Debate as a Methodology of Knowledge Production in Pre-Modern India*

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Abstract

The article seeks to focus on taking stock of what is already available by way of methodological prescriptions about knowledge production in pre-modern India. This is what seems to have come in the way of integrating contributions from various disciplines. A shift of focus from the site of knowledge production to the site of organisation of thoughts is necessary for it. One have to search for it in the philosophical literature. There is the need for a compiler to organise the scattered material for somebody with the objective to ascertain the principles of organisation of knowledge thereof. The article argues that in order to accomplish this task there is a need to go through various academic protocols and institute academic bureaucracy by setting different methodologies in a systematic manner.

Key words: Assembling thoughts, Debates, Knowledge production, Methodology, Philosophy.

1. Introduction

The principal task here is to discern in the scattered material of traditional India the process of what Whitehead would call philosophy as 'assembling', as different from or opposed to philosophy as authoring. Organising each of these requires a different strategy, and methodology. The diversity in the various Upaniṣads was sought to be organised by Bādarāyana who systematized the Upaniṣads into *Vedānta Sūtra* for which Śaṅkara wrote a *Bhāṣya* (commentary or exposition); along the line of Śaṅkara, but unlike Bādarāyana, Nāgārjuna provided philosophical foundations and arguments to the sayings of the Buddha. Distinguishing the nature of knowledge production in these different phases or discourses is important as it has implications to the contemporary claims.

Embarking on the acknowledgment of studies on knowledge production in pre-modern India, the article begins by tracing a trajectory from the present. While freezing, for practical purposes, some phases of the present, it will recall some relevant discussions from the past through flashbacks. The paper begins with a neutralised or frozen present, (that allows him to follow strict chronology) that is 19th and 20th century scholarship on pre-modern India. It starts with colonial scholarship that characterised the lack of rational or objective knowledge systems in pre-modern India. This is subsequently contested by many. Those inspired by Edward Said's thesis of Orientalism, exposed the underlying politics of justifying colonial rule in this depiction. I have elsewhere argued how those who contested this depiction did not take into consideration the invariance in modernity's attitude towards its own past and its attitude towards those non-Western societies like India (Raghuramraju, 2011). In fact, their depiction of their own preceded or even became a precondition to the depiction of those that which lay outside the West.

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Setting this apart, the paper identifies two ways of taking on this depiction of absence of the knowledge domain in pre-modern India. One is the defensive way where one contests this and highlights the availability of knowledge production in pre-modern India. The other path that one could take is, if not right in the beginning, but subsequently is the following. This is, lack or absence is the pre-condition, according to Socrates, for desire. In his dialogue *Symposium* he argues that lack is the precondition for desire thus it is foundational. He says those who have do not desire; if you have and still desire then you desire to continue what you have; and if you have and still desire then you desire to have more. In all these, says Socrates, you desire because you lack. Thus, lack is the pre-condition for desire.

Following this fundamental thesis one could start producing more because there is lack. So there is nothing offensive about the depiction that there were no knowledge systems in pre-modern India and there is no need to take it defensively. This approach need not make one defensive but can be positive and productive. This would have taken the discourse in another direction. We do not have something that they have, but we will have them now, if they are relevant and necessary. Extending the same logic, they may not have something that we have and they may start producing it. If they already have what we have then this lands the argument into further complication which I will not discuss here. This intended allegation about absence could be enabling without being offensive. It could be received like Rāvana who is the *avatāra* of Jaya Vijaya, the *dvārapālaka*s, which enabled Rāma to realise his potential.

2. Claiming tradition

Having cleared academic ground, the paper now turns its attention to elucidating those attempts by modern Indian philosophers like S. Radhakrishnan who sought to establish against the colonial allegation of absence of philosophy in India, the difference and even the superiority of Indian philosophy. Another set of philosophers like B K Matilal (1991) and Daya Krishna who reject the reduction of the whole corpus of Indian philosophy to Advaita (1986). In contrast, they highlight the counter Indian philosophical schools such as Nyāya where the emphasis is on logic. This attempt is closely imbricated within the terrain of bringing Indian philosophy on par with Western philosophy. There is an underlying danger where the former can be dispensed with as it is second best. Another important aspect to be discussed is Amartya Sen's thesis about the argumentative nature of Indian philosophy. He claims that the sustenance and success of both democracy and secularism in India lie with the argumentative nature of Indian thinking (2005).

