

UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Indian civilization is more than five thousand years old, throughout this long interval of time it produced an outstanding and remarkable type of leading and variegated culture. Despite the innumerable philosophical, social, religious and linguistic diversities that we have, there has been some basic identity which holds these diversities together. In this paper I will try to engage with the philosophical diversities and how it has helped us to understand our national identity.

As we know Indian Philosophy has been heterogeneous in its nature right from the Vedic period to the present day and cannot be generalized into a single form. In spite of the countless wars within the country, invasions from outside and two centuries of subjugation by British, the continuity in the heterogeneity of Indian philosophical tradition can be observed very easily as it can be derived from its roots that is the classical Indian philosophy.

Most of the western thinkers often tried to generalize this heterogeneity of Indian Philosophy as religious and this generalization led to the labelling of Indian philosophy as religious during the colonial period, thus denying it of the rich diversities with which it is endowed with. During the colonial period, the British higher education system indoctrinated the Indians with western philosophy and Indian philosophy was neglected because the colonizers thought Indian Philosophy to be merely an amalgam of various religious thoughts and nothing else. As D.M Dutta in his article 'India's Debt To The West In

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Philosophy mentions that “During this time Indian philosophy was more alien to Indian universities than western philosophy, which had gained deep roots, and shares scarcely any special persuasion.”¹ So, we need to analyze that was it really the case that Indian philosophy is merely religious or was it just a strategy of west to dominate Indian minds.

We will also focus upon the role of Indian Philosophy in the formation of National Identity during the colonial period. Before investigating the concept of national identity formation in India, I will try to discuss what is identity? The word identity originated from a latin word *identitas* which means individuality, uniqueness a person has (character, qualities, beliefs of an individual). We all know that everyone has different aspects of identity in oneself and also has multiple identities at the same time.

Nowadays the concept of identity is at the center of debates in social sciences and humanities and this concept also plays an important role in nationalism but identity is not just bound to only nationalism but has many aspects as race, gender, culture etc. In this paper we will deal with only national identity. The concept identity has different meanings based upon the usage. As in ordinary language it indicates the personal identity of someone who has some attributes and distinguishing characteristics one has from the other but in social discourses it does not mean the same. As James D. Fearon mentions in his article *What Is Identity (As We Now Use The Word)?* that “identity is used in two linked sense which are social and personal so we have the dual sense of identity, one indicates the social categories and the other to the individuality.”² The concept of identity is not as simple as we think of it. We will also deal with how this identity which is primarily personal is converted into social and forms the concept of national identity. Do we need such a thing as national identity? Why it was necessary to have such a concept in the colonial period and in what way it came to be formed. As India is so diverse in every aspect so how such identity can be formed? And what was the role of Indian philosophy in national identity formation

¹ D.M Dutta, *India's Debt to the West in Philosophy*, *Philosophy East and West*, 6(3), p. 196

² <http://www.stanford.edu/~jfearon/papers/iden1v2.pdf>

during the colonial period, does it help or works as a hurdle? These are some of the questions which I will try to discuss in this paper.

INDIAN PHILOSOPHY: RELIGIOUS OR SECULAR

Firstly, what we have to understand that when we talk about Indian philosophy what is that we are talking about. Before investigating the concept of Indian philosophy we have to know the givens in the history of Indian philosophy, as Indian philosophy is divided into- the classical Indian philosophy (where we study the nine philosophical schools) the scholastic period (debates over the teachings and interpretations of these schools) the modern period (reinterpretations of the scholastic period doctrines within the modern frame) and the contemporary period.

As we didn't have the concept of 'India' in Vedic period so, how can we put the entire thing into a vessel named India? May be when we talk about Indian philosophy we see the geographical limitations we have at that point of time and till now or the methods and pattern used by philosophers since the Vedic times to the present day. Dutta also mentions "Indian philosophy presents a large number of rival systems of thought, each trying to solve the problems of human destiny by providing a coherent system of metaphysics, epistemology, logic, and ethics refuting rival theories, and all developing among themselves a vast wealth of philosophical literature during a period of nearly three thousand years."³ Moreover we can't put aside the tradition of *tika* (commentary) followed in Indian philosophy throughout the entire journey where one philosophical school asserts or negates the other through commentaries. This helps us to understand the complete picture of philosophy and how philosophers indulged with each other and also helps us to understand the continuity in the Indian philosophical tradition.

