevailed in writings on Oriental thought. If philosophy is a Western enterprise having its origin in ancient Greece, how could Digṅāga, Uddyotakara, Kumāriḷa, Śaṃkara, Vācaspati, and Udayan count as *philosophers*? Hegel held that Indian thinking never raised itself to the level of concepts; it rather remained at the level of feeling and *Vorstellung*. Following him, an entire line of great thinkers—Husserl and Heidegger among them—held that the idea of theory, and so of philosophy, was absent in Indian thinking, which therefore cannot be said to be philosophical. The view that Indian thinking was practical has been no less a component of modern Indian self-understanding. We all learned this in our graduate schools.

I will not on this occasion pause to demonstrate why I consider these opinions to be no more than clichés that will not survive the test of textual evidence. In my view, neither was Western thinking, at its beginning, pure theory, nor is Indian thinking simply practicality-oriented. In both cases, thinking began as a component of a large mythical-practical milieu, but developed into what is close to the idea of pure theory. It is surprising that clichés, on both sides, have survived at least a century of intellectual contact. Generations of Indologists and Orientalists looked to Oriental thinking to find in it an *other* to Western thought, and they thought they had found it there. One finds what one is looking for. They either valued or devalued Indian thought, depending upon their predilections, precisely for that reason: for some, it is valuable just because it provides what Western thought does not (an experiential, intuitive, mystic aspect); for others it is deficient in that it lacks the discursivity and

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intellectual rigor of Western thought. Matilal was right in claiming that “a considerable portion of Indian philosophy consists of a number of rigorous systems which are more concerned with logic and epistemology, with the analysis and classification of human knowledge, than they are with transcendent states of euphoria.”⁶ It would be wrong to dismiss this as a misperception born of an overzealous attempt to read Western analytical thinking into the Sanskrit texts. For those of us who, like Matilal, have spent years going through the rigorous discipline of studying Sanskrit texts under the guidance of traditional pundits, it just seems perverse to be told that that tradition is nondiscursive, anti-intellectual, experiential, mystical, intuitive, and practical.

At this point, I wish to recall two fundamental tenets of Gadamer’s theory of interpretation. For one thing, Gadamer tells us, you cannot sever a text from the history of its interpretation; you cannot bypass this history and lay hold of the meaning of the text directly. Secondly, as an interpreter, I can only interpret the text from the vantage point of my historical situation. Matilal—although he was not in any way influenced by Gadamer—was in fact abiding by these two hermeneutic principles. On the one hand, he looked at a text from within the interpretative tradition of Indian Sanskrit scholarship, that is, the way the commentarial tradition had been handed down through the lineage of pundits. Most Western Indologists want to interpret texts without taking that interpretative tradition into account, that is by returning to the texts themselves, setting aside what Gadamer calls the text’s *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Matilal also interprets the text from the contemporary philosophical perspective, and so makes it eminently relevant, and not merely of antiquarian interest.

Furthermore, the Indologists generally want to *understand* the text without any interest in the question of truth or falsity of the thesis asserted in the text. The philosopher’s primary interest is in truth or falsity. He interprets the text in order to determine the thesis it asserts, but in the long run he wants to be able to decide if that thesis is acceptable or not. Without that interest, a philosophical text ceases to be of philosophical interest; it may at most be of *cultural* interest. As a philosopher, Matilal did not merely expound, translate, and interpret Sanskrit texts, but argued for the position he supported and against the position he opposed. He asked, as every philosopher has to ask, which position is valid, and he made his own reasoned choice. On all these counts, Matilal did with the Sanskrit philosophical texts what, as a philosopher, he was under an obligation to do.

