

P A R T - I

## CHAPTER I

### PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND ITS PRESUPPOSITIONS

The view has been very often expressed that traditional Indian thought did not recognise the importance of history. This is a large statement and cannot be examined here. For the present, we are concerned with Indian philosophy, and we need not disagree that a philosophy of history in the true sense is missing within this domain. Now what are the implications of — and if one wishes, the reasons for — this lack? Several remarks may be in order.

It is interesting to begin by noticing that none of the classical schools of Indian philosophy — who in accordance with a methodological tradition started with a list of *pramānas* or sources of true knowledge — recognised history as a *pramāna*. This is not to say that historical knowledge was not regarded as valid. Only, the philosophers did not recognise historical knowledge as a unique and irreducible species of valid knowledge. They in fact sought to explain it either as a sort of inference (*anumiti*) or as a species of verbal testimony (*sabdajñāna*). This fact by itself does not explain why a philosophy of history should not have developed. For, given an interest in historical phenomena or historical writings the philosophers could have developed — consistently with

their reduction of historical knowledge to anumiti or to sabdajñana — either a logic of historical inference or a semantics of historical language. This however did not take place. Not history alone but also mathematics suffered from negligence at the hands of philosophers — and this despite the fact that both historical writings in the form of the purāṇas and of course mathematics with preeminence flourished<sup>1</sup>. One is naturally led to ask : 'Why?'

Comparison with Greek thought is instructive. The Greek philosophers not only discussed philosophical problems about mathematics, but some of them regarded mathematical knowledge as the paradigm case of knowledge. But what about history? Karl Lowith has argued that classical Greek thought — not much unlike Oriental thinking — is still further away from modern historical thinking. And of course the Greeks did write excellent histories. Not until the dawn of Christianity did a philosophy of history arise in the west. One may again ask : 'Why?'

We are in effect asking: why is it that ancient Indian philosophy as well as classical Greek thought failed to develop a philosophical concern for history? What difference did the dawn of Christianity make so as to make a philosophical awareness of the importance of history possible? Is that difference a necessary presupposition of this awareness? Or

could it be that in this area we are dealing with historical accidents, and that the search for necessary antecedents and implications is a misdirected effort?

It is true that a most absorbing and developed concern with time is to be found in most Indian philosophies, possibly leaving aside the extreme illusionistic systems. The Nyaya-Vaisesika regards time as an objective reality, one, infinite and parties, and Vatsayana, the commentator on Gautama's Sutras, seeks to keep the notion of time free from possible confusion with that of space. Time for the Vaisesikas, is the condition of all movement and change, the basis of all temporal relations. It is one, but only appears to be many owing to associations with the changes which occur within it. The Samkhya regards time as a form of Prakrti, a specific evolute of it — not a substance, as in the Nyaya-Vaisesika, but a relation connecting events together. The philosophers of this school debated the issue whether the one time, as distinguished from the moments, is a construction of the mind or an objective reality. For Ramanuja, time and Prakrti are equally original realities, though time is not a self-subsistent reality but belongs — as everything else does — to Brahman or the Absolute. The schools of Buddhism show a wide spectrum of views regarding time. Common to them is a conception of universal change as consisting of moments. It is only in the Advaita Vedanta that time becomes an unreal phenomenon representing the relation between Spirit and Maya<sup>2</sup>.

Thus the Newtonian view that time is an infinite self-subsistent, all-pervading continuum, the Leibnizian view that time is a system of relations between what are essentially non-temporal monads, the Kantian view that time is a mental construction, and the Bradleyan view that time is but an appearance of the absolute — all these seem to have been represented in the Indian schools. We may not therefore accuse the Indian philosophers of not taking time seriously, and we cannot explain their negligence of history as being due to their lack of concern with time.

Could it be said that though the importance of time was taken note of, yet for most Indian philosophers time did not achieve anything new? That time does not achieve anything new may be a consequence of two quite different doctrines to be found in Indian thought. In the first place, there is the view, to be found in most schools of Indian philosophy, Buddhism not excluded, that the goal of human existence, the supreme value, is moksa and that moksa is attainable through right knowledge. When a person struggling through time does acquire right knowledge of the nature of his self and thereby achieves moksa, he does not, in an important sense, achieve anything new, he does not acquire any previously nonexistent excellence. He only recognises a truth eternally accomplished. He realises that this perfection was eternally within him, and that his efforts through time have not given him anything which he did not earlier possess.

