

INDIAN AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

By

FRANCISCO R. ADRADOS

Reprinted from the

Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute

(Diamond Jubilee Volume)

Pages 1 - 8

BHANDARKAR ORIENTAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

POONA

1977-78

INDIAN AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

By

FRANCISCO R. ADRADOS

While the comparative study of religions has developed considerably, there has been no parallel development in works comparing different philosophies. In particular, studies of Indian Philosophy seldom refer to Greek philosophy, or vice versa. At the most, on rare occasions, one detail may be compared, and the question of whether it is a coincidence or a loan is discussed. As an example, I can quote the comparison of the soul with a horse-drawn chariot in Plato's *Phaedrus* and in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. On the other hand, there does exist some rather vague speculation about possible "oriental" influence in Orphism, Pythagorism and Stoicism.

In this field, as far as I can see, the speculation about possible occidental influences on Indian philosophy is even less. However, the fact that the Bhagavata Religion was well-known by the Greeks (remember the inscription of Taksila of around 180 B. C., made by a Greek member of this religion) should attract our attention to the similarities between the *bhakti*, a central feature of the cult of Kṛṣṇa, and love or *agape* which is also central to the cult of Hellenic gods like Isis. This is only one example of the sort of problems which are worth studying.

I do not wish to refer here to these problems of possible loans or influences between the two philosophies or religions, above all in the Hellenistic age when the Indian and Greek peoples were in direct contact. I am simply trying to mention some similarities without trying to explain them. The important thing is to realize that they exist.

In fact, what happens when one or the other Philosophy is examined is that the differences between the two tend to be stressed. Indian Philosophy has its beginnings in the commentaries to the Veda and in the interpretation of sacrifice. This leads to metaphysical speculation looking for salvation or liberation. Knowledge is looked for only on account of this search. All this thought is developed in a religious atmosphere, even though from one moment on, its spirit becomes different from that of the Veda. As opposed to this, in Greece we find philosophers, who are, in many cases at least, individuals working against the old traditions, rationalising them; who, generally are not searching for salvation, but for knowledge for its own sake; who openly advocate action, and frequently political action.

These differences are obviously important and I do not intend to minimize them here. Indian Philosophy, which originates in a religious conception of the world, culminates in a religious position, uniting an interpretation of the Whole with a search for the salvation of man by entering the *Brahma*, far from the world of action. Greek philosophy progresses along the road of rationalization, of science, of constructing rules of conduct for man's life in this world. But this is not all. In Greek philosophy there are many points of similarity with Indian Philosophy. They are precisely those which are considered most characteristically Indian, and which are however also present in Greece. It is simply necessary to see the similarities hidden by the use of different words and approaches. On the other hand, materialist and rationalist positions, which in the Occident are usually considered to have their origins in Greek culture, are found in similar form in India.

To begin with, it must be remembered that in the Greek and Indian cultures, the starting points are common or similar. For example, the polytheistic religion of Homer and the Veda; the similar cosmogonies, doubtless of Mesopotamian origin found in the Veda, Hesiod, the Orphics; the feeling of the closeness between man, gods and nature in the oldest culture of both people. A religion like that of Kṛṣṇa, as another example; which is centred on the theme of the god who is born and dies among miracles, who is god of love and salvation, clearly belongs to the same group as agrarian religions like those of Demeter and Dionysius in Greece, and others that could be mentioned in Mesopotamia and Egypt. It is, then, logical that from these religions, constellations of parallel ideas should emerge.

Then, from a particular moment on, working from similar starting points, characteristics of the human mind which are general, will produce more or less parallel results. It is clear that the number of possible combinations is limited, and duplication and repetition will occur. For example, both in India and in Greece, the human mind, from a particular moment, looks for the unity which exists behind apparent multiplicity. The criticism which is made of Homer and the Theogonies, of the Veda, is parallel. So are the inconsistencies and ambiguities. In both countries appear, for example, monist and dualist solutions, and sometimes transitions from one to the other.

