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Alternative epistemologies in indigenous philosophy, and its contextualization in India

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the different avenues available in epistemological system building, and how these different avenues play out in the context of existing conditions and historical preconditions. It begins with a brief explication of what is understood by the terms "indigeneity" and "philosophy" to understand the conglomerate "indigenous philosophy". This is done to avoid any confusion regarding the fundamentals of the discourse. The paper, then, proceeds to offer various critiques that can be found in the Western canon regarding philosophy that did not originate from Europe, specifically, the critiques and their deficiencies have been pointed out. The paper, then, tries to make an argument for the need of an alternative epistemology based on more equitable representation in different fields of knowledge.

Keywords: Epistemology, Indigenous Philosophy, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality, Epistemic Violence

Introduction

The point of departure of the paper shall be with a problematization of the possibility of "Indigenous Philosophy". Subsequently, an inquiry into why it is necessary to explore Indigenous Philosophy, and what the significance of such an inquiry is. Having established the necessity of Indigenous Philosophy, the paper, then, proceeds to problematize the definition of "indigeneity". This is central to developing an "Indigenous Philosophy" and elucidate its tenability. Next, the second constituent term, "Philosophy", shall be assessed in order to further reinforce the possibility of an "Indigenous Philosophy". It is imperative to define what "philosophy" represents within the rubrics of "Indigenous Philosophy". The ambition of the paper is not to provide a definite and normative answer to what "Indigenous Philosophy" means. It, rather, aims to problematize it, and open up avenues for future discourse in the field in the quest for alternative epistemologies. Furthermore, the reading into the works of Latin American and African thought could possibly highlight how Indian thinkers can recalibrate their philosophical approach in order to resuscitate or create a sui generis framework to an Indigenous Indian Philosophy. Broadly speaking, the paper shall be limited to an investigation into the possibility of "Indigenous Philosophy" in India while drawing comparisons with the Latin American and African thought.

To begin with the explication of what is known as "indigenous philosophy", it can be broken down into the assessment of the two constitutive words, namely "indigenous" and "philosophy". The two concepts are highly contested and disputed by thinkers in the fields of philosophy, political studies, anthropology, and other allied fields.

Firstly, to lay groundwork for the necessity of an exploration into "Indigenous Philosophy", it is essential to question the possibility of an Indian Indigenous Philosophy. Primarily, this is par for the course when it comes to Indigenous Philosophy from any region. The primordial question is the possibility, since formidable thinkers from Europe have questioned its possibility. For instance, Hegel, in his "Lectures on the Philosophy of History" (1805-6), critiques Indian philosophy for being "oriental" and "static". Indian Philosophy, in his opinion, lacked the dynamism and development of Western philosophy, and the passive contemplation of the world was a characteristic of Indian Philosophy. He, further, points out that Indian philosophy was ahistorical and lacked a sense of progress.

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To quote, The religion and philosophy of the Indians have a wholly different character from those of the Greeks. The Indians are more speculative, more contemplative; the Greeks are more practical. The Indian passes his time in meditation and solitude, to which he is predisposed by the climate of his country, the stillness of its forests, and the influence of his own melancholy temperament. The Greek, on the other hand, lives in the open air, is engaged in all kinds of public business, and is always in motion. In general, we find that the Oriental spirit is passive; the Occidental, active. The former is conscious of his own being, the latter is not. The Orientals are sunk in contemplation; the Occidentals are ever striving for action [1].

Indian philosophy is not negated by Hegel, although there is a pointed paternalistic proclivity. The possibility of Indian Indigenous philosophy, therefore, is perceived as limited. Another sentence that further suggests such a sentiment is, The Indian has no sense of the objective world, and no consciousness of his own individuality. He is sunk in contemplation, and his consciousness is absorbed in the Infinite [2].

John Stuart Mill, the English philosopher, criticized Indian philosophy in his work "Utilitarianism" (1861) for the tendency to be excessively speculative and its detachment from practical issues. The problem, then, according to him, is that Indian philosophers remained preoccupied with abstract metaphysical questions and had the propensity to ignore urgent social and political issues of their time. These are but a few observations made by the Occidentals. The point of highlighting such critiques is not to stimulate a reactionary theory. It is, rather, to redirect the course of indigenous philosophy in India keeping in mind such critiques without undermining their cogency. This is exactly why exploring indigenous philosophy is important. Indigenous philosophy possesses the potentiality of responding to these critiques and building upon them an epistemological system which is emancipated from the inadequacies and dependencies. It is, precisely, the need for an alternative epistemology that warrants indigenous philosophy the primacy it lacks, or at least seems to lack.