There is still another trend of thought which, by implication, mellows down the importance of time. This is the well known conception of time as cyclic. According to this conception the infinite time is not a linear series but an endless succession of recurrent cycles which fall into four main types : satya, treta, dvāpara and kali. Now it would seem that in this conception of time nothing is essentially new, for there must have been a preceding cycle in which it figured. In fact, on this view the very irreversibility and unidimensionality of time come to be denied. Could such a conception of time allow for the possibility of a serious concern with history?

There is no doubt that these two factors are in a way responsible for the Indian attitude towards time and its relevance. For us, the second one is more interesting. However, with regard to the conception of a cyclic time two things may be borne in mind. For one thing, not all philosophical systems made any substantial use of this notion in their ontologies. For another, the conception of a cyclic time does not deny newness of events. What it denies is the newness of the values achieved, or of the truths realised in an epoch. It is not that every single event or individual belonging to one yuga had been prefigured in an infinite number of other yugas preceeding it. No yuga in fact is identical with another in content. But the moral and spiritual ideals, the human virtues and failings, the patterns of social and individual behaviour

116352  
29 APR 1997

SOUTH BANGALORE  
University Library  
C. S. R. K. S. S.

— the form, in brief, is what is supposed to repeat itself. Such identity of form leaves room for novelty of content.

Truths, according to the Indian tradition, are ageless, suprahistorical. So also are values. No man could claim to have discovered the truth for the first time. Great men like Sri Krishna and the Buddha claim only to be teaching truths which others without number had been before them. Who in the long list of seers could lay claim to have been the first to see the truth?

History as the series of events or as the record of events in their uniqueness, is assured, History as a significant process of achieving new values which were not achieved before is denied. If philosophy is concerned primarily with ultimate values, with ageless and eternal truths, it need have no concern with the history of events.

The law of karma, so uniquely determining the broad spectrum of Indian philosophical thought, assures a moral order in the universe, but does not generate a consciousness of history. For history, in the strict sense, is not the history of the sojourn of an individual soul through the series of its transmigrations, but a gradual advance of an institution, a race, a nation, or of mankind in general towards a far off goal through an ordered succession of events and experiences, actions and decisions, thoughts and sufferings. The law of karma made room for both determination by the past

and initiative at present, which an awareness of history requires. But it is not the sort of determination which the notion of history requires. It is individualistic in application, and its basic notions of rebirth and transmigration are trans-historical. A doctrine of the spiritual evolution of the soul through successive births is as little historical in nature as is a doctrine of cosmic change, even of ordered cosmic change. Both these doctrines were developed in Indian philosophy — with no consequential advantage in favour of a philosophical interest in history.

The Vedāntic monists debated the issue, whether finite individuality and the world of change are, from a transcendental (pāramārthika) standpoint, real or not. Sankara did not, as is well known, while Ramanuja did, accord reality to the world and finite selves. But it is important to bear in mind that merely by granting reality to the world and finite individuals one does not make room for history. One may even go further : a recognition of the reality of time, though a necessary condition of a philosophical concern with time, is not yet sufficient for it. In fact, Ramanuja and many other schools of Vedānta did not recognise time to be real, but they did not develop any genuine philosophical concern for history.

The reason is not far to seek. History is not just change. Recognition that the world is a process in which

nothing abides is not an index of one's sense for history. There are Indian Heracliteans, but no Indian Hegelians (though Ramanuja has been wrongly supposed to be one). History is basically history of man. History of man again is history of human consciousness. Recognition of the historicity of consciousness is the necessary and sufficient condition of a philosophical concern for history. Now, in general, for Indian thought consciousness is above change. Change is relegated by the Vedānta to the domain of anātma, to Prakṛti. The self, Ātman, is beyond time and change. The process of moving from a state of bondage to a state of liberation is either only a pseudo-process (as in Advaita Vedānta) or, if a genuine process, then surely not a new achievement. And, in any case, it is not an achievement for mankind in general. The idea of the historicity of consciousness is inconsistent with an essentialist notion of man. Where, as in Buddhism, the concept of process is extended to consciousness, the process is conceived on the analogy of outer change, the Heraclitean flow : with Nirvāṇa the flow is arrested and transcended. Nirvāṇa is beyond history, and cannot be conceived of as an achievement of history within history. The cycle of rebirth is trans-historical.