In addition to these claims of absence, difference, parity and argumentativeness as constituting the pre-modern knowledge this paper argues to look more closely at the debating nature of pre-modern Indian philosophical thinking. Debates are different from dialogues though they do have some similarities. Difference, logic and arguments are part of debates. Ideas in a debate become more active, dynamic, remain alive. In a debate both parties should know the system that they are debating. This makes the idea transparent to both the sides. This transparency allows for the idea to be light and not unnecessarily opaque and unintelligible. It is from the platform of transparency that the debates seek to critically evaluate the idea and take it further.

Debates in Indian philosophy acquire prominence post Buddha. During the Vedas and the Upaniṣads the dominant approach is aphoristic, explorative, and in the mode of inquiries. For instance, there are different versions of pre-existence.

3. Pre-Existence as Non-Being and Being

An earlier formulation of this is available in the *Ṛgveda* where it is claimed that void or

absolute absence preceded existence. Revealing mature sensitivity to articulate an absence, this state is expressed in negative terms. It is said in the *Songs of the Creation*, that:

> Then there was neither Aught nor Nought, no air nor sky beyond.
>
> What covered all? Where rested all? In watery gulf profound?
>
> Nor death was then, nor deathlessness, nor change or night and day.
>
> That One breathed calmly, self-sustained, nought else beyond it lay.
>
> Gloom hid in gloom existed first – one sea, eluding view.

So this state of pre-existence, where nothing whatsoever is there, is designated, as a state where there is no trace of 'change'. Hence it is a state of permanence. There is not even a celestial movement causing day and night. However, this is not a state of stillness or inertia, as there is life. This is subtly indicated by the breathing which reveals the mark of life. But this movement is governed by equilibrium, which does not cause any change. It is a perfect and perhaps the oldest indication of the idea of movement without changes. Having described this state of Non-Being, the same verse immediately leaving no trace of gap, not even conceding the possibility of continuation of this state, thereby making it almost inevitable to move away from this state describes how existence, which is subject to change arises out of this pre-existence. That is, it is from this state of pre-existence as Non-Being, existence is formed. Elucidating this formation it says that from this void-like situation first arose existence. To quote the passage from *Ṛgveda*:

> "… desire, the primal germ of mind,
>
> Which nothing with existence links, as sages searching find.
>
> The kindling ray that shot across the dark and drear abyss –
>
> Was it beneath? or high aloft? What bard can answer this?

> There fecundating powers were found, and mighty forces strove –
>
> A self-supporting mass beneath, and energy above.
>
> Who knows, who ever told, from whence this vast creation rose?
>
> No gods had then been born – who then can e'er the truth disclose?
>
> Whence sprang this world, and whether framed by hand divine or no –
>
> Its Lord in heaven alone can tell, if ever he can show.'

> '*Songs of Creation*', *Ṛgveda*, X, 129, tr. by J. Muir in *Original Sanskrit Texts*

So in the chronological order: desire whose cause eluded the creation was preceded by pre-existence. The relation governing these two stages is almost mutually exclusive. Further, the strict heterogeneity prevailing over these two realms makes it difficult to explain how the later phase emerged from the earlier one. That is, how unlike comes out of like has remained a perennial philosophical problem. The process from Non-Being, which is bereft of change to existence that is pervaded by change, is not explained in causal terms, nor is this transformation explained by alluding to an external agency. The only explanation offered is that it is and will remain a mystery.

This combination of pre-existence and existence continues to be there subsequently. For instance, in *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* it is said that in the beginning, 'this [world] was non-existent." And from this 'Being (*sat*) was produced'. (Hume, 2003, p.287). Further, in *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, pre-existence is referred to as, 'invisible, ungraspable, without family, without caste (*a-varṇa*). Without sight or hearing is It, without hand or foot'. It is eternal 'all-pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle'. In addition, it is stated that it is 'Imperishable', and the 'wise perceive as the source of beings.' And it goes on to enumerate

how everything arises from this imperishable. Deviating slightly from explaining the process from pre-existence to existence as mystery, in the following this process is indicated through a metaphor of spider. Moving from mystery to metaphorical, it is said:

> "As a spider emits and draws in [its thread],
>
> As herbs arise on the earth,
>
> As the hairs of the head and body from a living person,
>
> So from the Imperishable arises everything here."
>
> Hume, 2003, p.367

Unlike the reference to pre-existence in the *Ṛgveda* where the process of creation is said to remain a mystery, in the above verse the connection between the pre-existence and the existence is metaphorically alluded to. The state of affairs of pre-existence is mostly opposite of what is found in existence. The first phase of this transition into the opposite is variously interpreted. There are different versions of creation: The first form of creation is water and everything else subsequently emerged from it. There is another version according to which the world is built by the gods. In *Ṛgveda*, (V 85.5) it is asserted that Varuṇa is the cosmic architect who by using the moving sun as his measuring-rod has designed the universe. In *Chãndõgya Upaniṣad* there is another interesting theory according to which:

> "In the beginning this world was merely non-being. It was existent. It developed. It turned into an egg. It lay for the period of a year. It was split as under. One of the two eggshell-parts became silver, one gold."