At the same time, in the dualist systems there are various possibilities. Sometimes the same solutions appear in India and Greece, while at others they do not. For example, an opposition like that of spirit and matter in Anaxagoras clearly recalls the opposition between the *Ātmā-*

Brahma and the *Prakṛti* : as in certain passages of the *Ġītā*, even though in others *Prakṛti* is rather an unfolding of the *Brahma*. From here, there is a logic which takes one to parallel positions on returning to the thesis of unity. For the *Vedānta*, the *Prakṛti* is illusion, *māyā*; in the same way as for Parmenides, beside the world of Being, there is the world of opinion, the *doxa*. On the other hand, unity in the materialist sense is achieved both in the *Sāṃkhya* and in some Greek systems. (In Democritus and Epicurus, the gods are material).

Finally, all things considered, though without for the moment setting about judging the reasons for the similarities and differences, it would be an important task to make a study of both, establishing the interplay of elements and their possible combinations which produce different philosophical systems, both in India and in Greece, as they often offer parallel solutions to parallel problems. This can be seen even without going into the problem of possible loans and influences.

A good starting point would perhaps be to consider the social aspect of the origin of Greek and Indian philosophy, and the origin and character of the writing in which both are reflected. This study, I think, would show us that the differences are not so definite or so universal as is thought.

These writings are, in India, as is well known, a series of commentaries on the different Vedas, interpreting its mythical, ritual and metaphysical aspects. They arrive, it is true, at very different positions. There are often no clear distinctions between the genres represented by the *Brāhmaṇa*, the *Āraṇyaka* and the *Upaniṣads*. In these works, there are almost imperceptible transitions from what we know as Religion to what we know as Philosophy. We see that, as opposed to what happened in Greece, the Epic has continued to develop for centuries until the fourth century A. D. and has included passages which are not basically different from the *Upaniṣads*. Also the differences in doctrine among them are much less important than among the different presocratic philosophers. Another distinctive feature, not found in those writers, is that the *Upaniṣads* are presented dramatically, in dialogue form, reflecting open discussions and not only the doctrine of a master.

These are the differences. But really, just as well as Indian speculation about the One – the *Brahma* or other forms – is a development of certain parts of the Veda in which appear cosmogonic doctrines about Prajāpati, about the One, about Puruṣa, so it can be said that all presocratic philosophy consists of a series of derivations from the Theogonies. Corresponding to the evolution from Chaos to the creation of the world in

Hesiod, there is, in the presocratics, an evolution from the different principles or *arkhai* also to the creation of the world. In answer of the different attempts to define the *Brahma* in the *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka* and other *Upaniṣads*, we find the multiplicity of the *arkhai* (water, fire, air, the One, the Being). These efforts repeatedly failed and were repeatedly renewed. Both in India and in Greece, these principles are divine, they develop automatically to create the cosmos, leaving the old gods of creation in the shadows (a *dhātā*, a Hephaestus, a Prometheus). Jäger has spoken of the Theology of the early Greek philosophers.

The books by the presocratic philosophers are, in fact, new cosmogonies "interpreting" and substituting the old ones. They are either in verse or prose. In the same way, Orphic cosmogonies still existed in verse and prose in the sixth century B. C., like the one by Pherecides of Syros. There also existed commentaries on these cosmogonies like the one we know through a papyrus from Thessaloniki of the fourth century, which gives "interpretations" which are not very different from those of the philosophers.

The philosophers may present themselves as inspired: like Parmenides, who in this is no way different from the *Gītā*. They may not limit themselves to pure knowledge, but instead look for liberation, like Empedocles, who in this coincides with the Orphics, the Pythagoreans and the Indian philosophers.

Thus, it can be seen that, even though the Greek philosophers may have been presented as purely rational men in a struggle against tradition, this is not in fact the complete truth. Empedocles is a religious leader in no way different from the Orphic preachers or from purificatory poets like Therpandros, Thaletas and others. The poet who officiates over the great religious festivals, directing the choirs, who is a *sophós*, or "wise man" who brings divine favours on the city, is really a sort of priest. This is the way the Greeks saw it. Some philosophers, however, like Empedocles, Thales and Heraclitus were also honoured for their wisdom, which was sometimes considered to be divine.

A parallel to the creation of philosophy in a dialogue among a group of people free from the obligations of everyday life, dedicated to intellectual leisure, as is found in India, exists in Greece. In India, the *Upaniṣads* reflect the discussions of the brahmins with their disciples, with the kings who were their protectors, with their women, and with the ascetics: that is, of a partly profane, partly sacred circle. In Greece, we could compare with this the Socratic circle from which Greek philosophy was born at a somewhat later date than in India. Despite the greater rationalisation, a

Socrates is not really so far from the brahmins of the *Upaniṣads* : after all, his relations with Apollo, his *daimonion*, his search for the health of the soul, make him worthy of comparison with them. Similar social circumstances have produced comparable literary genres.