After investigating the concept of 'Indian' philosophy I would like to discuss what philosophy is in Indian context. What do we mean by philosophy in India? In India we use is the concept of '*darsana*' instead of philosophy. Philosophy as such is a western concept.

³ D.M. Dutta, India's Debt to the West in Philosophy, *Philosophy East and West*, 6(3), p.199

So, we need to investigate whether philosophy and *darsana* are the same thing or are they different. The word philosophy came from two Greek words which are philo+sophia, philo means beloved and sophia means wisdom so, philosophy literally means the love of wisdom. It is a foreign concept. The literal meaning of *darsana* is “vision” or “viewing” which simply means how one is viewing things or how is one’s vision about anything but when used in the context of metaphysics it means to look upon the true nature of things. E.A. Burtt in his article “What Can Western Philosophy Learn From India?” defines *darsana* very clearly “the deeper realization of spiritual truth that can be achieved when one is responding to the inspired presence of a great soul”⁴ and he also submits that there is incongruity between west and east when they talk about ‘doing philosophy’ as they both have different cultural and historical background and different context in which the philosophical problems are analyzed, discussed and resolved. So, the concept of *darsana* has different meaning and it is subjective in all cases. In this way I don’t think that philosophy and *darsana* are interchangeable with each other. The change of *darsana* to philosophy is the outcome of the interpretations of Indian philosophy by west, colonial influence and imposition of English language during the colonial time.

Now we will discuss how Indian philosophy has been generalized as religious since the colonial times. There were many orientalist who often tried to associate Indian philosophy with religion. Not only the west there were many nationalist philosophers who often associated Indian philosophy with religious ideas and thought and asserted that Indian philosophy needs secularization. This problem arose due to the stereotypical framework which had been established by orientalist and liberal utilitarian thinkers. This problem has been discussed by Niladri Bhattacharya in his article ‘The Problem’ where he opines that the framework in which we were dealing with Indian philosophy in colonial times was established by orientalist and liberal utilitarian where the orientalist started codifying and translating classical Indian philosophy according to them. India has a glorious past and a rich heritage in philosophy and liberals condemned the Indian philosophy by arguing that

⁴ E.A. Burtt, What Can Western Philosophy Learn From India?, Philosophy East And West, vol.5, No.3(oct.,1955) p.195

there is no philosophy in Indian philosophy and they only have religious and mystic ideas in the name of philosophy. So, this was the frame that Indian nationalist philosophers inherited and they had to deal with Indian philosophy on the basis of the orientalist and liberal discourse. So, to present Indian philosophy on the global platform the nationalists started secularization of philosophy as they were convinced by the orientalist and liberal frames that philosophy in India was a religious activity but it was not the case. This problem was also discussed in the article Pandit and Professors: The Renaissance of Secular India by Nalini Bhusan and Jay L. Garfield. They mention that “western orientalist introduced a systematic and philological secularized study of classical Indian philosophy”⁵. This was a strategy of the west during colonial times where not only west but Indians were also convinced by the label of religious which was assigned to Indian philosophy and that it required secularization. By this they only wanted to demean the Indian philosophical tradition so that the glorious past of Indian philosophy in its original form would take a backseat and comprehended only by their codification and translation. This in turn would enable them to hegemonize our minds and souls. Therefore whatever we are studying in present times in Indian philosophy is a result of the structure designed by the orientalist-liberal-nationalist discourse, where nationalists were stuck in the trap of the west. Orientalist drew our attention only to the few aspects of our classical Indian philosophy as spiritualism, mysticism, pessimism etc. and portrayed that the Indian philosophy has only these characteristics and is homogenous. This allowed them to generalize Indian philosophy into a singular form.

However this is really not the case. As we have discussed earlier that there is an unbroken continuity in Indian philosophy from classical to contemporary times and Indian philosophy has its roots in classical Indian philosophy which was very diverse due to the presence of nine different schools (Charvaka, Buddhism, Jainism, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa And Vedanta) and within them there were many sub schools which have different ideas, thoughts and approaches regarding each philosophical

⁵ Nalini Bhusan, Jay L. Garfield, Pandits and Professors: The Renaissance of Secular India, Indian Philosophy in English: From Renaissance to Independence, (2011) p.4

problem. This clearly establishes the diverse and heterogenetic culture of Indian philosophy. Fore.g.Charvaka follows the materialistic approach, Jainism follows the realistic-relativistic approach, Vedanta follows the spiritual approach etc. This can be established by their texts which has been followed by them.Indian philosophy was never homogeneous in its nature so how can we generalize this heterogeneity of Indian philosophical tradition in a single form. So, there is no way to stick a label on Indian philosophy either religious or secular because in both the cases what we are doing is generalizing the diversity into a single form which is not just.

NATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION DURING COLONIALISM

The concept identity is very complex as it has different aspects and scopes but primarily it is associated with the individual's personality but it cannot be bound within an individual as everyone has multiple identities when it comes to the social perspective. Amartya Sen in his book 'Identity and Violence' also mentions that every individual has multiple identities as everyone has many associations(variety of groups) within the society. For e.g. "the same person can be,without any contradiction,an American citizen, of Caribbean origin,with African ancestry,aChristian,a liberal,a woman,a vegetarian,a long distance runner,a historian,a school teacher,a feminist,a heterosexual,a believer in gay lesbian rights,a theater lover,an environment activist,a tennis fan, a jazz musician etc. Each of these collectivities, to all of which person belongs, gives her a particular identity.None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category"⁶. Therefore the sense of personal identity is already existent in the social affairs as an individual subscribes to different ideas, communities etc. of the society of which he is a part. This is how cultural identity(people shares the same cultural beliefs), racial identity (in which the race is common to all), national identity (where nation is the common interest of all) etc. is formed

⁶ Amartya Sen, Prologue, Identity Violence, USA: W,W, Norton; 2006, pp.1-2

In India before modern period there was no concept of India as a nation but that does not mean that there were no unifying ideas which transcended through the geography that later came to be known as India. From Indus valley civilization till the British invasion there were many emperors who had unified India geographically. In many ancient text there is a mention about emperor Bharat who had unified India⁷ and from there the concept of *Akhanda Bharat* originated and later on in the history of India we see the Mauryan Empire which united whole of India. The references to our geography was the key notion of unity which finds mention in several texts as a land surrounded by mountains on one side and oceans on the three sides (Himalayas in the north , bay of Bengal in the east, Arabian sea in the west and Indian ocean in the south). We will only discuss the formation of national identity and concept 'India as a nation' which was formed during the British subjugation. The term India was popularized with the arrival of the East India Company in the 17th century.

When Britishers came India was a diverse country in terms of religion, race, linguistics, and cultural aspects. Britishers easily grasped this diversity and took advantage of it by their policy of divide and rule. So, at this point of time there was only a common enemy which allowed for the creation of a new spirit and the unification of Indians against the British oppression and brutal exploitation. "The greatest thing done in those years was the creation of a new spirit in the country, a new electric current that awakened the people to the true meaning of nationalism and filled them with enthusiasm that created waves after waves all over the country. Repression and depression could not silence the stir of this enthusiasm. After each wave of repression and depression, it renewed the thread of the life of movement for liberation and kept it recognizably one throughout nearly fifty years of its struggle. The cry of *Bande Mataram* rang on all sides, and people felt it glorious to be alive and dare and act together and hope. The old apathy and timidity was broken and a force was created which nothing could destroy, and it carried India to the beginning of a complete victory".⁸ This was the basic reason due to which the concept national identity in

⁷Adinath Vilas Sangave, (2001), *Facets of Jainology: Selected Research Papers on Jain Society, Religion, and Culture*, p.196

⁸Sri Aurobindo: *Bande Mataram*, Centenary Edition, Volume 1, p. 502

India emerged and strengthened. There were many incidents, movements, slogans (Bharat Mata Ki Jai), concepts (Swaraj) that emerged at that time which gave rise to the national identity formation in India. Many popular movements and incidents also played a major role in the formation of national identity during this period for example the war of independence (1857), First World War, Satyagraha movement by Gandhi, Rowlettact (1919), JalianwalaBagh incident (1919), Khilafat movement, Noncooperation Movement etc. The concept Swaraj presented by Gandhi and Tilak was also in this line which gave impetus to the national identity formation. Gandhi in his book Hind Swaraj (1909) talks about self-rule or home rule which according to him India can only be governed by the Indian people by Indian principles and practices not by the foreign people. He also mentions that British can only rule on India by the cooperation of Indians, if they do not cooperate with them then they will leave the country very soon. By the concept of Swaraj Gandhi wanted to establish self-rule and independence from the British. Tilak also discussed the idea of Swaraj by which he wanted freedom and self-government. According to him the practice of Swaraj should not be merely as right but it should be practiced as *dharma*. Tilak also presents political, social, moral and philosophical definitions and meanings of Swaraj.

