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Sources of Indian Tradition

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Review Article

Sources of Indian Tradition

Sometimes the influence of India on our culture becomes visible. Our language, for instance, has assimilated Sanskrit words like *buddhi* and *dukha*. A close scrutiny of the picture of a stupa can suddenly reveal some design of flower and leaf that shows kinship with the humbler patterns of our folk art. One wonders about a country whose influence on us is so primordial that it can come to the surface in unexpected ways even after centuries of separation. *Sources of Indian Tradition*,¹ a book intended for "the general reader or college student seeking a liberal education that embraces both East and West" (p. x), can become a starting point for a deeper reestablishment of contact with that ancient land. In a little over nine hundred pages it presents excerpts from key Indian sources linked together into a continuity by short commentaries. The reviewer will not give equal treatment to the different parts of the book. He will concentrate on those aspects of the Indian tradition which are, in his opinion, most original.

¹ The book is part of the Columbia University series, Introduction to Oriental Civilizations. The general editor of the series is Wm. Theodore de Bary. The present volume was compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Stephen N. Hay, Royal Weiler, Andrew Yarrow. Special contributors are A. L. Basham, I. H. Qureshi, R. N. Dandekar, V. Raghavan, Peter Hardy and J. B. Harrison. New York: 1958, Columbia University Press.

Under the rubric "Brahmanism", Part One deals with the common patrimony of India: the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads.

The Vedas are collections of hymns so ancient that their origins are lost in conjecture. Here are the hymns sung by the ancient Aryan face to face with the universe. He prays in awe to nature gods, tries to control events through magic rituals. But there are also moments of philosophic questioning. Thus, though the Atharva Veda contains a charm against jaundice and another against serpents, the Rig Veda has preserved a hymn in which the metaphysical *angst* appears full blown in the first stanza.

Neither not-being nor being was there at that time; there was no air-filled space nor was there the sky which is beyond it. What enveloped all? And where? Under whose protection? What was the unfathomable deep water? (p. 17)

The Brahmanas are priests' commentaries on the Vedas. They stress the ritualistic elements and tighten them to a pitch of punctilious legalism. In the Aranyakas, however, the forest hermits meditate on the ritual sacrifices; gradually they regard the rite less and less as an exercise of magic powers, more and more as a symbol that leads to a deeper vision of reality.

The Aranyakas are only an emphatic instance of an intellectualizing trend already present in the beginning. The progress of this trend can be illustrated by examining the evolution of the term "brahman". Originally it means prayer (*bráhman*) or the man whose prerogative it is to pray (*brahmán*). Because of the second meaning, priests are called brahmanas. With regard to the first meaning, brahman, as prayer, is considered to contain within it powers that can control or change events in the universe. So little by little brahman comes to mean the power or source or principle or whatever-it-is that is the ultimate ground of order and meaning in the cosmos.

Men begin to dedicate themselves to the search for Brahman considered in this last sense. They are also stirred by a new interest—the search for the *atman*, the search for the self.

The Upanishads set forth philosophical speculations concerning this two-fold search. And the main theme of the Upanishads is this: that the discovery of Brahman is the discovery of atman and the discovery of atman is the discovery of Brahman: the ultimate reality and the true self are somehow one. This theme is approached from different points of view and on different levels. The interpretations given it are multifarious. As an example, here is part of a much quoted passage from the Chandogya Upanishad. The young Shvetaketu is being instructed by his father, Uddalaka Aruni.

"Having put this salt in the water, come to me in the morning." He did so. Then the father said to him: "That salt which you put in the water last evening—please bring it hither." Even having looked for it, he did not find it, for it was completely dissolved. "Please take a sip of water from this end," said the father. "How is it?" "Salt." "Take a sip from the middle," said he. "How is it?" "Salt." "Take a sip from that end," said he. "How is it?" "Salt." "Throw it away and come to me." Shvetaketu did so, thinking to himself: "That salt, though unperceived, still persists in the water." Then Aruni said to him: "Verily, my dear, you do not perceive Being in this world; but it is, indeed, here only: That which is the subtle essence—this whole world has that essence for its Self. That is the Real. That is the Self. That art thou, Shvetaketu." "Still further may the venerable sir instruct me." "So be it, my dear," said he. (pp. 35-36)