Leaving this theme, I shall go on to examine the problems of monism and dualism, of salvation and knowledge, of the first principles, the soul, the world and personal divinity.

It is true that in India, the search for salvation is the real objective, while the Greeks mostly stop at pure knowledge, sometimes, as in Plato, desired for the purpose of illuminating conduct in social life. Even so, the salvationism of the religion of Demeter, of Orphism and of certain philosophers already mentioned, must be noted. It is important to realize that in Plato there is a real doctrine of *Karma* and the transmigration of souls - sometimes considered to be of oriental origin. His asceticism moves the soul away from the senses, preparing it for death, as is stated in the *Phaedon*, it is really trying to free the soul from the body, thus obtaining a happy life for it. It is true that the theme of union with God is not reached, although that of illumination by the work of Good is. The doctrine of *henosis*, unity, though momentary, of the soul with God, appears in Plotinus.

The problem of unity is sometimes presented in the *Upaniṣads*, as is well known, in vaguer terms than in the later philosophies of the *Vedānta* and the *Sāṃkhya*. In these philosophies, a dualism which has developed into two different kinds of monism is the dominating idea, as I have already said, while in the *Upaniṣads* a monism, which is in its turn a surpassing of the opposition *Ātmā-Brahma*, takes prominence. It conceives the world as an unfolding of this primordial unity. In fact, the *Brahma* is, in origin, one of the various crystallisations of the movement towards unity which is already visible in the Veda. In the *Gītā*, its opposition with respect to *Prakṛti* is, as has been said, somewhat changeable : sometimes it is very clear out, sometimes *Prakṛti* definitely comes from the *Brahma*.

The Greeks' search for primordial unity takes them to positions which, while not being identical, are comparable. To begin with, there is nothing which can really be compared with the provisional opposition of *Ātmā* and *Brahma* : the concept of *nus* in Anaxagoras doubtless covers both fields, and, in the same way, the concept of *logos* in Heraclitus. (There is the *logos* of the soul and that of the world, which are the same). They are, it is true, concepts which are not precisely identical to the Indian ones, but certainly comparable. In Plato, on the other hand, there is an opposi-

tion between the rational soul (*nus*) and the Being, the Ideas. Even so, there is a relationship, since only the *nus* is capable of knowing the Being.

The Greek opposition of spirit (*nus*) and matter in Anaxagoras can be compared, as I have said, to the Indian opposition between *Brahma* and *Prakṛti*; in the same way as the Platonic opposition of the rational soul (*nus*) and the affective soul and the body in Plato. Platonic asceticism, which aims at isolating the soul from the body and its appetites, is like Indian asceticism which does not reject action, but the "attachment" to its consequences : like that of the *Gītā*.

Other opposing ideas found in Greek philosophy present more marked differences. Thus, the opposition in Heraclitus of Being, also defined as Fire, to the *logos*, with whose help it organises itself and develops, or that in Empedocles where the elements are opposed to the forces (Love and Discord) which organise and disorganise them following a cyclical rhythm. However, there is something comparable between these dualist conventions and any other implying a process which organises an existing reality. Even the opposition of ideas like that of Democritus between atoms and chance, or that of Aristotle between matter and form, has some points of contact.

I must stress that, in any case, Greek dualism is more radical than Indian, which is always really searching for unity. But, that it is comparable can be seen, among others, in the fact that the cyclical conception of the creations and destructions of the world exist in both cultures, and in the fact that in both the spiritual principle is given divine attributes, even the character of a personal god. So as there is some vacillation between recognising in the *Brahma* a principle or a god, the One "wants and does not want", according to Heraclitus, to be called Zeus. The stoics formally identify the *logos* with God : Cleanthes, in particular, gives him the name Zeus.

