

Orientalising Indian Philosophy: Hegel and Sri Aurobindo

Purushottama Bilimoria

Abstract

The paper reflects on the influence of Orientalist frameworks in the interpretation of Indian Philosophy within European thought. It tries to analyze the intersection of Western and Indian Philosophy with a focus particularly on Hegel's philosophy of history and its impact on later interpretations of Indian thought. Hegel's own philosophy of history presents a teleological progression of Spirit which historically positions Eastern traditions as an earlier stage of intellectual development in human history. This paper explores how this framework influenced reinterpretation of Indian philosophy beyond the Western frames as well, especially in the work of Sri Aurobindo. The paper compares the Hegelian framework to Sri Aurobindo's theory of spiritual evolution, which centres on the progressive manifestation of consciousness. It seems that Sri Aurobindo's conception of evolutionary progression and Hegel's dialectical movement of Spirit have certain structural similarities. The paper argues that Sri Aurobindo reconfigured the Hegelian model, prioritizing individual spiritual realization over the utopian, grandiose state found in Hegel

Keywords: orientalism, Hegel's Philosophy of History, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual evolution, cross-cultural philosophy

Introduction:

Many Indian philosophers or scholars working on Indian philosophy have worried about the Orientalist distortions introduced into the modern, slightly pre- and post-Enlightenment era work on Indian thought.

But first a word on "Orientalising". The thesis draws on Raymond Schwab (1984) and later Edward Said's overly celebrated work, *Orientalism*, wherein "Orientalism" is elucidated as a "technology of power" by which Europe or the Occident authorizes itself to represent the silent other, in the image of its own invulnerable (or vulnerable) essences and universalized self (Schwab, 1984; Said, 1978). Said candidly notes: 'The construction of identity [of one's self...involves the construction of opposites and 'others' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from 'us.' Each age and society re-creates its "Others".' In the construction of the 'Orient,' a construction that highlighted the

European's (and later, the American's) ease of access to (and manifest destiny in) Asia, particular pains were taken to evaluate the 'Other' in terms of European achievement, society, literature, and so forth. In addition, Said points out: ... and the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (Said, 1978, p. 332).

Ninian Smart in his ground-breaking book, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*, argued that the modern reconstruction of Indian philosophy rests not so much on Orientalism but on two dogmas: a singular focus on problems of natural theology enacted in propositional analysis (in the context mostly of Western monotheism), and, its neglect of a totality of worldviews, ranging over a wide compass of doctrines, ideologies, myths and symbolic patterns, sacred practices, and ultimate concerns (Smart, 1992). Smart went on to suggest a three-tiered prolegomenon for neo-Indian philosophy, structured around the *comparative* analysis, the *history* of thought, and the *phenomenology* of a range of experiences, normative principles and action (Smart, 1995, p. 31).

But is Smart suggesting anything very new? Consider, the “comparative” component in philosophy had long been established and practiced, among European philosophers and religionists who had some, however sinister, interest in philosophies of the East as of other non-Western cultures. Herder, Novalis, Hegel, Schopenhauer, later Deussen and even Nietzsche to an extent dabbled in this area.

Thus, at the close of 19th century Max Müller, the classic patron of British-German Indology, was still discovering Europe ‘in this cradle of the human race, the native land of the highest philosophy’ (Müller, 1967). But the recovery of the old disclosed an “idealism”, a happy blending of religion (i.e. the “Hindu Bible of *Vedas*”) and philosophy (of the *Upanishads*) in the “Science of Religion”, which, like medieval theology, enriches our “new world” but is not equal to its modernist challenges (Müller, 1928). It is in part a misaligned legacy of this dialectic of the reconfigured intellectual periodicity that trumps the superiority of the Greek (Hellenic) origins of Western philosophy (which is echoed again and again from Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and even Richard Rorty). And here Herder's contrary position is relevant. For Herder, the East or what came to be identified as the Orient does not begin as the West's or Occident's “other”, its distant enemy and so on; rather the former marks the historical condition for the possibility of the latter in a dialectical space created by his idea of *aufhebung* (negating and synthesizing, or subsuming in Hegel's terminology), the necessary movement of the infinite over the finite. Temporal cultures are not necessarily marginal to the present; they may even be central to it; it is only that their memory has receded from sight, along possibly with all its artifacts. This view was to have an impact on Hegel.