There are two other aspects of Matilal’s methodology in dealing with Indian philosophy on which I want to make brief comments. For one thing, he thought he did comparative philosophy. We often talked about this, and I expressed my usual misgivings about the philosophical value

of doing comparative philosophy. He would agree with me that there is a way of doing comparative philosophy which is superficial. This is what I have often called "tagging theories on one side to theories on the other side." What is the philosophical point of doing this except to demonstrate that two traditions produced similar theories? But, as Donald Davidson asked in conversation, why should one read Indian philosophy if the Indian philosophers gave the same sort of answers to precisely the same questions as the Western philosophers do? Matilal's response to this would be twofold. First, comparative philosophy in a certain sense is unavoidable for one who writes about Indian philosophy in English. Thus he writes in his Preface to *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar*:

I believe that anyone who wants to explain and translate systematically from Indian philosophical writings into a European language will, knowingly or unknowingly, be using the method of 'comparative philosophy'. In other words, he cannot help but compare and contrast Indian philosophical concepts with those of Western philosophy, whether or not he is conscious of so doing. Otherwise, any discourse on Indian philosophy in a Western language would, in my opinion, be impossible. Thus, 'comparative philosophy', in this minimal sense, should no longer be treated as a derogatory phrase.⁷

The same situation, I am sure, would obtain if English or German philosophical texts were rendered into Sanskrit, or if, I would suppose, Kant is translated into English. Comparative philosophy would cut across the East-West dichotomy.

Secondly, and this I am sure would be his response to Davidson, Matilal would insist that in spite of the similarities he was so good in bringing out, Indian philosophers did not ask many of the questions which Western philosophers asked; when they were asking the same question, the Indians gave the question a slant, a twist, a formulation, which gave it a new significance; they sometimes allowed us to give fresh answers to the questions raised in Western philosophy; and sometimes they asked questions which were never asked in the Western tradition. If we keep all these possibilities in mind, then we can agree with Matilal that

the study of Indian philosophy is not simply necessary from a cross-cultural point of view, or from the viewpoint of understanding the 'Indian mind' (if there is such a thing), but that it is most urgently needed for increasing creativity and comprehensiveness in the philosophic endeavours of modern professional philosophers.⁸

In other words, Indian philosophy could contribute to the formation of a global philosophy, not in the sense of a philosophical theory acceptable to all (for that would not be philosophical), not in the sense of a common project to which all different traditions can contribute, but a common discourse in which they can participate—in other words, a conversation of mankind (not a conversation of the West or of the East by itself).

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Concluding his Introduction to the volume *Analytical Philosophy in Comparative Perspective*, Matilal writes:

The chief purpose here in this volume has been an attempt to initiate a dialogue between the ancient (Sanskrit classical) philosophers and modern philosophers—a dialogue as much as it is possible and can be allowed in the pages of an anthology. Too often Indian philosophy has been considered (very wrongly) as being 'soft' and tender-minded. Too often it has been identified as being mystical, non-argumentative, poetic and dogmatic. An emphasis on the other side has been attempted here to correct this heavily one-sided picture. What best way is there to accomplish this than by initiating eventually a dialogue with modern analytic philosophers in a way that would try to transcend the language barrier?⁹

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Matilal devoted his life to making such a dialogue possible, and thereby to making the classical Indian philosophies living again.

III. Areas of Interest and a Philosophical Position

Although Matilal wrote on a variety of topics and areas in Sanskrit studies in general and Indian philosophy in particular, it would not be incorrect to say that his main interest lay in the issues and arguments—logical, semantic, epistemological, and metaphysical—that characterized the disputations between Nyāya and Buddhism. In Nyāya his primary training was in the *Anumānakhandā* (the part devoted to inference) of Navya-Nyāya, but his competence and interest ranged equally over old Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Buddhism. Since, in these disputations between Nyāya and Buddhism, the relation between language and reality was a central issue, Matilal devoted a great part of his attention to it, and consequently also to both Bhartṛhari and Nāgārjuna, who occupy two extreme positions in the scale of possible views on the matter. All these interests reached their culmination in *Perception*,¹⁰ in which, focusing upon the Nyāya-Buddhism controversy, he defends a sort of Nyāya realism as opposed to the Buddhist phenomenalism, idealism, and constructionism.