> "That which was of silver is this earth. That which was of gold is the sky. What was the outer membrane is the mountains. What was the inner membrane is cloud and mist. What were the veins are the rivers. What was the fluid within is the ocean."

> "Now, what was born therefrom is yonder sun. When it was born, shouts and hurrahs, all beings and all desires rose up toward it. Therefore at its rising and at its every return shouts and hurrahs, all beings and all desires rise up toward it."
>
> Hume, 2003, pp. 214-5

In a slight deviation from postulating pre-existence as Non-Being in the same *Chãndõgya Upaniṣad*, the pre-existence is also portrayed as 'Being.' It is stated there that:

> "In the beginning, my dear this world was just Being (*sat*), one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say: "In the beginning this world was just Non-being (*a-sat*), one only, without a second; from that Non-being Being was produced. But verily, my dear, whence could this be?' said he. 'How from Non-being could 'Being' be produced? On the contrary, my dear, in the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second."
>
> Hume, 2003, p. 241

So, in the above, the notion of 'Being' is called to clarify the confusion surrounding the transformation from Non-Being to existence, as they are heterogeneous realms. That is, it is difficult to sustain the explanation where unlike emerges out of like. So there is a move to change the designation of pre-existence from Non-Being to Being, thereby smoothening the explanation where like largely comes out of like. (It is another matter that this provides the philosophical foundation to the subsequent discussion on two versions of causality, namely, *satkārya* and *asatkāryavāda*. Explaining the process from 'Being' to existence it is said that:

> It bethought itself: "Would that I were many! Let me procreate myself!" It emitted heat. That heat bethought itself: "Would that I were many! Let me procreate myself." It emitted water. Therefore whenever a person grieves or perspires from the heat, then water … is produced.

That water bethought itself: "Would that I were many! Let me procreate myself." It emitted food. Therefore whenever it rains, then there is abundant food. So food for eating is produced just from water.

Now, of these beings here there are just three origins: [there are beings] born from an egg, born from a living being, born from a sprout.

That divinity [i.e. Being] bethought itself: "Come! Let me enter these three divinities [i.e. heat, water, and food] with this living Soul (*ātman*), and separate out name and form.

"Let me make each one of them threefold."

That divinity entered into these three divinities with this living Soul, and separated out name and form.

It made each of them threefold.

Now, verily my dear, understand from me how each of these three divinities becomes threefold."

<div align="center">Hume, 2003, pp 241-2</div>

There is another version according to which it is proposed that in the beginning this world was just the Self (*ātman*), one only. He wished: 'Would that I had a wife; then I would procreate. Would that I had wealth; then I would offer sacrifice.' So great, indeed, is desire. Not even if one desired, would he get more than that. Therefore even today when one is lonely one wishes: 'Would that I had a wife, then I would procreate. Would that I had wealth, then I would offer sacrifice.' So far as he does not obtain any one of these, he thinks that he is, assuredly, incomplete. Now his completeness is as follows: his mind truly is his self (*ātman*); his voice is his wife; his breath is his offspring; his eye is his worldly wealth, for with his eye he finds; his ear is his heavenly [wealth], for with his ear he hears it; his body (*ātman*), indeed, is his work, for with his body he performs work. (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* in Hume, 2003, pp. 85-6). In the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* the self is portrayed to be in the pre-existence. It says:

"In the beginning this world was Soul (*ātman*) alone in the form of a Person. Looking around, he saw nothing else than himself…. He was afraid. Therefore one who is alone is afraid. … He desired a second. He was, indeed, as large as a woman and a man closely embraced. He caused that self to fall … into two pieces. There from arose a husband … and wife…. …He copulated with her. There from human beings were produced.