Discussion:

A. Hegel:

Hegel was arguably the most influential of 19th century philosophers in the development of the discipline

came to be known as the Comparative Philosophy. This study is the extent and depth of Orientalism that informs his, doubtless quite remarkably scholarly and informed, intervention in this field. He left behind quite a legacy that in the 20th centuries continued its impact on an array of significant German and European thinkers: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Habermas, and Žižek, and on the south Asian studies front he had a huge influence on Paul Hacker, S. Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, Wilhelm Halbfass – despite the conscience of his friends J. L. Mehta and J. N. Mohanty – and to this list may be added K. C. Bhattacharyya, albeit on a rebellious note. Indeed, Hegel was ‘the single most influential figure in the overlap between German Indology [Oriental scholarship] and philosophy’, He effected most if not all of the key changes in European thinking from the 1790s to the 1820s, not least in respect of Indian philosophy. His most sustained engagement in this area appeared in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History and History of Philosophy* (Hegel, 1969). Hegel possessed a near-encyclopedic familiarity with Indian material, for which he relied on the Indologist Franz Bopp, and consulted English translations of Sanskrit works by Colebrooke and William Jones; but he shared nothing of scholarly respect and grounding in Buddhist thought, dismissing it as ‘naivety of emptiness’. Nor had Hegel much acquaintance with the metaphysics of the *Upanishads* that his rival Schopenhauer at least brought to Western philosophy (there is no evidence that Hegel read closely Duperron’s *Oupenakhat*). When he later comes across the detailed empirical-analytical pursuits of Sāṃkhya and Nyāya, he modifies his account, though not his substantive view (Halbfass, 1992).

The Romantics too were impressed by the worthy contribution of Indo-European to the whole history of human thought. So, there was a new-found scientific self-consciousness based on the linguistic importance of the Orient to Europe. But an Orient only of the long-gone past, as Herder was to pronounce, and decidedly not of the present-day nepotistic or corrupted Asia or parts of North Africa, and certainly not the more recent Islam (forgetting that it was Arabic scholars who had preserved Aristotle’s texts and developed among the first scientific instruments after borrowing “zero” and other mathematical notations from India). Hence, for example, the Purāṇas were considered to be degraded forms of earlier, lofty traditions. The new signal (or “buzz”) word was “Āryan” (Āiryanam, in Avestan-Persian. It is to be noted that the term itself comes from Sanskrit *ārya* meaning “the noble”, as the Buddha was also called – signifying the mythic descendants and linguistic predecessors of the original Indo-European inhabitants, possibly somewhere in the steppes of Central Asia, – and it is this “Āryan”, as I will argue later that re-appears in Sri Aurobindo, albeit with a vengeance (he even called his monthly journal *Arya*)

Another element that marked early 18th century Oriental scholarship was historicism – the belief, still in a crude form, that history has its own teleology, *-telos* – purpose, direction, end-goal, – that there is progression within it regardless of human intentionalities, contingencies or accidentals; and that all cultures are inextricably entangled in this forward-thrust. If that is the case, then, again the Orient must inevitably hold out great secrets for historical anthropology in collaboration with philology and indeed philosophy. Hegel was unnerved that no

one had yet tried to articulate the whole history of philosophy, the role of religion within it, its relation to freedom and the state, and the spaces occupied by the new-found intellectual traditions of the Orient.

