

A Comparative Note on Early Greek and Indian Philosophical Understanding

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ABSTRACT

Indian and Greek philosophical understandings had developed in ancient times, with a remarkable quest to learn more about the human mind, consciousness, and its relationship with the physical world. From the beginning of Greek and Indian rationalism to the inquires of the matter philosophers, similarities in Mystic and monistic thoughts, parallelism in atomic theories, and striking resemblance in Platonic and Upanishadic philosophical thoughts suggest a continuous dialogue between two great ancient civilisations and their intellectual classes, if not directly than through some medium or from a common meeting place like the capital city of great Persian empire, where people of high intellectual resources were often travelling for various purposes. Most of these parallel philosophical thoughts or understandings were taking place in the -Alexandrian world, and classical writings have made this knowledge available to us, which may be examined now for having a deeper understanding of these thought processes. The present paper tries to critically analyse the ideas and interface of these ancient philosophies and philosophers.

Keywords: *Greece, India, Philosophical understandings, Rationalism, Matter Philosophers, Mysticism, Monistic Ideals, Vedanta, Platonic thoughts, Upanishadic Philosophy.*

"Today's Western world must be considered the product of both Greek and Indian thought", remarks Thomas C. McEvilley after conducting thirty years of research for his work, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002). In the ancient world, although philosophies developed in many nations, it was mainly in India and Greece that one found parallel developments in rational thought. ¹. Beginning of Greek and Indian Rationalism In the history of Greek thought, the emergence of Ionian states in Asia Minor was a turning point. Greek rationalism was born in Ionian cities, not in Athens, the intellectual hub of Classical Greece. The rise of the Achaemenian Empire, of which the Greeks living in Lonia and the Indians inhabiting the region around the Indus, were integral parts; we have the first evidence of interaction between Indian and Greek civilisation. The results of these interactions, which provided an opportunity for

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dialogues between the two, were spectacular in the development of thought. Commerce and political expansion also allowed different philosophies to come into contact with each other in different nations of the vast Achaemenian empire. What factors enabled the Ionian Greeks to make this breakthrough? The absence of priesthood, which developed religious doctrines that limited thought; the familiarity with achievements of the oriental world included in the Achaemenian Empire; and the adoption of the polis system, which fostered freedom for the advancement of Greek speculative thought, appear to be the main causes responsible for the rise of Greek rationalism in Sonia.

Like the polis system of ancient Greece, the Janapadas system *was developed* in ancient India. The Janapadas were both democratic and monarchical. The monarchy was, although, in the majority of the states, the kings were not like gods and autocrats. They were governed by Dharma and not considered superior to religious and intellectual sages. There were democratically elected assemblies and councils which were controlling the kingdoms. During the time of Buddha, sixty-three philosophical systems were prevalent in India, and many were agnostic and atheistic. As late as the 14th century, Madhvacharya wrote a book entitled *Sarvadarsan Samgrha* in which, beginning with the atheism of Charvaka, he devoted each of his sixteen chapters to different schools of Indian religion, showing how each religious school differed from the others within the spacious body of Hindu thought. The Indian political and social environment, too, like that of Greece, encouraged the development of varied thoughts. It is sometimes said that rationalism in India was brought forward by the Buddhists, who learned about the culture of debate and discussions from the Greeks. What, then, of the argumentative culture developed in early Upanishadic texts predate the Greek influence? 2. Matter Philosophers: Greece and India Like the early Upanishadic philosophers, the Ionian thinkers too believed that a single world- principle lies at the foundation of all existence. This basic essence (arche) was the beginning and the cause of all Being, as well as of its changes. What was this basic essence? The Ionians were called "matter philosophers" because they were of the opinion that everything was issued from a particular material. Thales of Miletos (c.624- c. 548 B.C.) said that water was the source of everything else in the world. In the Creation hymn of the Rigveda, the question is raised whether fathomless waters existed before the formation of the world, and the answer is given in the affirmative (1). The Satapatha Brahmana (2) also speaks that verily, in the beginning, this universe was water (II, I, 61). According to the Ramayana (3), "all was watery, in which the earth was formed (III, 110, 3-4). Almost