Both in India and in Greece, Knowledge is basically directed at recognising a final unifying substratum of reality, or at most, a final dualism on which it is founded. Although in Greece, the identification of the soul with the fundamental beginning of the world is not so clear as in India, there is, as I said, a relationship, or similarity, between them which makes knowledge possible. If in Plato it is the *nus* which recognises the Ideas, before this Parmenides had already established a direct relationship between the *phronein* or "thinking" and the Being. Knowledge acquired in this way, is, for Greek philosophers, the highest worth man can obtain, and has even religious value. Aristotle openly claims this when he says that the

theoretical way of life is the highest model, since it is God's. The idea of Knowledge as a salvation power certainly does not exist in Greece, although Plato is not far from this way of thinking when he postulates that the only objective of Knowledge is God. Here we have the beginning of semidivine characteristics which guide the wise man's conduct. He is led away from the world of the senses and outward appearances, in the same way as in India Knowledge liberates him from *moha* or "confusion" which exists when the soul remains joined to the "intellect" and the "mind" (*buddhī, manas*) which are part of *Prakṛti* or "nature".

The great differences which exist between the philosophies of Greece and India, have their roots in the India's insistence on ideas like that of the *karma* of the *saṁsāra*, and Salvation or Liberation, which in their turn are based on identification of the *Ātmā* and *Brahma*. Although in Greece there are traces of something similar to these concepts, their parallels are obviously much less important. Here, two things happen.

The presocratic philosophies are in every way purely theoretical, despite the traces of religion found in them and the fact that one way or another they bring the concepts of man and the world closer: the *logos*, the *dike* or "justice" etc., refer to both (as does the *ṛtam* in India). When the subject of human conduct and destiny enters prominently into the interests of Socrates and his followers, there is now a purely human starting point. Socrates tries to define the virtues rationally. However much time he spends on the soul, and however much Plato links the virtues with the concept of Good, it is clear that they are both interested in the conduct of man in this world, and not so much in the service of his salvation as in that of the human community. In Greek philosophy, there is an interest in politics which distinguishes it from Indian philosophy. This does not prevent there being elements and orientations common to both.

It is very clear that these common factors become accentuated in the Hellenic era, either due to an influx of oriental ideas, or because a point in the development and crystalization of previous ideas has been reached, or because both factors combine. I have already mentioned the common features found in the Indian *bhakti* and the Hellenistic *agape*. Such obvious religious parallels do not appear however in the philosophies. The Greek division between Philosophy and Religion is a factor which obviously separates Greek from Indian Philosophy, but themes like that of the *sympatheia tón hólon* or "universal sympathy" of the stoics, or the humanism in the thought of the epicureans, however, are on the same lines.

On the other hand, the stoics, with their identification of Logos and God, make possible a synthesis between Philosophy and Religion, thus

reconstructing the unity India never lost. Later Plotinus, and, above all, Saint Augustin's religious-philosophical conception establish between the soul and God, a relationship which may be compared with that which underlies the "yoga of action" and the theory of the *bhakti*.

With this I just wanted to offer some ideas on the comparison between Indian and Greek philosophy, and between their respective religions in as much as they are linked to the philosophical thought, being complementary to it. An analysis of elements and concepts, a comparison of them and of the groups and systems they form would make possible a rational and scientific description of similarities and differences, with an interpretation of the evolution of the different systems in India and Greece. This comparison could, of course, include the Persian systems.

It is important to find the common starting points, their possibilities of evolution, their achievements, the results of meeting with elements of different origin, or of the necessities of different ages and cultures. It is obviously necessary to explain the historical phenomena of reciprocal influences or loans. The problem could be posed the other way round. A description of the elements which are common and those which are different in the different phases of religious and philosophical thought would be a good beginning for a historical study of influences and loans. Even more interesting is the fact that it would help us to advance in the study of the constants in human thought, of its deepest needs, its way of working. We would progress in our understanding of something which is not bound by frontiers or eras, and mysteriously reappears when it was thought lost.

In the ancient world, Greece and India are the places where elements of the early agrarian polytheistic religions, which are fundamentally the same, developed furthest and in the essentials, independently. This development presupposes they have been superated. It is, then, especially interesting to compare both philosophies. All these pages hope to do is to attract attention to a field which, perhaps as a consequence of the specialization modern science requires, has been ignored for too long. It may, however, prove to be specially fruitful, not only in a deeper understanding of the respective philosophies and religions, but also in giving them their rightful place in the field of the studies referring to man.