And she then bethought herself: 'How now does he copulate with me after he has produced me just from himself? Come, let me hide myself.' She became a cow. He became a bull. With her he did indeed copulate. Then cattle were born…. Thence arose creation. Verily, he who has this knowledge comes to be in that creation of his"

<div align="center">Hume, 2003, p. 81.</div>

So it is the fear of being lonely that caused the creation that begins with two consisting of man and woman. The following from *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* reveals the initial stages of creation. It says that the non-existent world in the beginning subsequently embarked on the following: 'He desired: "Would that I were many! Let me procreate myself!" He performed austerity. Having performed austerity he created this whole world, whatever there is here…' (Hume, 2003, p. 287). A clear gender specific formulation is found as the basis for initial procreation in the *Ṛgveda* where it is said that Lopamudra, the wife, wants to have a child, but her aged husband Agastya has taken a vow of chastity. She is overcome by intense sexual desire and seduces him. He subsequently regrets the result and drinks *soma* the sacred drink of immortality to atone himself for this lapse. While acknowledging the pervasiveness of desire in human beings he asks for forgiveness. (*Ṛgveda* 1. 179. 1-6). The following instance from the *Ṛg Veda*, however, dispels the possible association of gender as instrumental in the first act of procreation, lest a gendered association is concluded. It is said in the hymn from the *Ṛgveda*

10.94, 1-4, that it is the male Purūravas, a mortal man who seduces his beloved Urvaśi, a water nymph. Though the latter fulfils her lover's desire she is devoid of desire and merely submits to his sexual demands. Thus we have a picture of both male as well as female as seducing the other sex with overpowering desires.

So there are different version though differing from each other sometimes slightly and other times radically. However there is no attempt to provide reasons why they differ from each other. Each is in a self-expression, an inquiry that is available for others to emulate. Ideas even when contested are not rigorously debated. Perhaps, given the shared perceptions about ultimate transcendental reality there was less need to communicate and provide support to the idea. But with the advent of Buddhism which went into a head on collision with the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads*, there was a need to defend the Vedic and Upaniṣadic doctrines logically. Bādarāyana systematised *Upaniṣads* into *Vedānta Sūtra*s, for which Saṅkara wrote a *bhāṣya*. The ensuing period witnessed more activity where each school of thought in addition to reflecting and expressing their own doctrines paid enough attention to stating the differences they have with other schools. This made them learn the philosophies of the other schools while at the same time they were constantly updating with the philosophical schools they aligned with. This practice continued.

The paper concludes with a discussion on what happened to this methodology of knowledge production during the colonial period and consequences of this predicament. I have elsewhere made a case for excavating the possibility of debates actual and possible, in modern India (Raghuramraju, 2006). The paper finally turns its attention towards revising debate as an intellectual methodology to deal with knowledge production in pre-modern India. Thus, the idea of debate and the state of the present status of scholarship in India forms the basic concern of this paper.

This is best exemplified in the foundational texts of Indian philosophy such as *Upaniṣads* that contain lively dialogues in which Sages like Āruṇi, Svétaketu, Nārada, Sanat Kumāra, Prajāpati, and Yājñavalkya and significantly Gārgi and Maitreyī participated. The philosophical heat continued to maintain itself in the debates between the orthodox and heterodox schools, between the schools and even within schools. In fact, it was mandatory that any system builder or sub-system builder or interpreter should consider the actual and possible objections against his or her point of view. Actually, some philosophers could put forth the opponent's point of view more ably and effectively than the opponent himself or herself. Vācaspati Misra is an illustrious example of this. Referring to the debates in classical India 'prevalent probably as early as the time of Buddha and the Mahāvīra (*Jina*),' B.K. Matilal says:

> Logic developed in ancient India from the tradition of *vādavidyā*, a discipline dealing with the categories of debate over various religious, philosophical, moral, and doctrinal issues. There were several *vāda* manuals available around the beginning of the Christian era. They were meant for students who wanted to learn how to conduct debates successfully, what tricks to learn, how to find loopholes in the opponent's position, and what pitfalls to be wary of …. Of these manuals, the one found in the *Nyāyasūtra*s of Akṣapāda Gautama (circa 150 AD) is comparatively more systematic than others….

> Debates, in Akṣapāda's view, can be of three types: (i) an honest debate (called *vāda*) where both sides, proponent and opponent, are seeking the truth, that is, wanting to establish the right view; (ii) a tricky-debate (called *jalpa*) where the goal is to win by fair means or foul; and (iii) a destructive debate (called *vitaṇḍā*) where the goal is to defeat or demolish the opponent, no matter how…. The first kind, signals the employment of logical arguments, and use of rational means and proper evidence to establish a thesis. It is said that the participants in this kind of

debate were the teacher and the student, or the students themselves, belonging to the same school.

The second was, in fact, a winner-takes-all situation …. Tricks, false moves, and unfair means were allowed according to the rules of the game….

The third type was a variety of the second type, where the winner was not supposed to establish his own position … but only to defeat the opponent using logical arguments, or as the case was, tricks or clever devices.

Matilal, 1999, pp. 2-3.