“According to Aurobindo philosophy of Indian nationalism is also the philosophy of patriotism. In view of this philosophy, patriotism is not limited to the love of the land of the country, *janmabhumi*, but it is also love for the people of the land. This philosophy goes even further and inspires love of the values of the culture that have been nourished and promoted through a long history of five thousand years and more. And beyond the values of this great culture, patriotism is in its heart-illuminated worship of the smiling and beneficent and strong and powerful *Shakti*, which we call Mother India, *Bharat Mata*. A nation is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of spirit, nor a fiction of mind, it is a mighty *Shakti* composed of the *Shaktis* of all the millions of units that make up the nation. He further pointed out that the nation is veritably a soul, which is immortal and even when

geographically fragmented or divided, it has the power to reunite itself as one unity in diversity.”⁹

ROLE OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY IN NATIONAL IDENTITY

In this section I will deal with how the heterogenic nature of Indian philosophy deals with the concept of national identity. Does it helps in national identity formation or works as a hurdle?

Sri Aurobindo wrote in *BandeMataram* (August 17, 1907) in which he answered this question effectively. “He argued that every nationality has been formed in spite of diversity of race or religion or language, and not unoften in spite of the coexistence of all these diversities. He pointed out that the English nation has been built not only out of various races but keep to this day their distinct individuality and that each one of them clings to its language tenaciously.”¹⁰ He referred to the striking example of Switzerland where distinct racial streams speaking three different languages and, later, professing different religions coalesced into and persists as one nation without sacrificing a single of those diversities. He referred to France where three different languages are spoken; he pointed that in America, the candidates for White House addressed the nation in fourteen languages; he referred to Austria, a congeries of races and languages, and he referred to acute divisions in Russia.¹¹

Sri Aurobindo maintained that the contention that unity in race, religion or language is essential to nationality will not bear examination. He acknowledged that such elements of unity are very helpful to the growth of nationality, but they are not essential and will not even of themselves assure its growth. Referring to the example of the Roman Empire, he pointed out that even though it created a common language, a common religion and life, and did its best to crush out racial diversities under the heavy weight of its uniform system, failed to make one great nation.¹²

⁹Sri Aurobindo: *BandeMataram*, Centenary Edition, Volume 1, p.503

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹ Ibid, p.506

¹²Ibid

What, then, Sri Aurobindo asked, are the essential elements of nationality? And he answered:

“We answer that there are certain essential conditions, geographical unity, a common past, a powerful common interest impelling towards unity and certain favourable political conditions which enable the impulse to realise itself in an organised government expressing the nationality and perpetuating its single and united existence. This may be provided by a part of the nation, a race or community, uniting the others under its leadership or domination, or by a united resistance to a common pressure from outside or within. A common enthusiasm coalescing with a common interest is the most powerful fosterer of nationality. We believe that the necessary elements are present in India, we believe that the time has come and that by a common resistance to a common pressure in the shape of the boycott, inspired by a common enthusiasm and ideal, that united nationality for which the whole history of India has been a preparation, will be speedily and mightily accomplished.”¹³

We often think that plurality always works as a hurdle in identity formation of any sorts but is it really the case. The construction of national identity in India having extremely complex diversities has never been a simple task. Tagore in his essay “Nationalism in India”(1917) mentions that the problem in India was not political but social as in India there is so much diversity in each and every aspect so to form an identity and to seek the common interest of all was a challenging task. He further said that each individual has their higher instincts which was “moral power of love and vision of spiritual unity”¹⁴ which is common to all and only through these instincts the idea of national identity could be possible in such diversity.

In national identity formation during colonial period philosophy was used as a tool that has shaped the intellect of not only the political and public figures but also of the society. In

¹³Sri Aurobindo: BandeMataram, Centenary Edition, Volume 1, p. 507

¹⁴<http://tagoreweb.in/Render/ShowContent.aspx?ct=Essays&bi=72EE92F5-BE50-40D7-8E6E-0F7410664DA3&ti=72EE92F5-BE50-4A47-2E6E-0F7410664DA3>