The next question, then, that brews is about how indigenous philosophy can be assessed keeping the context of India in mind. Which brings the question of first having to undertake the tumultuous path of trying to define what "indigeneity" signifies. The concept of indigeneity evokes the spatio-temporal existence of a clan, tribe, people, or even thought. How far back must the debate go in order to etch out who/what is indigenous to a region. This is further complicated by the fact that geo-political developments of the past cannot be ignored to determine who/what is indigenous. One must ensure the delimitation of time and space when speaking of a community or people, and subsequently the thought that emanates. In the Indian context, the wide ranging philosophical schools of antiquity like Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Vedanta, Mimamsa, and Samkhya are understood as indigenous to the Indian subcontinent in the ancient period. The concept of indigeneity, however, is not a static one. As the Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano, points out that indigeneity can be defined as "a

cultural and historical identity that emerges from the encounter between indigenous peoples and colonial powers [3]". Quijano maintains that indigeneity is not a static category, but a dynamic one that is constantly shaped by ongoing struggles for social, political, and cultural recognition. Indeed, the definition of what is indigenous may change with the passage of time. Not in the sense that the ancient schools of Indian philosophy cease to be indigenous, rather due to the production of more philosophical discourses which are introduced over time. As any region that is enriched with a philosophical tradition as abundant as Indian philosophy, there is bound to be additions to the indigenous discourses on philosophy. This, then, leads to another dimension of how indigeneity of thought can be interpreted – which is the subject matter of the thought. More precisely, the question is "how can a thought be indigenous? What needs to be ruminated is whether it is the subject matter of the thought that makes it indigenous or the socio-political and temporal factors that define the indigeneity.

Moving on, the definition of "philosophy" is scrutinised. As basic and fundamental as it seems, this is a critical path to tread. As already alluded to earlier, the monopoly of what the definition of philosophy is has been accorded to the European thinkers spanning back to the Greeks. Aristotle defined philosophy as a study of the nature of reality, including the principles that underlie it and the causes that govern it. Plato defined philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom and the search for knowledge of the eternal and unchanging Forms that underlie the physical world. Kant defined philosophy as the investigation of the nature and limits of human knowledge, including the role of reason, experience, and intuition in shaping our understanding of the world. Embedded in these conceptions of philosophy, and the subsequent theories that were conceived through it, are certain biases and prejudices. For instance, Kant was a believer that non-white races were inferior to white Europeans. In his essay "Of the Different Races of Men," Kant argues that the African race is "far below" the white race in terms of intellectual and moral capacities [4]. Furthermore, it is also important to note that Kant held some sexist views about women and believed that they were naturally subordinate to men. He argued that women were not capable of the same level of rational thought as men and that their primary role was to be wives and mothers. Kant believed that European culture was superior to all other cultures and that non-European cultures were "uncivilized." He argued that non-European cultures needed to be "civilized" and "enlightened" by European culture. He also held heteronormative views about sexuality and believed that homosexuality was immoral and unnatural. Make no mistake, this is not a call for a boycott of the works of Kant or his gargantuan contributions to philosophy. It is, rather, a call to action for a more poised and balanced approach to philosophy and how philosophy is defined. The intent is to disillusion scholars of philosophy from the sacrosanct portrayal of Euro-centric philosophy or even epistemologies. However, the difficulty of defining philosophy does not end there. Academic philosophy, or rather what the Colombian-born philosopher, Eduardo Mendieta calls institutional or disciplinary study in the

¹ Hegel, The Philosophy of History (Adopted from Hegel's Lectures of 1830-1831).

² Ibid.

³ Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality."