universal is the belief that before the beginning of creation, there was nothing but a vast expanse of waters shrouded in darkness. It occurs in myths of many nations. In Greek mythology, according to Homer, the prime components of the universe were the ocean, water, and earth, according to Hieronymos and Hellanikos, and water and slime, according to Athenagoras (4). Thales might have been influenced by these myths when choosing water as a primary material substance. Another Ionian matter philosopher, Anaximenes, had theorised that the main substance which was responsible for the orderliness of nature was air. The air, when rarefied, became Fire, while wind, cloud and water were made of condensed air. When condensed still further, the water turned to earth, and when condensed even more, the water turned to stone. Air appears to be a cosmogonic principle in the Vedic tradition, too. In the Rigveda, Vata and Vayu are gods but not cosmogonic. This aspect is found in the Atharvaveda (5), where the term Prana (Vital Breath) is substituted for the Vayu (Air). We are told that the Prana is the controlling of all that we perceive; the Prana is the lord of all. It is identified with Prajapati, the creator god, and Rigvedic Matarisvan and Vata. In Chhandogya Upanishad (6), Vayu is said to have absorbed Fire, water, sun and moon. Another Ionian philosopher, Anaximander (c. 611-547 B.C.), refuted Thales, who had recognised water as the primary element. He rejected the idea of definite matter and suggested that a Boundless substance should be accepted as the source of all things. This Boundless he conceived as eternal, imperishable, inexhaustible, beginningless, indestructible and the highest object of religious reverence. It is always in motion, and through its motion, many worlds come into existence and disappear. Among the Milesian philosophers, Anaximander is probably closest to the philosophers of the Upanishads. His cosmology, which states that multiple worlds come into existence out of boundlessness, is very similar to the Upanishads. The boundless Anaximander is similar to the Indian Nirvikalpa, the nameless and formless, called Aditi in the *Rigveda*. This Nirvikalpa is ordered by Rta or Dharma, just as in Anaximander 'dike' ensures that all things shall eventually return to the boundless, from where they came: "From which all things take their rise and by necessity, they are destroyed into these; for all things render just atonement to one another for their injustice according to the ordering of time"(7). Just like Anaximander, a contemporary of Buddha, Ajitakesa Kambali posited that a combination of four elements- earth, water, air, and Fire- in certain proportions and under certain circumstances produced vitality or energy. Anaximanders had thought that man and other animals had descended from fish. It is worthwhile noting that in Indian mythology, the fish is the first incarnation of Lord Visnu. Anaximander's views about the origin of nature and the universe contained fantastic elements; nevertheless, because of a

natural explanation for the origin of life, it surpassed the creation myths. Among the matter philosophers, Herakleitos of Ephesos (530-470 B.C) was not interested in explaining the origin of the world, which he regarded as eternal, but rather to account for the fact of motion and change within it. Thus, he described the universe as a fire, which is never extinguished, a process, or a substance. Thus, according to him, all things are forms of Fire, which change constantly. Believing that Fire is the primordial element occurs as early as in the Rigveda and is well treated philosophically in the Upanishadic texts. Chhandogya Upanishad (8) identifies water, earth, food and stars as forms of the sacrificial Fire. The early school of Buddhism shares two fundamental doctrines with Herakleitos. One is that Agni (Fire) is the primary element, and the other is that all things are Kshanbhangu (short-lived and would pass away). Fire is very prominent in Buddhism. Buddha, like Herakleitos, considered Fire to represent his metaphysical principle of becoming as it is the most mutable of the elements. Buddha compares the existence of beings to the candle flame that is renewed every instant. Western scholars recognise that Thales of the Ionian school was not only the first philosopher but also the first nature scientist in human history. He had given a fresh perspective by omitting the gods from his account of the origin of nature and tried to explore a natural explanation of how all things came into Being. The Indians, on the other hand, were said to have little interest in science because they were more interested in spiritual problems. This Eurocentric view can be well rejected on the basis of Indian texts. Chattopadhyaya writes that in the same Upanishadic texts that speak of Brahman or Atman as the ultimate Reality, one can also find the earliest scientific thought. According to him, it was Uddalaka Aruni of Pancala and not Thales of Miletos who could be recognised as the first nature scientist. Uddalaka Aruni, who might have lived in the 8th or 7th century B.C., proposed, while forwarding his views on the evolution of everything in nature, that it originates from the primaeval Being or sat with a motion inherent or dynamism in it. The most important thing about this procedure is that practically at every step of this sketch, he used empirical data rejected by the priestly class. Like the matter philosophers, Aruni-Uddalaka also tries to establish scientifically a series of natural stages of development explaining how all realities have come out of being. According to him, the first Being produced heat (Tejas). Then heat produced water. Then, out of water came Anna (food) in its ordinary sense, but here, probably including all solid matter. From heat, water and food, everything in the universe arises, including men and the mind. Other sixth-century Greek thinkers had adopted a different approach. They did not consider the nature of things in a particular