## II

In the foregoing section, an attempt was made to identify and to evaluate some of those traits of Indian philosophical thinking which are either responsible for, or correlates of, the lack of a serious philosophical concern for history. In

doing this, our purpose has been not to find out certain pervasive characters of Indian thought but to utilise this ideological phenomenon in order to be able to discover those conceptual conditions which are necessary for a genuine philosophy of history. In other words, we have wanted to use the case of Indian philosophy as a suitable illustration (one could also take the case of Greek philosophy), and have asked : 'What philosophical concepts were lacking there which may be able to account for the absence of a philosophy of history?' Or, 'What philosophical concepts so determine Indian thought that they render a philosophical concern for history impossible?' If we find appropriate answers to these questions, we shall be on our way towards answering a more generalised question: what are the necessary and sufficient conditions required for a genuine philosophy of history?

Making use of our foregoing discussion we may lay down the following as constituting the necessary and sufficient conditions of the possibility of a meaningful philosophy of history :

- (a) Time should be accorded ontological reality.
- (b) Both naturalism and absolutism, both reduction of man to nature and dissolution of man in the absolute have to go.
- (c) Both absolute freedom and total determinism have to be rejected.
- (d) An essentialist notion of self has to be rejected, and replaced by the conception of an essential temporality of consciousness.



Of these, (a) and (d) should be considered together. The time whose reality is relevant here is not just the physical time in which natural events and human experiences take place. What is needed is the conception of historical time as distinguished from physical time, and whatever else may go into the notion of historical time, surely the notion of the temporality of consciousness is not just consciousness's being in time in the same way as any other natural event is in it. It is rather the fact that consciousness is time itself, that every conscious state carries with it the original, further unanalysable and irreducible temporal significations of past, present and future in one. For an account of this temporality of consciousness reference may be made to Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness<sup>3</sup> and Heidegger's SEIN UND ZEIT. But such a theory of consciousness would also entail a rejection of that essentialist notion of self (ātman) which is almost a pervasive feature of Indian thought. For temporality should be required to characterise not empirical consciousness alone, but also transcendental consciousness. In fact, empirical consciousness, as the consciousness belonging to this man here and now, may be located — via my body with which it is inalienably connected — in the cosmic, physical time. But even if I bracket the empirical adjuncts of my consciousness, even if I overlook the fact that it is my consciousness tied to this psycho-physical organism, the phenomenological residuum, i.e. consciousness as such, thought not any longer locatable in physical time, is yet characterised

by original temporality in the sense elaborated by Husserl. An essential temporality of the ātman is a necessary presupposition of a serious philosophical concern for history. Neither naturalism nor absolutism can satisfy these requirements: the former would locate consciousness within physical time, the latter would raise it above time. Likewise, a philosophy of absolute freedom will raise consciousness wholly above time, just as a total determinism will place it within nature. History to be meaningful requires a *via media*; it requires that consciousness, essentially temporal, creates values freely but yet within a given objective situation. If consciousness were wholly determined by nature, there would be a natural process of greater complexity but no history. If consciousness were wholly free and so above time, there would equally well be no history.

### III

History is history of man. There is no history of nature, nor is there history of the absolute. The former would be a physical process, the latter a concatenation of bloodless categories. History of man is history of consciousness. To speak of the history of an institution (say, of the British Parliament), of art, of diplomacy etc. is legitimate only in so far as these embody, objectify or express human consciousness. If history be history of consciousness, and if consciousness be essentially transparent (*svayamprakāsa*), then history

of consciousness would also be consciousness of history. This however does not seem to be so. History and consciousness of history do not coincide. That they do not coincide only gives lie to the theory that consciousness is all transparent. If on the other hand consciousness were all opaque, it would be in time as much as any other thing is but would not be temporal in that specific sense in which its being so is a necessary presupposition of history. Thus though all history is history of consciousness and also to some extent consciousness of history, it is not always explicit and fully so. For though consciousness is never fully opaque, it is also never completely transparent.