A properly-effected philosophy of history – which is also the history of philosophy – must be able to show how the Spirit (*Geist*) is mediated through nature, substantiality, ideality and thinking, i.e. Concept (*Begriff*), to yield the unity of spirit in rational knowledge, and how each stage of development is dialectically related to the preceding and futural stages. Hegel then gives us an epistemography, a graduated diagram of how knowledge comes to be in the march of history. This historical progression of the *Geist* (or Spirit) is delineated through three differentially interrelated modes of inquiry, each creating a discourse or rather presupposing a discourse which can be readily identified with, namely, history (of people and regions), philosophy (which covers ethics and polity), and philosophy of religion (which includes theology). Under each one of these modalities, Hegel includes extensive discussion of the Oriental world and discursively gives measure to the total contribution and worth of the corresponding Oriental tradition to this particular face of truth (Bilimoria, 2020).

The structure he gives to these broad configurations (namely, of Identity, Difference, Ground; Abstract Universal, Concrete Particular, Concrete Universal; Unity, Plurality, Totality; Immediacy, Rupture, and Reconciliation) is basically reduced into and identified with the triad of Indeterminacy, Determinacy, and Self-Determination - which parallels the triadic structure of the Concept in terms of Universality, Particularity, and Individuality (in *Philosophy of Right*) (notice the variations in the order), juxtaposed with the triad of negation of logic (the movement from thesis, anti-thesis to higher thesis or synthesis). Within each there is what Hegel calls *aufgehoben* or sublation, assimilation, of the prior to the latter, more determinate stage. It should be noted, if not already obvious, that these sequences in history are identical with the sequences or moves ‘in the logical deduction of the conceptual determination of the idea’ in the systems of philosophy, and so it follows that ‘every philosophy is a particular stage of development in the whole process and it has its specified position at which it has its true value and meaning’. The timeless logical categories take on a phenomenal clothing that constitute in historical experience the successive phases of the self-progression of the Absolute (Hegel, 1969).

To be sure, the culmination, by *Geist*’s movement in history, for Hegel occurs the civil state, possibly beginning with the utopian Prussia. For one can ask the following questions: Is such a collective rational realization of human freedom fully possible? How might this be actualized? And is it significantly the proclivity of Western history to be a function of dialectical development in human self-knowledge?

B. Sri Aurobindo:

A similar dialectic appears in Sri Aurobindo’s idea of integrative evolutionism, with a significant difference. (For Sri Aurobindo too there is a latent evolutionary impetus or principle in the development of human kingdom through the self-progression of the Absolute (Aurobindo, 2005); Mahapatra 2023, calls it ‘integral evolution’. However, the culmination is not to be had in the grandiosity of the state, but rather in the human person (not necessarily confined to the Prussian nor for that matter gentlemen, though the latter may lead the first harbingers

of the gift). Unlike Hegel, for Sri Aurobindo the state is not ‘the highest achievement of human society’. Sri Aurobindo did speak of ‘nation-soul’ which is distinguished from ‘national ego’ that leads to stolid nationalism – that the European imperial powers were mixed with — the reason he refused to see Mahatma Gandhi who he thought was rallying up nationalism in India. ‘Nation-soul’ for him signified the unity of the collective that has achieved a high-level awareness, self-reflection and freedom.

And this is very different from Darwinian-Lamarckian idea of natural evolution: creatures have developed genetic mutation that created divisions between species, while they all have a common origin. The living beings that are more likely to survive in the long run are the ones who inherit or experience the genetic variations that are the most adapted to their environment. This process was a “natural selection” by Darwin and constitutes the driving force of evolution (Darwin, 1859).

The idea of evolution of one kind or another was very much in the air in the 19th century, and Sri Aurobindo was arguably among the first Indian intellectuals to have adopted this line of thought, albeit with a significant variation, to reconfigure the history of human development – away from development of institutions, law, dharma, economics, politics and so forth. One doesn’t find anything like an evolutionary ethos in classical thinking; some scholars have argued that the system of Sāṃkhya embeds that, but I think that is more an emanationist theory (as Voltaire was to suggest using the ‘spider and web’ metaphor), than an evolutionary process that could be marked and chartered in historical matrix: that is what progression implied: the movement in the course of history, propelled by forces acting on history, hence the work of historicity, to yield stages of development from the primitive or primordial to a highly developed, indeed evolved stage. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, Darwinism and evolutionism were adopted and adapted by South Asian intellectuals, but often in distinct, selective, and highly syncretic ways rather than as a wholesale adoption of Western materialistic thought (C. MacKenzie-Brown 2020).