substance. Pythagoras (c.580-c.507 B.C.) and his followers had found the nature of the things in mathematical relationships.

All pre-Socratic Greek philosophers were struggling with the problem of one and many. On one hand, while the idea was that the world is made of different things, on the other hand, the belief was that there is one unifying force behind all this diversity. The alternative to this thought was to find a single source of explanation for all that exists, whether it is mathematical relations, Fire, or water. Pluralism was an alternative strategy in philosophy, which refers to the view that many kinds of things exist. Rather than reducing all things to a single force or substance, why not instead reduce everything to a few fundamental forces or substances? This approach was taken by two pre-Socratic philosophers, Empedocles and Anaxagoras. According to Empedocles, four elements- Water, Fire, Air, and Earth were fundamental, and the forces of love and strife organised them.

3. Mystic Philosophers: Greeks and Indians

The religious mystics of the Pythagorean school of thought also believed in the transmigration and immortality of the soul. There is a distinct tradition of Orphism, Pythagoras and Plato in Greek thought in which, like the Hindu mysticism and the Upanishadic thought, we have a change from the materialistic to the metaphysical, from the mundane to the innate. Reality can not be perceived, but it is something beyond it in Pythagoreanism. The soul exists freely, and it is the true Reality in itself. The identity of the soul with the creator, the rebirth based on Karma, the Pythagorean doctrine of five elements, vegetarianism and mystical speculation, etc., all appear to be completely Indian. Mention may also be made of the theorem of Pythagoras, which also occurs in an earlier Sanskrit text, Sulva-sutra. Orpheus of Thrace, who is said to be the founder of a religious movement, had propounded similar doctrines before Pythagoras. He laid down his doctrines in poetic texts, the central part of which is lost. Our knowledge of the Orphism depends on late sources. Orphism and Indian religious practices have many similarities. Just as the Brahmins propagated the idea that a man can achieve the union with God with ascetic practices and abstinence and not just by drinking Soma rasa. Similarly, Orpheus, too, substituted asceticism for drunkenness to purify the old Dionysiac religion. Orpheus aimed for the liberation of the soul from the bodily chains, and by asceticism, this was achievable --but to achieve the last freedom, a man has to pass through many lives. Though this was the predominant view of the Upanishads, this view was not found in Greek religious practice of any age. Even the metaphors in Orphism are Hindu and Buddhist-- the Upanishadic wheel of life appears as the "sorrowful weary wheel" of Orpheus.

The Orphic abstinence includes friendliness to all creatures, avoidance of eating meat, fish, and animal sacrifices, metempsychosis, and non-injury (Ahimsa). The cosmogony, as depicted by Orpheus, is totally different from Homer and Hesiod. It proposed the origin of the world from a World-Egg, just like the Vedas. It has also been emphasised that the soul takes a journey after death to reach its final destination.

This belief in metempsychosis also occurs in Empedocles. He talked about the "fall of men" and also stated about the rebirth of the soul as an animal or a plant, a girl or a boy.

The asceticism was pointed out as the way to gain the original bliss. Meditation was suggested as the best way to attain supernatural powers and find out the ultimate Truth. The Hindu belief in reincarnation and Moksha are counterpart thoughts to Empedocles' view of gaining divinity by the soul in the end. A close comparative analysis of the Nyaya, Vaishesika and Samkhya systems of Indian philosophy and the fragments of Empedocles reveals striking similarities.