Three things are to be observed in this quotation. First: Insight is gained in the tension of dialogue between guru and disciple. Through a lifetime of contemplation, the guru has gained profound insights. He cannot communicate these to his disciple. But in day to day living he can speak to his disciple, puzzle and encourage him, hint at what he has seen until the disciple himself begins to enter into the world of incommunicable insights. Second: Insight is gained through a dramatization which is also a kind of myth. The goal is spiritual vision, but it is pursued through the limbs and senses of the body. Myth is not abandoned in the search for truth. This is characteristic of ancient—and much modern—Indian thought. The sages pursue spiritual vision without setting aside the primitive matrix of myth, imagination, dramatization. Their most sublime intuitions live and move and have their being within this matrix. It is fashionable in some circles to

describe Indian culture as world-denying. The sources show, in this reviewer's opinion, that Indian culture is most genuinely Indian when it moves within that field of tension between the drive to be steeped in matter and the drive to transcend matter. Sometimes this tension produces striking harmonies, as in the yoga postures where the gesture of the body is also a profound gesture of the spirit, a reaching for the Absolute. Third: The request, "Still further may the venerable sir instruct me," is significant. It expresses dissatisfaction with insight already attained, a refusal to accept any formula as final. This is not the skeptic's shrug of the shoulders: We cannot be sure of anything, but at least your story is interesting; tell me another. It is rather an awareness that any truth possessed entails the realization that all truth has not yet been grasped. It is an expression of desire and awe before reality. That is why the Indian sages use myths. For them a myth is not a lying tale; it is a pointing at that which is too real to be trapped by conceptual thought.

Though Part One occupies only a small portion of the book, the reviewer has treated it at length because it sets an intellectual mood that pervades the entire book. For the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads together make the common starting point of the different strands of the Indian tradition. Subsequent developments, whether they accept or turn away from these beginnings, are nonetheless deeply influenced by them.

Part Two deals with Jainism and Buddhism, the two outstanding unorthodox bodies in Hinduism, while Part Three deals with orthodox Hinduism. The test for orthodoxy is acceptance or non-acceptance of the authority of the Vedas.

The Jains will probably interest the reader for their practice of *ahimsa* or nonviolence. It is based on the doctrine that all things are alive and the living must never be hurt. The Jain must, therefore, become "a man who is averse from harming even the wind" (p. 63).

The treatment of the two forms of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, shows not only their opposition but also their

continuity. For example, Theravada, an earlier form, presents its followers with a tension between the aspiration towards Nirvana and the call to compassion. Here it must be remarked that Nirvana is not a state of nothingness. Though some of the extreme language used to describe Nirvana might give the impression that it involves self-annihilation, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the Buddhists consider it a state so completely beyond ordinary human experience that it cannot be described in human language. Now the entry into Nirvana would seem to entail a forgetting of one's fellow men. For how can one enjoy release from the cycle of rebirths if he still remembers the sufferings of living things? Yet Buddhism has always been characterized by an immense, brooding compassion over the sorrows of every living thing. The mahayanists try to solve this tension by holding up the ideal of the bodhisattva: an enlightened one who is on the threshold of Nirvana but refuses to cross it because he chooses to help his fellow to bear their pain and finally to attain release.

Many texts are given which show that Buddhism as a way of life does not correspond to its stereotype as a pursuit of nothingness. Take this theravadist description of a wise man.

The wise and moral man
 Shines like a fire on a hilltop,
 Making money like the bee,
 Who does not hurt the flower.
 Such a man makes his pile
 As an anthill, gradually.
 The man grown wealthy thus
 Can help his family
 And firmly bind his friends
 To himself. He should divide
 His money in four parts;
 On one part he should live,
 With two expand his trade,
 And the fourth he should save
 Against a rainy day. (p. 125)

At first sight Hinduism seems to be a farrago of unconnected beliefs and practices. On closer acquaintance one discerns an inner harmony. One who would compile sources of Hinduism finds himself embarrassed with riches and faced with

the problem of organizing them in such a manner as to reveal their unity. The compilers of the book under review wisely chose the four ends of life as the organizing principle.