Hence it is argued that the idea of the progression of the Absolute, or put it another way, the progression from the mundane to the Supramental and its return, i.e. the theory of mutual ascent from below and descent from above, is a variation of the ideals of emergent evolution, and appear to be near identical in Hegel and Sri Aurobindo. In spirit’s self-conscious development, ‘spirit’s self-determination [manifests] in time under the idea of freedom.’ There is an in-built *telos* or impetus of *spirit*, to gradually yet progressively undergo natural, moral, rational, cognitive and spiritual determinations. Sri Aurobindo took seriously Hegel’s criticism of Sankara’s concept of Brahman is being static, lacking in dynamism of substantiality and purpose, a simplistic abstraction as was Buddhism’s ‘universal principle of The Nothing’, because India stalled somewhere in the evolutionary progression of the Spirit and became unstruck in Nature, in dreamy somnambulist mother unable to beget its incarnation. Hegel’s philosophical orientalism spills over (his reservations about Śaṅkara were expressed in a reply letter to Prof J. N. Mohanty whether he (Sri Aurobindo) was committed to a monist Vedanta metaphysics).

It may be that Sri Aurobindo was influenced by Hegelian concept of evolutionary progression which he

nonetheless used for his own spiritual philosophy. In place of Hegel's Reason, Sri Aurobindo substituted the Conscient; and the three-step dialectic we have in Hegel re-appears as forces that move consciousness toward progressive evolution. Evolutionary growth follows a triple process; expanding, ascending and descending that propels from inward movement for the emergent Absolute Consciousness to integrate at manifest levels. Life, Mind, and Supermind are the three significant stages (though there is Matter that supports Life and Mind, but left behind *willy nilly* in the descent of the Supermind, or ascend to. Another triad epigram appears in progression form the Outer being, the Inner being, and the Psychic Being (Aurobindo, 2005).

S.K. Maitra begins by noting the similarities of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy with the speculations of Plato, Śaṅkara, Bradley, Bosanquet, and Bergson. But he underscores differences because they jettison the Absolute (the Transcendent) away from the Manifest world regarding the phenomenal world as variation to something a shadow-puppet-show – unreal, illusory, hallucinatory, a dream-effect, delusional, etc. (Maitra, 1993).

According to Maitra, 'The only philosopher I can think of who has succeeded in maintaining a continuity between the Absolute Reality, the Creator and the created world is Hegel.' Maitra added this caveat: 'But Hegel did this work with the help of logic and by making Thought [read Reason] all in all, which suffered from the very serious defect that it gave no recognition to Will or to the suprarational powers of cognition' (Maitra, 1993).

Maitra is not quite correct on this point of critique and difference between Hegel and Sri Aurobindo, as a closer reading of Hegel will show that both have will as *volition* (albeit at stages of the unconscious) and extrasensory perception (transcendental cognition on the part of the Incarnation, even the chosen Philosopher-Emperor of the Prussian state, is no mere magic feat but part of the episteme-physical progression of the Spirit from its slumber to its self-realization of "I" as the supreme consciousness and self-consciousness in the utopian completion of Being-for-itself).

Elsewhere Maitra makes allusions to the similarities in the idea of the evolution of the Spirit through various stages of hide-and-seek and unconscious, and then conscious, and finally self-conscious developments that have striking confluence in the *Life Divine* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* respectively. Return to the first short comment: "The only philosopher I can think of who has succeeded in maintaining a *continuity* between the Absolute Reality, the Creator and the created world is Hegel" (Hegel, 1807/1977, p. xx). The hiatus that many transcendental idealists, including Immanuel Kant who left it hanging or in animation, hold between the Absolute and the manifest world of entities, motion, space and time... needs to be bridged and not left in some epiphenomenal animation.