Among the problems in Indian logic and epistemology which particularly interested Matilal are: the role of language and conceptual construction in perception, theories of meaning and reference, problems of empty terms and fictional entities, theory of definition, intentionalism versus extensionalism in Indian logic, ideas of subject and predicate in Indian grammar and logic, theories of truth and error in the Indian epistemologies, the problem of knowledge of knowledge, the context principle in Indian semantic theories, and holism in Indian theories of meaning. Outside logic and epistemology, his interest concerned the ineffability thesis, mysticism and its logical defense, and the Mādhyamika concept of *śūnyatā*. During the last ten years, he worked a great deal on the ethical theories in the epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, on which a series

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of articles appeared in Bengali in the literary magazine *Desh*. Right toward the end of his life, he became interested—and how could he not help being drawn into it?—in the question of relativism, on which he published a paper and planned to coauthor a book (along with Michael Krausz).¹¹

Although eventually Matilal opts for Nyāya realism, he tries to strengthen the defense of the *pūrvapakṣas*—Buddhism and Bhartṛhari—as much as possible, and nowhere gives the impression of not giving them their due. The realism is defended through a series of choices: preferring the theory of “mixture of *pramāṇas*” (*pramāṇa-samplava*) so that not only touch and vision, but also perception and inference, may cognize the same object; showing that the theory of extrinsic truth of cognitions (*parataḥprāmāṇya*) is consistent with all the facts; establishing a ‘causal route’ from the intentional objects back to material bodies; arguing the thesis that the object of sensory awareness is both an intentional object and a material object (thereby making a separate domain of intentional objects superfluous); and—in accordance with Navya-Nyāya—distinguishing between entities posited for analysis of cognitions and entities belonging to the ‘inner circle’ of the ontology. In doing all this, especially the last, Matilal not only defends Nyāya realism but considerably revises the classical Nyāya, even the Navya-Nyāya ontology. Thus he retains only natural universals and dismisses artifact universals (such as ‘potness’) as bogus universals. In doing all this, he proves himself to be a creative interpreter.

IV. Some Questions

There are several questions which may be raised regarding Matilal’s way of doing Indian philosophy. Let me formulate three of them in the order of their severity. First, one may ask, is all Indian philosophy analytic? Are there not other facets of Indian thinking? Second, why interpret Indian philosophy “in the light of” contemporary Western analytic philosophy? Why not introduce, in one’s discourse about Indian philosophy, the other contemporary philosophical styles, methodologies, and figures? Third, why interpret Indian philosophy “in the light of” Western philosophy at all? Why not, for example, do just the reverse, that is, interpret, translate, and critique Western thought from the point of view of Indian (or, possibly, Oriental) thought? Let me briefly respond to these questions, as I think Matilal would have (gathering threads from the innumerable conversations we have had over the years).

I think Matilal knew Indian philosophical literature too well to hold the view that all Indian philosophy is analytical. The emphasis he often placed on this aspect was intended, as he explicitly says in a passage quoted above, to counteract another one-sided but more misleading emphasis placed on the religious, alogical, and nondiscursive aspect of that tradition. But at a certain point, philosophical thinking—in India as

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well as in the West—rises above the cultural milieu from which it has come and from which it derives its nourishment, achieving a certain level of conceptual idealization, and it is then that its discourse tends to be universal discourse. A philosophical thesis is then sought to be grounded in arguments, reasonings, and empirical evidence. It can then be called analytical in a broad sense. To say that a large part of Indian philosophy is analytical is not to assign that part to any standard school of analytic philosophy (which itself, as we know, is enormously variegated and differentiated). Perhaps one could say that philosophy was regarded in the Indian tradition as a hard-headed, rigorous discipline where definitions, arguments, and disputations prevailed, and which made use of grammar, philology, etymology, analysis of ordinary language (*lokavyavahāra*), and an appeal to ordinary (and extra-ordinary) experience and textual hermeneutics for vindicating or refuting philosophical claims. In other words, philosophy was a most serious theoretical enterprise. Even the mystic who held that reality was ineffable sought to ground his thesis in logical reasoning—as Matilal argued in his Oxford Inaugural Lecture.¹²