The first end of life, according to Hinduism, is *dharma*. The compilers complain that it is difficult to find any passage that adequately brings out the comprehensive character of *dharma*. They try to convey its meaning through the cumulative effect of chosen texts. From these it seems that *dharma* is a regulating principle that holds the cosmos together and is inherent in the very structure of the cosmos. It is the foundation and sustainer of all creation. It is called the highest good. It drives away evil, promotes strength and efficacy among beings. It preserves those who preserve it. From it material gain and spiritual good result. *Dharma* is no stiff and iron law. It is different for different ages of the universe. And it sustains people separately in their respective stations in such a way as to give each man his own *dharma*.

Though the compilers are aware that *dharma* in its fulness cannot be defined, they essay a definition of at least its basic meaning. "The basic meaning of *dharma*, a word derived from the root *dhr*, 'to sustain,' is the moral law, which sustains the world, human society, and the individual" (p. 211). Note the word "moral". Prof. Das Gupta pointed out, during the conference on the world's great religions held in Manila in 1960, that modern Hindu teaching on nonviolence is based on the conviction that the world is ultimately ruled by moral, not physical, laws. One who trusts in violence, therefore, goes against the very structure of the cosmos and will not prevail. This conviction is already expressed in ancient teachings on *dharma*. "Whatever is attended with nonviolence (*ahimsa*), that is *dharma*" (p. 221). And "*dharma* should not be violated, lest the violated *dharma* destroy us" (p. 221).

It should be clear by now that the teaching on *dharma* is based on an intuition of the cosmos as ordered from within. This order is conceived as hierarchical.

Of created beings, those which are animate are the best; of the animate, those who subsist by means of their intellect; of the

intelligent, men are the best; and of men, the brahmins are traditionally declared to be the best;

Of the brahmins, the learned ones are the best; of the learned, those whose intellect is fixed upon ritual activity; of those whose intellect is fixed upon ritual activity, those who carry out ritual activity; of those who carry out ritual activity, those who realize the Brahman.

The very birth of a brahmin is the eternal incarnation of dharma. For he is born for the sake of dharma and tends toward becoming one with the Brahman. (p. 226)

In this passage, both human and non-human worlds dovetail into a single, hierarchic structure. Dharma is immanent in this structure and endows it with a dynamism towards the Absolute. The dynamism becomes manifest when dharma incarnates itself in the brahmins and, through them, tends toward the Brahman.

The passage also shows how dharma can be used to justify the subtleties of class distinctions. In fact a large proportion of the writings on dharma deals with the minutiae involved in the initiation ritual, the arrangement of marriages, the niceties of caste and subcaste. Thus a deep insight into reality peters out into legalism.

When all has been said, dharma is a complex and living thing. To understand it, one must go to a man who lives dharma and listen to his living words. "In this world people go unto a person who is best versed in dharma for guidance" (p. 220).

The second end of life is *artha* which is translated "material gain." Strangely enough, the classic on the subject, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* or *Treatise on Material Gain*, is not concerned with business and commerce but with the art of ruling. The ideal king rules according to dharma. He never forgets the dignity that becomes his rank because his work is divine. He conquers his passions and disciplines his senses. He furthers discipline among his subjects through the extension of education. The true king is non-fatalistic and a man of energetic activity. He bears in mind that if he is sluggish, his officers will also be

sluggish; hence important matters are acted on at once. Yet meditation is not neglected; periods are daily set aside for it. Finally the king knows where his happiness lies.

In the happiness of his subjects lies the happiness of the king; in their welfare, his own welfare. The welfare of the king does not lie in the fulfilment of what is dear to him; whatever is dear to the subjects constitutes his welfare. (p. 248)

However, another kind of advice often appears. Here is a sample.