⁴ Kant, Anthropology, History, and Education.

context of Latin American philosophy, is distinguished from other forms of philosophy. In his work, "Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates", he identifies philosophy in three distinctive subheadings. Needless to say, he has mentioned them in the context of Latin American philosophy. However, these subheadings which also serve as categories will be evaluated on its pertinence in the wider framework of indigenous philosophy. More accurately, whether they can be applied in the Indian philosophical setup. The first, the aforementioned, institutional or disciplinary study of philosophy. This is referring to philosophy as a discipline in the university. Mendieta refers to it as "a Fach, a faculty, a discipline enconced within the tree of knowledge, or the mapping of knowledges bequeathed to us by the French and German enlightenments^[5]." The next subhead is in response to the inability to "break through the stalemate on the question of the existence of Latin American philosophy^[6]". This is what he refers to as "genealogical" or "anarchical". He writes, This type of thinking is heterodox and heretical because it crosses all established and sacralized disciplinary borders between philosophy, sociology, political theory, cultural history, and the history of ideas, and because it suggests that the question "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is less important and insightful than a question that is meant to remind us of Michel Foucault: "What are the institutional conditions for the possibility of asking these questions, and in tandem, what are the effects of asking whether there is, or should be, a Latin American philosophy?" This new school of Latin American philosophy reflects as much the crises of Western philosophy as it does the maturation and internationalization of Latin American philosophical thought^[7].

The third and last group Mendieta identifies is that of what he calls the geo-political or world-historical. He writes, Like the genealogical and anarchical school, this school challenges the rigid disciplinary boundaries that have determined the ways in which the questions about the origins and purpose of Latin American philosophy get asked. But in contrast, it opts for a world-systems approach to the issue concerning the building blocks of knowledge. In an extremely provocative and generative fusion, thinkers in this tradition have brought together mid-century ideas on world history^[8].

The trends in Latin American philosophy as identified and summarised by Mendieta show a mostly belligerent disposition towards the Western philosophical systems as enshrined in institutional or disciplinary philosophy. It is noteworthy, however, that it is not an outright rejection of the European epistemological systems. It takes strides towards a Latin American centric approach in building epistemologies and philosophical systems.

It is worthwhile at this juncture to mention that Latin American thought developed in the aftermath of colonisation. One of the most influential thinkers in Latin American philosophy is the Argentine-Mexican philosopher, Enrique Dussel. He is well known for his works "Philosophy of Liberation" which is seminal to the field of liberation philosophy. He argues for the need of a critical analysis of social structures and power relations, particularly

in the context of colonialism and imperialism, and proposes a framework for understanding the concept of liberation as a process of freeing oneself from oppression and domination. In another one of his works "Ethics and Community", Dussel explores the relationship between ethics and community, arguing that ethics should be rooted in a commitment to social justice and the promotion of the rights and interests of marginalized communities. He also examines the ways in which various religious and philosophical traditions have contributed to the development of ethical principles. The watermark of his thought is a commitment to the promotion of social justice, human dignity, and the recognition of the rights and interests of marginalised communities. Additionally, another important figure in Latin American thought is the Argentine scholar, Walter Mignolo who is known for his contributions to the field of postcolonial studies and decolonial theory. He talks about the concept of "coloniality of knowledge" where he contends that modern Western knowledge has been shaped by colonialism and imperialism, and that this legacy continues to shape the ways in which knowledge is produced and distributed today. He critiques the notion of a universal, objective knowledge that is detached from its social and historical contexts, and instead emphasizes the need to recognize the diverse and plural nature of knowledge production. Mignolo also speaks of "epistemic disobedience^[9]" which involves challenging dominant forms of knowledge production and asserting alternative ways of knowing. He argues that this requires a willingness to question and challenge established authority and to embrace alternative forms of knowledge and understanding. Switching gears from Latin American philosophy, the contributions of African philosophy can be analysed. African philosophy has much in common with Latin American philosophy in terms of the themes and context in which it has been developed as will be seen. Introducing Paulin J. Hountondji, a philosopher from Benin in West Africa, at this juncture seems apt. His philosophy is deeply entrenched in the African intellectual tradition and his philosophy is a reflection to his commitment of using philosophy as a tool for social and political transformation. He is an advocate of a philosophical approach that draws from both African and Western traditions. It can be best seen in his critique of ethnophilosophy. For the uninitiated, ethnophilosophy refers to the idea that each ethnic group has its own distinct philosophy that is rooted in its unique cultural traditions. Hountondji argued that this view is problematic because it ignores the fact that philosophy is a universal human activity that transcends particular cultures. Yet again, he is also a postcolonial thinker. This can be best highlighted by his observations between the relationship of knowledge and power. He argues that knowledge is always situated within specific social and political contexts, and that it can be used to both empower and oppress people. Hountondji is particularly interested in the ways in which colonialism and neocolonialism have shaped the production and dissemination of knowledge in Africa. The next African thinker that will be briefly expounded is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan thinker. He deliberated mostly on the themes of language and culture where he placed an emphasis on the native languages in pedagogy in an attempt to decolonize