Śaṅkara is famously considered to hold the most extreme form of idealism matched in recent times by Spinoza and more especially Bradley, T H Green and McTaggart. Hegel criticizes Śaṅkara, as did Sri Aurobindo. For both, while the grand idea of Being (Brahman-Atman) as the ground of all, is the basic concept of the

metaphysical tradition and in Vedānta thought it is even more emphatically crucial, Brahman was too static a Concept that embedded no *potential* and was not capable of any creative actualization etc., let alone progression. From the hermeneutical lens of both, the impersonal, abstract, ahistorical, atemporal concept of ‘Brahman’ much dear to Vedānta philosophy is but a ‘dead’ metaphor, in as much as it is grounded in *eidos*, *logos*, and *ousia* and therefore has its life or sustaining significance entirely within the discourse of metaphysics (as Heidegger would say of all grand metaphors of the subject). Thus Brahman stood to be de-structured, dismantled, disseminated, deconstructed by being subjected to the same rigors of hermeneutical destruction that Hegel had suggested. It may then be possible to recover the latent, the *unthought*, and to reanimate the tradition in more creative ways than has occurred either through the revivalism of neo-Vedānta or the Romanticism of 19th century philological Indology, of which Hegel was a central protagonist. This love for re-doing Indian philosophy was certainly in the air.

Aurobindo by contrast to Śaṅkara and neo-Hegelian idealists in Britain, is in traditional terms closer to the *Bhagavad-Gītā*’s ontology (a merger of Sāṃkhya with Upaniṣadic pantheism, like that of Íśa and Śvetāsvatara) into a form of panentheism and more so to Ramanuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita. (Just anecdotally but a poignant intervention: J N Mohanty wrote to Sri Aurobindo as to which version of Vedānta he preferred: Advaita or some other? Response report: Viśiṣṭādvaita).

However, what Sri Aurobindo did not specify is that even the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and Rāmānuja’s panentheism are in a sense *static*; yes, there are traces of developmental progression but then there is a lot of entropy and devolution leading to *pralaya*, the cyclical cosmic process. Avidya remains as *avidyā*, *ajñāna*; God as Brahman remains God and the world does not evolve more than the as symbolic body of God into full Spirit either by the descent of God in full or by ascent of Nature back to being Godhead in full. Where as in Sri Aurobindo, God or Brahman or Spirit does evolve and progress.

Conclusion:

And at this juncture, a moot question arises “Did Sri Aurobindo read Hegel?” (Hegel, 1969; Maitra, 1993). His language, use of dialectical thinking, and the very focus he puts on consciousness, knowledge, sparks of intelligence awakening Nature from its otherwise inert, unconscious, inconscient stages to consciousness, self-conscious ascent of the Mother *qua* Nature/Prakṛti, the conscient, the Overmind’s descent via Supermind linked to intermediary of intuition/knowledge or revelation, the engagement of the will, the suturing of *sat-cit-ānanda* and other triads – always in 3s echoing Hegel’s dialectic of thesis-anti-thesis-higher thesis – are so reminiscent of and resonates with Hegel’s highly-charged language of the phenomenology of spiritual evolution. He could have chosen pure physical-biological/neurolinguistic evolution if *evolution* is all he was interested in – and there were models already gaining fame with Darwin, Spencer, Lamarck. Alternatively, there might even be a mix of material-biological and spiritual-soul mind evolution – as in Jainism. Although a little complicated to go into here, we may note that Jains have evolution happening at both planes as mentioned, albeit, in staggered

stages: at least at the level of higher order beings. Thus, according to the Jains, many eons back the predecessors of today's human beings were described as being six feet long with large brain and middling physical motion; they appeared perhaps to be a cross between dinosaurs and the Neanderthals. Nevertheless, there is a little evidence of a Darwinian Lamarckian account of biological-neurological evolution in Sri Aurobindo, but one certainly do Hegelian evolutionism which too skipped the burgeoning and fashionable discipline of evolutionary biology and both opted for what someone has described as Integrative spiritual-mental evolutionism.

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