There is no trace of reincarnation and self-knowledge in the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Judiac and Iranian cultures. On the other hand, all the Orphic and Pythagorean elements cited here are found in the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions. The name Orpheus itself is cognate with the Vedic Ribhus, the three brothers who, after their miraculous works, became gods in the mansion of the sun god. The name Pythagoras is also said to have been derived from Petha-guru, which means father teacher in Sanskrit. Pythagoras might owe the development of his ideas to Orpheus, but to whom Orpheus owes. Specific analogies in the doctrine of metempsychosis suggest that the origin of this philosophical thought is from India rather than being originated from Greece. The theory of Karma, or a relationship between present birth and previous birth, is found only in Greece and India. This idea was propagated in Greece by the philosophers like Pythagoras, Empedocles, Orpheus and Pherecydes. However, it was not recognised by any source before Plato. This doctrine was not very popular in ancient Greece, whereas in Indian thought, it is undoubtedly a prominent concept. Though ancient Greeks were well aware that Pythagorean philosophy was not alien to their land, they were not sure where this theory came from in Greece. India was recognised as the source of orphism and pythagorism after Alexander met Gymnosophists, who attested that India was a land of philosophers. Before this happened, Egypt was being considered as a source of these thoughts.

4. Development of Monistic Ideal: Parmenides and Vedanta Parmenides (c.515-450B.C.), a native of the Greek city of Elea in Southern Italy, represents the culmination of the monist

tendency which was developing in early Greek philosophy. He stands in the same relation to his predecessors as does the Vedanta philosophy to the Upanishads. Reality is one, eternal and unchanging, asserted Parmenides. The ultimate principle is pure Being, which has no quality except existence. It is uncreated and indestructible. It is made known through the mind and through reason and not through experiences, as senses may be misleading. The Being, as described by Parmenides, is practically identical to the Self (Atman), which lies at the heart of the Advaita doctrine. So close is this identity that the two ontologies, the Greek and the Indian, can, for all practical purposes, be treated as one. Parmenides' theory on Reality coincides with Sankara's exposition on Brahman and Maya. Plato derives a lot of his monistic ideals from Parmenides. The Eleatic-Vedantic ideology is key to healing many ills which beset our age.¹⁰

5. Atomism: Greece and India The beginning of early philosophical atomism in Greece and India may be considered a significant manifestation of proto-scientific thinking, and perhaps it was one of the most significant attempts of the early rational thinkers to solve the problem of one and many.

It was the Democritus (c. 460-370 B.C.) from the Greek mainland who renewed the matter philosophers' concern and reaffirmed their confidence in knowledge derived from sense perception. His idea of the universe consisted of two basic realities: an infinite number of atoms and space, which are imperceptible, eternal and indivisible. The movement of these atoms takes place in a void, and all things consisting of atoms and combinations of atoms are the primary reasons for changes in nature. It is interesting to find a similarity between the atomism of Kanada, the founder of the Vaishesika System and Democritus. In both Indian and Greek theories, we find the emergence of the universe as a result of the combination of atoms. The anu-s or atoms of Vaishesika are made of one of the four basic elements of the universe: Earth, Water, Fire or Wind, or are combinations of two, three or all four of them. In Democritus, the atoms of different shapes collide accidentally with one another in a mechanical manner, and no cosmic law or intelligent power governs this action. On the other hand, in Vaishesika, the will of the Supreme Being reigns in the action of atoms in accordance with the law of the unseen (first). Furthermore, whereas the Democritus explains the formation of everything with atoms, including the souls and bodies of the immortal divine beings, the Vaishesika philosophy explains only the non-eternal part of the material world with its atomic theory. Substances like time, space, akasa, mind, and soul are not in their ambit. Unlike Democritus, the Jains believed that all atoms (anu) were identical and that differences in the character of the elements were