When one king is weaker than the other, he should make peace with him. When he is stronger than the other, he should make war with him. When he thinks: "The other is not capable of putting me down nor am I capable of putting him down," he should mark time. When he possesses an excess of the necessary means, he should attack. When he is devoid of strength, he should seek refuge with another. When his end can be achieved only through the help of an ally, he should practice duplicity. (p. 254)

Duplicity is defined as "keeping oneself engaged simultaneously in peace and war with the same state." There is a strong machiavellian tone in the Arthashastra.

The third end of life is *kama* or pleasure. This includes not only the pleasures of marriage and of a good table, but also poetry, drama, music—all to be enjoyed in a well-appointed dwelling. Hindu aesthetic theory emphasizes the importance of reveling in beauty for its own sake; in so doing one catches a glimpse of the infinite bliss of Brahman. *Kama* is the prerogative of the married householder. His pleasures should abound, but always according to the moderation of *dharma*. Hence he does not become a dilettante or libertine. Rather he comes to realize that true *kama* involves suffering and sacrifice, and a consequent deepening of love. The married householder's life prepares him for the final pursuit of union with the Ultimate Reality.

For the ordinary hindu's life is arranged in four stages to enable him to fulfil the four ends of life. In the first stage he is a student being initiated into the teachings and rites of Hinduism. In the second stage he is a married householder; this is the time to attain the fulness of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*. Then, when he "sees his skin wrinkled and his hair gray and when he

sees the son of his son," (p. 234) he enters into the third stage. He arranges his affairs and retires into the forest to meditate; but his family may still come to him for advice and guidance. In the fourth stage he renounces the world completely; he is now a *sannyasin* exclusively devoted to the pursuit of the Absolute. In these last two stages he is seeking the fourth end of life, *moksha*.

Moksha is release from the cycle of rebirths through union with the Brahman. There are three ways to moksha: the way of knowledge, the way of works, the way of devotion.

The way of knowledge belongs to the six schools of philosophy. In their search for the Absolute, the hindus find themselves obliged to philosophize on many things: on the nature of the Ultimate Reality that they are seeking, on the nature of the act by which that Reality is attained, on the paradoxical nature of the world. For, to the hindu, the world manifests yet hides and even distorts the Absolute; again, the world seems somehow unreal, yet it is the very stage on which the seeker after moksha has just led a full and active life. The six schools differ not only in their answers but even in the way they ask their questions. But they are all agreed in this: that the way of knowledge is not an academic exercise, but a long and strict course of physical, psychological, and intellectual discipline. And the end of this course is not a neat intellectual position, but an experience of the Absolute, a face to face vision of the Ultimate Reality.

One cannot always retire to seek moksha in solitude. Often one's dharma requires that he remain in the thick of action. When this happens he should seek moksha through the way of works (*karma-yoga*). "Do you do your allotted work, for action is superior to nonaction" (p. 286). And this is the burden of the *Bhagavad Gita*: only through the performance of the dharma that belongs to a man by virtue of his station in society can he attain release from rebirth. Better to engage in the deeds of one's own dharma (*svadharma*) imperfectly than to perform the dharma of another with success.

Better is one's own dharma which one may be able to fulfil but imperfectly, than the dharma of others which is more easily

accomplished. Better is death in the fulfilment of one's own dharma. To adopt the dharma of others is perilous. (p. 289)

Faithfulness to dharma also has its social dimension: it contributes to *lokasangraha* which is variously translated by the compilers as "the stability, solidarity, and progress of society" (p. 280), and "the ideal of social integrity" (p. 281).

But the manner in which the deeds of dharma are performed is all important. The *karmayogin* (one who follows the way of works) is detached from the fruits of action. Hence he always acts from an inward peace. He is free from the paroxysms of anxiety that afflict those who are overeager to enjoy the fruits of action.

Action alone is your concern, never at all its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let yourself be attached to inaction. (p. 291)

This detachment springs from the supreme attachment to "the Lord," who is Krishna in the Gita. For Krishna and the other gods are considered partial manifestations of and ways to the one Ultimate Reality. The *karmayogin*, then, offers his entire life as a sacrifice of personal devotion to his Lord.