⁵ Mendieta, Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom."

the process of learning in schools. He is a vehement anti-colonial thinker who argues in favor of not only political independence, but believes that decolonisation involves a transformation of cultural and economic structures that perpetuate colonial power relations.

In Indian thought, thinkers like Ashis Nandy provide insight into the psychological and cultural effects of colonialism and postcolonialism on individuals and societies ^[10]. He points out that the legacy of colonialism continues to shape contemporary social and political dynamics in India and other postcolonial societies. He is critical of the rise of nationalism and identity politics in postcolonial societies. In his view, these movements often perpetuate the very forms of violence and exclusion that they seek to overcome. Nandy offers alternative visions of modernity that emphasize the importance of cultural diversity and traditions, and that challenge the dominant Western model of modernization. Moving on to another prominent Indian philosopher, K. C. Bhattacharya. In his 1921 essay "Svaraj in Ideas", Bhattacharya asserts that India needs to achieve "Svaraj in Ideas" before it can achieve political independence from British colonial rule ^[11]. He believes that India needs to develop its own intellectual and cultural identity and to break away from the dominant European ideas that have influenced Indian thought. Bhattacharya's essay is a call to Indian intellectuals to take responsibility for developing a distinctive Indian philosophy and to use this philosophy to guide the struggle for Indian independence. He believed that a strong and independent Indian intellectual tradition was necessary for India to achieve Swaraj, or self-rule, in all areas of life. The relevance of this essay has not diminished in the postcolonial era. In fact, there is a certain poignance of the work in postcolonial India. Furthermore, the novelty in the works of Daya Krishna cannot be ignored while talking about contemporary philosophers in India. His rejection of essentialism and emphasis on the importance of historical and cultural context in understanding philosophical ideas provides alternative avenues of approaching Indian philosophy ^[12]. In his work "The Nature of Philosophy, 1955", Daya Krishna explores the nature of philosophy and the role it plays in human life. He argues that philosophy is fundamentally a critical and reflective activity, and that it should be pursued with a spirit of intellectual humility and openness to new ideas ^[13].

As the keen listeners or readers may have identified, there is lack of emphasis on ancient systems of knowledge of all the three traditions - Indian, African and Latin American. This has been done intentionally in the interest of precision and brevity. It, in no way, is an indication of the lack of efficacy or validity of the ancient systems of knowledge. Contrary to that, the contemporary landscape of indigenous philosophy in the traditions are shaped by the undercurrents of the ancient schools of knowledge of their respective traditions. The objective is also to illustrate that indigeneity is not static and the contemporary thinkers that have been mentioned are no less indigenous than the ancient thinkers or schools of

thought. Therefore, demonstrating that indigeneity is, indeed, a dynamic concept.

With regards to the contextualization of indigenous philosophy in India- after having ascertained the definition of what it is to be indigenous and what kind of philosophy can be ascribed with such a label, the analysis can, then, proceed to a comparative examination of Indian thought juxtaposed with the African and Latin American thought. The three traditions were cherry picked owing to the similar colonial pasts they have shared, albeit with nuanced differences in the forms of colonisation. What can be referred to as "Contemporary Indigenous Philosophy", as opposed to "Ancient Indigenous Philosophy", provides an insight into the direction and a possible pathway into alternative epistemologies that are unfettered by colonial knowledge systems while not wholly discarding the literature and thought originating from Europe. The investigation into the possibility of indigenous philosophy, with a semantic focus on its constituent words, aspires to adumbrate vitality and potentiality of indigenous philosophy.

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¹⁰ Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*.

¹¹ Bhushan and Garfield, "K. C. Bhattacharyya, 'Svaraj in Ideas' (1928)."

¹² Krishna, *Indian Philosophy*.

¹³ Daya Krishna, *The Nature of Philosophy*.