

Trends in Approach

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The spirit of inquiry and dogma

History of human thought shows that all search starts with the spirit of inquiry found dawned only on a few. What they discover on the strength of their seed capital – an outstanding human intelligence – and their effort – observation and inference founded on it – and leave for posterity tends to become dogma for those who lack that spirit. Thus the heritage that sprouts from the spirit of inquiry becomes sacred eventually and assumes a status that defies this spirit. Its authority becomes final and unquestionable and any attempt to re-examine it is looked upon as blasphemy and crushed with cruelty. Wars were fought for generations after generations to defend a particular creed against another.

The Indian scene

Contrary to this experience elsewhere in the world, India has on the whole pursued the path of freedom of thought and tolerance. This explains the co-existence of contradicting schools of thought in the areas of religion and philosophy. This was made possible by a persistent wider philosophical outlook that the same all-pervading principle is known by many names, implying that the differences, being creations of imagination and language, are superficial. This outlook is as old as the oldest literature of India, the Rigveda. No wonder, therefore, that the Indian canvas of philosophical thought is variegated with multiple colours and figures.

The Vedic and the Non-Vedic

While the majority of schools accepts authority of the Veda in matters beyond the span of sensory perception, the history of non-conforming schools is as old as the Vedic literature, to judge from implicit references to them occurring in it. With the rise of Jainism and Buddhism, the tendency to oppose established authority assumed distinct character. Buddha's date by common consent is the sixth c. B.C.; and there is evidence to prove that elements of Jainism existed before him. These two schools challenged the authority of the Vedas and offered their own systems of religion and philosophy. We can view them as prophet-centric like Christianity and Islam. Followers of Vedic tradition, on the other hand, regard the impersonal corpus of Vedic literature itself as the foundation of their beliefs and practices by virtue of its being eternal and omniscient which, again, is a matter of belief, ignoring that it consists of varied and conflicting views about religion and philosophy. For the modern scholar, this literature is valuable because it is the oldest extant literature that reflects the life and mind of the ancient man and

scales heights in philosophical thinking that are not even thought of in other traditions.

The rationalistic schools

Side by side with the trend of dogmatic assertions found in Vedic and non-Vedic traditions, the trend of rationalism too is found to have assumed the character of distinct schools about the beginning of the Christian era. Among them are to be primarily counted Saankhya, Vaisheshika and Vedaanta as systems dealing with proper metaphysical problems. Though policy-wise committed to the authority of the Vedas, the Vedaanta system as expounded by Shankara adopts a rational way in fortifying the findings of the Upanishads, and can thus be said to be carrying on the spirit of inquiry championed by the Upanishads in denouncing the Vedic sacrificial cult. The most convincing proof of the rationalistic outlook of the Vedaant would be found in its atheistic character in viewing the individual soul as identical with the universal soul.

The theistic schools

This atheistic, monistic view is found indigestible by theistic schools of Vedaanta such as that of Raamaanuja (Vishistadvaita), Madhva (Dvaita) and Vallabha (Shuddhaadvaita) which are primarily devotional cults that find it indispensable to maintain the distance between the soul and the God, and yet cannot disown support of the Vedic tradition. Against the obvious general inclination of the Upanishads towards monism, these exponents of Vedaanta employ all interpretative ingeniousness to show that the Upanishads support their view.

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