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, whatever penance you practice—that, O son of Kuntī, do you dedicate to Me. (p. 295)

The way of devotion (*bhakti-yoga*) is easy to recognize but hard to describe. It is best to begin by contrasting it with the philosophers' way of knowledge. The philosophers so stress the transcendence of the Absolute as to take away, at least in the view of the ordinary man, all sense of personal warmth. Not that the hindu philosophers render the Absolute impersonal in the western sense of the term; that is, they do not make the Brahman unconscious and unknowing. One of their names for the Absolute is *Cit* which means infinite consciousness, knowledge itself, infinite subjectivity. Still, the philosophical treatment of the Absolute is apt to leave most people lost in a sea of infinity. Now *bhakti-yoga* teaches that, though the Ultimate Reality is indeed infinite, he manifests himself in various ways that are more easy for man to understand.

Brahman's most important manifestation is in the form of a personal god. There are then three movements in *bhakti-yoga*: puzzlement at the vastness of the Infinite, a longing for his finite manifestations, devotion to a personal god. The intensity of this devotion can be seen from Narada's description of it: devotion is the "dedication of all acts to God and the intense anguish when one slips from his absorption in God" (p. 333). The *bhakti* tradition abounds in the use of human language to describe the devotee's relations with his Lord. For example, the following are given as forms of devotion:

attachment to Him as a servant, as a friend, as a child or as toward a child, and as a beloved; surrendering oneself unto Him; seeing Him everywhere; inability to bear the separation from Him. (p. 335)

Yet the sense of his infinity is not lost.

He is not a male, He is not a female, He is not a neuter; He is not to be seen; He neither is nor is not; when He is sought, He will take the form in which He is sought, and again He will not come in such a form. It is indeed difficult to describe the nature of the Lord. (p. 356)

The three ways to *moksha* are not mutually exclusive. The *karmayogin's* offering of his actions, for instance, is essentially an act of *bhakti-yoga*. And even Shankara, the most austere metaphysical of the philosophers, encouraged devotional worship. Many *bhakti* hymns are attributed to him and his followers.

The Hindu propensity to put together elements which are usually deemed incompatible has led to a fairly common view that Hinduism is an irresponsible eclecticism and that the Indian mind has no sense of logic. This would be difficult to maintain in view of the fact that Indian philosophers have evolved most intricate schemes of logic. The reviewer believes that a better explanation can be found in the Indian sense of the infinity of the Absolute. A reality so rich cannot be exhausted by one approach, cannot be limited to one mode of expression. Also, Hinduism is basically a seeking. It is a constant questioning, not a set of clear and distinct answers. When a man is looking for something, he values every clue. He will not throw a clue away simply because it will not fit into

a framework he has so laboriously constructed. He will hold on to every clue and push each one as far as it will go, never doubting that some day he will find that which he is looking for. And the dynamism of the hindu search comes from the conviction that there is an Ultimate Reality and that, in the end, this Reality will show himself to the seeker and the seeker will see him.

In the reviewer's opinion, the most original aspects of the Indian tradition have already been presented in so far as the limits of a review and of his abilities will allow. He begs to be allowed to give the rest of the book a summary treatment.

Part Four deals with Islam in medieval India. Like many other creeds, Islam entered India for the most part by way of conquest. But, unlike those creeds, Islam succeeded in gaining many adherents without becoming absorbed by Hinduism. Still, Islam had points of contact with Hinduism in the mysticism of the Sufis. There were many attempts to combine hindu and muslim beliefs. Most notable among these attempts was the Sikh movement which is treated in Part Five.

Part Six, which takes up more than a good third of the book, deals with modern India and Pakistan. There is a strong emphasis on political and social developments. The Indian independence movement and the events that led to the formation of Pakistan are adequately documented. In many ways it is a familiar story since something similar has happened and is happening in other countries. These are the elements of the story: the violent irruption of western rule, a cutting off from old traditions, western education with its ideas on freedom and democracy, a stirring up of ambition, a resurgence of lost traditions, the independence movement, a struggle for leadership and, through it all, confusion. But immanent in this confusion is the courage and determination to create something new which shall embody everything of value in the old, whether from east or west, but which shall be more alive than either.

If our ancestors had points of contact with India, so do we.