Here it is important to point out that in the above passage Matilal is preoccupied with logic. He highlights logic that is one aspect of debate and does not pay attention to the larger genre which is debate. However, what is important to recognise is that such philosophical activity with debates at its centre, which was widespread during classical times has since then faded away. There is a consensus regarding the agency, — both internal to the tradition and external to it, — causing this fading away. For instance, pointing out the indomitable presence of Western philosophy and the severity of its impact on philosophy in India, Kalidas Bhattacharyya says:

Most of the others who have done philosophy in India since have more or less servilely accepted Western philosophy, and that too as it was understood by the British thinkers, and granted recognition to that much only of Indianism which was intelligible, in terms of Western ideas. The rest was rejected as dogmatic, magical, tribal, romantic, speculative and what not?

Bhattacharyya, 1982, p.173.

He, however, simultaneously identifies the problems and difficulties with the 'old-type' of present day scholars in Indian philosophy. About them he says:

The difficulty with these old-type scholars in Indian philosophy is that they live in a self-contained world of their own and do not care to communicate with others except in their own limited world …. This was the state of affairs even in the old-day India.

Bhattacharya, 1982, pp.173-174.

While acknowledging the fact that Western education has done to India incalculable harm, he however, recognises that it "has after all restored to us that one world." He warns that the continuing seclusion could only lead to 'inbreeding in the field of ideas,' and this would be only 'false patriotism and harmful nostalgia'. Referring to the purview of seclusion S. N. Dasgupta says that, those Paṇḍits were not only ignorant about new ideas from the outside but were equally unaware of other Indian systems other than their own. He says:

Even the best Paṇḍits of our age follow the old traditional method, and are almost always profoundly ignorant of Buddhism and Jainism … and with few exceptions, they seldom publish anything which may be said to embody the results of their study and mature thinking.

Dasgupta, 1982, p. 220

Further, pointing out yet another limitation within classical Indian philosophy in Sanskrit by Pundits of the twentieth century, M.P. Rege — who made many innovative attempts to initiate dialogues between classical pundits and modern logicians — says:

… Indian philosophy gives the impression of moving in a closed circle. The discussions, no doubt, are free, but all the *pūrva-pakṣa*s are given. The arguments which can be advanced in their support or for defending them against possible attacks are well-known. The possible counter-arguments from the side of the *siddhānta* are also well-rehearsed …. The new argument is much likely to be a variation on an old argument…. They could only produce improvements in style, not in substance.

(Rege in his Introduction in Daya Krishna, et al. 1991: xxiii).

So we have both internal and external reasons, the former more dominant, for the decay of philosophical thinking, thus settling the question – who caused the decay. I have elsewhere pointed out that the nature of the debating tradition degenerated like the Jarasandha's body after it was slain by Bhima with the instruction from Krishna. Like Jarasandha's torn body, the various parts of the dialogic tradition in India, following the colonial intervention, have never been able to come together again. At best they could only touch each other. Retrospectively speaking, perhaps what Indian thought needs today is the compassion of the Rākṣasi who brought the two parts of Jarāsandha's body to the King (Raghuramaraju, 2006).

To return to the main line of argument, near-absence of debates in contemporary Indian philosophy is quite different from the classical Indian philosophy as depicted by Matilal. The contemporary picture does not provide a firm ground to rehabilitate the dialogical structure of society. And a dialogical structure is vital for any society's growth. Moreover, the peculiar feature of contemporary Indian thought is that its pre-modern base has not been completely annihilated, as it was in the West, clearing the debris and establishing new modern relational network. At the same time, it is equally impossible to go back to the pre-modern. Both these options prevent society from refurbishing the dialogical structure. Contemporary India consists of a combination of the modern and the pre-modern; neither existing together nor insulated from each other, they are physically nearer to each other, each obstructing the growth of the other like two wrestlers.

So there is a need for debates. We need to seriously cater to this need. One way of dealing with it is to take stock of the available works from the pre-modern India. This requires that there is a need to organise before adding new ideas or systems; organising an old and probably a dilapidated material. This requires compilers, editors rather than authors. This will provide a wide spectrum of different versions that are available. These different versions can then be put for a serious debate thus coming up with different contested evaluations. The pre-modern resources from India, placed for a debate in the largely changed modern terrains along with providing differences have to confront the challenges modernity poses to them. This will make pre-modern both available and stand scrutiny of the modern times. This will make pre-modern less opaque or less romantic or a mere store house of orthodoxies. In order to accomplish this task there is a need to go through various academic protocols and institute academic bureaucracy by setting different methodologies that captures both variety yet present the material in a systematic and crisp manner.

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