But is consciousness wholly and entirely temporal? Does its historicity exhaust its being? Here, I think, Indian thought yields the deep insight that the life of consciousness has also an aspect of being beyond time. This should be evident from the fact that consciousness may stand aside and reflect on its own historicity, on its own involvedness. Now it may be contended that this reflection itself belongs to the process reflected upon and that consequently reflection does not raise consciousness above time and history. This contention is only partially true. I have elsewhere distinguished between two kinds of reflection. One kind of reflection which we may call consists in critical thinking, interpretative constructions, speculative synthesis, etc. This kind of reflection is surely historically oriented. It seeks to interpret history, but the interpretations themselves belong to history. But there is

another kind of reflection — let us call it reflection — which does not construct systems but reveals phenomena, or rather lets phenomena show themselves. It is in this latter kind of reflection that consciousness comes to its own as supra-historical, as *uberzeitlich*, as what Indian philosophers have called the *sākticaitanya*.

Thus consciousness has both dimensions — a historical dimension and a supra-historical dimension. A philosophy of history needs both. Modern phenomenology sees only the former aspect : the temporality and historicity of consciousness. Indian thought saw the latter. Neither is adequate in itself. Each of the two needs the other.

One may pursue this line of enquiry further. The consciousness which is temporal and so historical is the international consciousness. In fact, its temporality and its internationality are but two aspects of the same phenomenon. The consciousness which is supra-historical is the transparent, self-illuminating consciousness. The precise relation between the concepts of intentionality and transparence is pertinent here and has been discussed by me elsewhere<sup>5</sup>. As Heidegger has argued<sup>6</sup>, neither a thing (e.g. a furniture or a copper-plate) nor a worldless subject may truly be said to be historical. True history is neither the movement or change of natural objects, nor a series of experiences of a monad-like subject. It is only the intentional consciousness, the consciousness which is in the world, which is truly historical. The world,

too, is historical as the world of consciousness. A furniture is historical in so far as the world to which it belongs and the consciousness whose world it was is past<sup>7</sup>.

My fundamental agreement with Heidegger in this point would imply that my earlier statement to the effect that true history is history of consciousness should not be construed as a variety of the idealist philosophy of history. My divergence from idealism concerns the latter's concept of consciousness as non-intentional. The modern thesis of intentionality which emphasises that consciousness is essentially directed towards an other and so is an openness towards the world such that without it is nothing, seems to be fundamentally right (except in so far as I have recognised another dimension of consciousness in so far as consciousness is self-illuminating to some degree or other) and helps us to steer clear of a one-sided idealism and dogmatic realism. (It also saves us in epistemology from an unstable representationism). The notions of historicity of consciousness and historicity of the world are then inseparable correlates. But the world which is historical is no more the world of natural science than the consciousness which is historical is the pure world-less subject. Consciousness then in its historical dimension is worldly. In its supra-historical dimension it is just self-illuminating (prakāsaekarasa).

Such a conception of history would entail rejection as much of a naturalistic scientific *Verdinglichung* of the

historical process as of a Hegelian conception of history as having absolute rational significance. Here is a profound insight around which Marxism and Existentialism tend to converge. History is neither a meaningless process of change, nor is it totally meaningful in the sense of moving towards an absolutely posited goal (divine purpose, classless society, etc). It has an essential ambiguity. As a phenomenon it has an essential anirvacanīyatva . Philosophical reflection (in the sense of reflection) tends to rid it of this ambiguity, and to show it either totally meaningless or as fully meaningful. Its essential ambiguity is revealed only to reflection<sup>8</sup>.

R E F E R E N C E S

1. The Pauranikas are supposed to have regard aitihya or tradition as an independent source of knowledge. This would come nearest to a recognition of historical knowledge as being sui generis.
2. Hiriyanna, M. CUTLINES OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY, (London: 7th Impression, 1968), p. 367.
3. Husserl, E. "Vorlesungen zur Phanomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins", edited by M. Heidegger) in : JAHRBUCH FUR PHILOSOPHIE UND PHANOMENOLOGISCHE FORSCHUNG, Vol. IX, 1928.
4. Mohanty, J.N. "On Philosophical Description", in Bhattacharya, K., editor, PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS, First Series, Santiniketan, 1969.
5. Mohanty J. THE CONCEPT OF INTENTIONALITY (St. Louis: Warren Green, 1970).
6. Heidegger, M. SEIN UND ZEIT (Tubingen : Max Niemeyer Verlag, 7th edition, 1953), p. 388.
7. Ibid., p. 380.
8. Compare Ricoeur, P. HISTORY AND TRUTH, English translation by Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965). Ricoeur's views on history have influenced mine in some important respects.