due to the manner in which the atoms were combined. On the types of atoms most of the Indian schools believed that there were as many types of atoms as there were elements. Some Buddhists developed the idea of the atom as the minutest possible duration of time, coming into being and vanishing almost in an instant, only to be succeeded by another atom caused by the first. Thus, the atom of Buddhism, according to Basham, in some measure resembles the quantum of Planck¹¹. Indian and Greek atomism were certainly independent of each other. Pakudha Katyayana, who was an older contemporary of Buddha, was the first to teach atomism in India and was, therefore, earlier than Democritus. 6. Plato & Indian Philosophy The idea of the existence of rights and justice, as Socrates taught universal standards, arrived after a long thought process. His dictum that 'knowledge is power' is analogous to the Vedic dictum or 'Mahavakya Pragnyanam Brahman'. Plato emphasised the existence of a higher world of Reality, which was independent of the world of senses that we experience every day. The origin of his ideas might be the insights from the teachings of Socrates and Parmenides. He said that Reality is known only through the mind; this higher Reality, he said, is the realm of Ideas or Forms. It is eternal, indestructible, absolute and unchanging. Truth resides in the World of Forms, not in the World of Senses or phenomena. In opposition to the World of Forms, the World of Phenomena, according to Plato, was unstable, transitory and imperfect. For example, the ordinary person who is confined to this world only understands beauty from observing beautiful worldly things only; the philosopher, on the other hand, goes beyond what he sees and tries to know with his mind the idea of true beauty. Similarly, the ordinary person lacks a true conception of justice or goodness; such knowledge is available only to the philosopher whose mind can go beyond worldly particulars to an ideal world beyond space and time. The Upanishads, too, like Plato, reject the World of Phenomena or sense perception as a source of valid information and stress the importance of thought and the need for reflection and contemplation. According to Plato, the senses lead men to a world of appearance, "to the shadows of the cave" (Republic), providing them with mere "Opinion" (doxa), while thought points the way to real knowledge (episteme). In the first part of the Theaetetus and the Republic, Plato's dialectic reveals the unfitness of empirical knowledge, and in the Kratylos, it elaborates on its incapacity to reach the "real" because it is compelled to search for it in the midst of constant change. A parallel view is held by the Upanishads, which points out the impossibility of the sense and the empirical knowledge accruing therefrom to reveal "true reality" because Brahman is where; "the eye does not go... nor speech nor mind" (Katha, 3). The senses pull men towards perishable, stop up appearances and do not penetrate the world of true existence.

Only the elevation of the soul brings man up to spheres of Truth and allows it to finally grasp it by inner experience rather than by an intellectual process. In Plato's manner, the Upanishads also acknowledge the two kinds of knowledge, the lower leading to appearance (Apara Vidya) and a higher (Para Vidya) leading to the higher knowledge Brahman. We read in the Mundaka Upanishad: "To him he said, there are two Vidyas (Knowledge) to be acquired, the higher 'Para' and the lower 'Apara', of these the lower comprises grammar, etymology meter and astrology, then there is a higher knowledge by which is realised the immutable". The resemblance between Plato's idea of the detached Philosopher king and Rajarishis (Philosopher kings) of the Upanishads; his three classes of the Republic and the Indian caste system; his conception of Nous (Mind) and the Demiurge and the Upanishadic notion of Jivatma and Parmatma; his idea of doxa (appearances) and the Hindu Maya; his three-part formulation of the soul and Sattva, Rajas and Tamas of Indian doctrine; and his doctrine of rebirth and immortality of the soul with the similar Indian ideas, are so striking that there seems to be some interaction between the two cultures. These ideas are so dominant in India that borrowing appears to be from here. Not only does Plato's ideas have similarities with those of Upanishadic doctrine, but his style of presenting the ideas in the form of tales and dialogues is also in the Upanishadic way. The myths and the poetic language serve as suitable instruments or vehicles for teaching at both places. The protagonist in most of Plato's dialogues is Socrates. There are more protagonists in the Upanishads- Aruni (Ch. Up.), Yagnavalkya (Brhad. Up.), Maitreya (Mait. Up.) and others. Even gods assume this role as the God of death, Yama (Katha Up), the God of all creation and so on. The dialectic method, which is the art of seeking knowledge through questions and answers, was used at both the places for philosophical enquiry and teaching. Poetic language, myths and similes occur in abundance in the Platonic dialogues and the Upanishadic texts.

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