The second question was forcefully pressed, in a recent discussion in Calcutta, by Sibajiban (Bhattacharyya). Sibajiban's point was that since "fashions" in philosophy change, interpretative stances geared to the present style will inevitably make room for the latest to arrive on the scene. Stcherbatsky, for example, interpreted Buddhism using the jargon and conceptual framework of the prevailing German Neo-Kantianism, which is now obsolete for most purposes. Analytical philosophy itself has undergone great transformations. (Contrast the work of Gaṇeśwar Mīśra with that of Matilal.) What do we do, then, to ensure that interpretations of Indian philosophy, in the light of any current philosophical trend, will last? Now, to this I would give the following response on behalf of Matilal. For one thing, one can only do something that is best, and one can only interpret, as Gadamer insisted, from one's present historical situation and not *sub specie aeternitatis*. There is no guarantee that one's interpretation will outlast time and history. For another, as far as Matilal was concerned, although he was primarily thinking in terms of the analytic tradition (Quine, Strawson, Dummett, Davidson, et al.), he had an open mind toward Brentano (some of whose ideas he used as early as in his Harvard dissertation), Husserl (about whom he learned in the course of time), and Heidegger. During the last few years of his life, he was interested in "deconstructionism"—largely under the influence of Gayatri Chakraborty-Spivak—and was looking for possible "subaltern" studies in the history of Indian philosophy.

I think a more radical question is the third and last: why try at all to "interpret" Indian philosophy—or, for that matter, Chinese philosophy—from the point of view of Western thought? Is not this asymmetry—for Western philosophy is not studied, expounded, and critiqued from the point of view of Oriental thought—a sign of the cultural hegemony of

the West, of what Husserl called the “Europeanization of the Earth”? This is indeed a very difficult question to answer, but a question no one who is caught up in this asymmetry should avoid. This is not the occasion to deal with it in detail, but let me—in retrospect, not being sure how Matilal would have responded—say a few things. First, it is a contingent historical situation which accounts for the fact that even self-characterized purists about Indian philosophy, the “orthodox” interpreters of Indian thought—the *gurus*, saints, and professors alike—write unhesitatingly on Indian philosophy in the English language (without worrying if such discourse does not entail a surreptitious interpretation, the sort of interpretation that is being questioned). That the professional philosophers in India do not generally write in Sanskrit or in any of the modern Indian languages (despite feeble attempts to do so), but rather write in English, shows that the alleged “asymmetry” is due not to any self-consciously adopted and defended methodological stance, but to a historical contingency over which we did not hold any sway. (Exactly out of the same sort of historical contingency, European thinkers do not have to write in Sanskrit or in Indian languages.) Secondly, Indian philosophers of past generations, whose interpretative positions Matilal opposed, no less thought from a Western perspective; only, they used the language of a Kant, a Hegel, a Bradley, or some philosopher of that breed. Third, there is a growing attempt in India—highly commendable and instructive—to interpret, talk about, and critique some very fundamental concepts of Western thought in the language of Indian philosophy. A very good example of this sort of work is to be found in the just published volume *Samvāda*.¹³

Finally, the goal should be—as it certainly was Matilal’s—to overcome this contingency, this asymmetry, and instead of interpreting one in the light of the other, to evolve a discourse and a conversation in which the partners would be Plato, Bhartṛhari, Aristotle, Gautama, Vātsyāyana, Digṅāga, Quine, Dharmakīrti, and Carnap—to name only a few. This goal is far off. Even the members of the contemporary philosophical community—those at Freiburg and at Oxford, for example—do not have unimpeded communication among themselves. How could we expect them to admit such “alien” figures from ancient and medieval India into a communicative community which knows no national, geographical, linguistic, and cultural bounds? But that is at least what we may aim at, if philosophy is to be a rational enterprise. Nobody contributed more toward that goal than Matilal.

NOTES

- 1 – Bimal K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

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- 2 – Ibid., p. 11.
- 3 – An earlier analytic interpreter of Indian philosophy was the late Gaṇeśwar Miśra.
- 4 – Bimal K. Matilal, *The Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation*, Harvard Oriental Series, no. 46 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965).
- 5 – Ibid., p. ix.
- 6 – Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar*, p. 11.
- 7 – Ibid., p. 13.
- 8 – Ibid., p. 12.
- 9 – *Analytical Philosophy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. B. K. Matilal and J. L. Shaw (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), p. 37.
- 10 – B. K. Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories on Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
- 11 – See his “Ethical Relativism and Confrontation of Cultures,” in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. Michael Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).
- 12 – B. K. Matilal, *The Logical Illumination of Indian Mysticism*, Inaugural Lecture at the University of Oxford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- 13 – *Samvāda: A Dialogue between Two Philosophical Traditions*, ed. Daya Krishna, M. P. Rege, R. C. Dwivedi, and M. Lath (Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, and Motilal Banarsidass, 1991).