every nation philosophy plays an important role in building national identity and is also relevant for the sustainable development for any nation. But in India the problem was that we don't have any singular national philosophy but plurality of philosophical positions. But then again there has been a continuity in these philosophical traditions. Different thinkers have had different opinions on what basis the national identity was formed in India. A.K Coomaraswamy in his essay "Indian Nationality" (1909) mentions that the unity of India has been grounded in its geographical and cultural identity that links Vedic India to contemporary (colonial at that time) in an unbroken continuity¹⁵ but our geography was not the same from ancient to medieval, medieval to modern and modern to contemporary period which was often associated with the idea of national identity. Aurobindo Ghosh in his article "Is India Civilized" (1916/1968) argued that Indian unity and its identity was neither based on geography nor on the cultural basis but found in the spiritual orientation that we have in our culture from Vedic times.¹⁶ We have many cultures, religions, linguistic diversities in India but not all continued over the ages. For e.g. in ancient time it was only Hinduism as a religion which was at the center of discourse in India but after the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism and after Muslim invasions it was not the case as many religions with their set of ideas had come to the fore. In the case of language Sanskrit was the standard language and in the center in the ancient period, I am not arguing it was the only one but in the center. After that there were many languages that came into the center. In the Mughal period Persian and Arabic takes the central place and after that with the beginning of the Bhakti Movement in the field of literature Hindi came into existence. During British subjugation English was the major language. Hence, it was very difficult for the national consciousness to rise.

Despite these diversities it was the unbroken and continuous Indian philosophical tradition which was the connecting link for the creation of national identity formation of India. Most of the Indian leaders relied on this rich philosophical tradition to mobilize and unite the masses against the oppressive British rule. The Indian leaders reinterpreted the ancient

¹⁵Nalinibhusan, Jay I. Garfield(2011), Pandits and Professors: The Renaissance of Secular India, Indian Philosophy in English: From Renaissance to Independence, Oxford University Press, p.5

¹⁶Ibid

Indian philosophical thoughts to suit their contemporary times. Below I have discussed the ideas of a few leaders who utilized the Indian philosophical tradition to create a sense of nationalism among the commoners of India.

Vivekananda reinterpreted the metaphysical elements of Upanishadic philosophy into an ethical framework to strengthen the concept of brotherhood among the Indian populace which in turn led to the rise of nationalism among them. He argued that the Upanishads put forward that the self was not different from the absolute reality (*Brahman*) and we all are equal in the sense that we all are identical to that absolute reality. Thus, he tried to overcome the differences among the people and attempted to foster a sense of unity among them. He emphasizes on the practicality of the Upanishadic philosophy in his book *Practical Vedanta* (1912) and puts it to use for developing a national identity in India.

Tilak's concept of *Swaraj* was based on Vedantic philosophy. According to Tilak *Swaraj* is a Vedic term which he derived from *Shastras* and it is not merely a right but *dharma*, as one has the full right on oneself and to be free in every way. He considered self as the supreme reality and each human being is a part of that absolute reality. He follows that that all beings have the autonomous spiritual potential within them and these ideas of Vedantic philosophy led him to the concept of freedom which was central to Tilak's political philosophy. A.R. Desai in his book "Social Background of Indian Nationalism" also mentions that "Tilak also reinterpreted Gita and declared action to be its central teaching. The very kernel of the philosophy of Gita, he said was missed by the Indian people who had, as a result, sunk into inertia and fatalistic moods. The Indian nation could be roused to dynamic effort only if they recognized this. Tilak tried to provide nationalism with a dynamic philosophy by drawing from the ancient Hindu religion".¹⁷

After Tilak we will discuss the ideas of Gandhi who also played a major role in the rise of national consciousness in India and contributed to the formation of India as a nation. When we look upon Gandhian philosophy we conclude that it was totally inspired by Bhagvad

¹⁷A.R. Desai, *Social Background Of Indian Nationalism*, (6 edition, 2005), p.276

Gita which was the philosophical text of classical Indian philosophy. The concept used by Gandhi his practices as *satya*, *ahimsa*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya*, and *aparigraha* which was the basis of all the movements are derived from classical Indian philosophy. So, Indian philosophy played a major role in the life of Gandhi from which he derived many things which he further used to guide people and made them aware of their past. Not only Tilak and Gandhi but everyone at that time who really knew about the Indian philosophy used this as a tool to integrate all the people for making a unified structure of India.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I tried to deal with the two parallel streams. The first is the nature of Indian philosophy and I have tried to problematize the generalization of Indian philosophy as religious by the west which further called for the secularization of Indian philosophy by the nationalist thinkers and philosophers. The second is the concept of national identity formation during colonial period in which I have tried to deal how this concept of national identity was formed and how it became the guiding light of the Indian national movement. I have also discussed how Indian philosophy played a role in aiding to create this national identity which proved to be a stepping stone for India's independence.

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