

## Article

# Past Continuous or Present Perfect? Continuity and Change in Contemporary Indian Philosophy

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**Abstract:** Contemporary Indian philosophy is a distinct genre of philosophy that draws both on classical Indian philosophical sources and on Western materials, old and new. It is comparative philosophy without borders. In this paper, I attempt to show how contemporary Indian philosophy works through five instances from five of its protagonists: Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya (his new interpretation of the old rope-snake parable in his essay “Śaṅkara’s Doctrine of Maya”, 1925); Daya Krishna (I focus on the “moral monadism” that the theory of karma in his reading leads to, drawing on his book *Discussion and Debate in Indian Philosophy*, 2004); Ramchandra Gandhi (his commentary on the concept of Brahmacharya in correspondence with his grandfather, the Mahatma, in his essay “Brahmacharya”, 1981); Mukund Lath (on identity through—not despite—change, with classical Indian music, Rāga music, as his case-study, in his essay “Identity through Necessary Change”, 2003); and Rajendra Swaroop Bhatnagar (on suffering, in his paper “No Suffering if Human Beings Were Not Sensitive”, 2021). My aim is twofold. First, to introduce five contemporary Indian philosophers; and second, to raise the question of newness and philosophy. Is there anything new in philosophy, or is contemporary philosophy just a footnote—à la Whitehead—to the writings of great thinkers of the past? Is contemporary Indian philosophy, my protagonists included, just a series of footnotes to classical thinkers both in India and Europe? Footnotes to the Upaniṣads, Nāgārjuna, Dharmakīrti and Śaṅkara, as much as (let us not forget colonialism and Macaulay) to Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel? Footnotes can be creative and work almost as a parallel text, interpretive, critical, even subversive. However, my contention is that contemporary Indian philosophy (I leave it to others to plea for contemporary Western philosophy) is not a footnote, it is a text with agency of its own, validity of its own, power of its own. It is wholly and thoroughly a text worth reading. In this paper, I make an attempt to substantiate this claim through the philosophical mosaic I offer, in each instance highlighting both the continuity with classical sources and my protagonists’ courageous transgressions and innovations.

**Keywords:** contemporary Indian philosophy; Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya; Daya Krishna; Ramchandra Gandhi; Mukund Lath; Rajendra Swaroop Bhatnagar



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Contemporary Indian philosophy is a distinct genre (not just a historic period) of philosophy that draws both on classical Indian philosophical sources and Western materials, old and new. It is comparative philosophy without borders, if I may borrow this phrase from [Chakrabarti and Weber \(2015\)](#). In this paper, I attempt to show how contemporary Indian philosophy works, through five of its protagonists: Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya (his new interpretation of the old rope-snake parable in his essay “Śaṅkara’s Doctrine of Maya”, 1925); Daya Krishna (I will focus on the “moral monadism” that the theory of karma in his reading leads to, drawing on his book *Discussion and Debate in Indian Philosophy*, 2004); Ramchandra Gandhi (his commentary on the concept of Brahmacharya in correspondence with his grandfather, the famous Mahatma, in his essay “Brahmacharya” ([Gandhi 1981a](#))); Mukund Lath (on identity through—not despite—change, with classical Indian music, Rāga music, as his case-study, in his essay “Identity through Necessary Change”, 2003); and finally, Rajendra Swaroop Bhatnagar (on suffering, a crucial concept in the present COVID-19 days, in his paper “No Suffering if Human Beings Were Not Sensitive”, ([Bhatnagar 2021](#))).

My aim is twofold. First, to introduce five contemporary Indian philosophers, whose names the readers might have heard, but whose work I am not sure that the readers are acquainted with; and second, to raise the question of newness in philosophy. Is there anything new in philosophy, or is contemporary philosophy just a footnote—à la Whitehead—to the writings of the great minds of the past? Whitehead ([1929] 1979) famously wrote that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato”. Are we to assume, then, that contemporary Indian philosophy, my protagonists included, is just a series of footnotes to classical thinkers both in India and Europe? Footnotes to the Upaniṣads, Nāgārjuna, Dharmakīrti and Śaṅkara, as much as (let us not forget the colonialism and Macaulay) to Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel?

Footnotes are not without merit. Shari Benstock reminds us that “inherently marginal [ . . . ] footnotes reflect on the text, engage in a dialogue with it, and often perform an interpretive and critical act of it” (Benstock 1983, p. 204). I agree that wisdom often comes from the margins, and that footnotes can be creative, and work as an almost parallel text—interpretive and critical. I further believe that the borderline between center and periphery, mainstream and fringe, text and footnote, should be drawn with a gentle touch rather than set in stone. However, my present claim is that contemporary Indian philosophy (I leave it to others to plea for contemporary Western philosophy) is not a footnote, it is a text with agency of its own, validity of its own and power of its own. It is wholly and thoroughly a text worth reading, and it is not written at the bottom (of the cultural or civilizational page as a footnote), but at the very top. I will try to substantiate this claim through the philosophical mosaic I offer here, underscoring for each of my protagonists both continuity and change; continuity with classical sources as much as critique, transgression, and experiments in new directions.

In the winter of 2016, during a seminar on the philosophy of Daya Krishna at the University of Delhi, the question about newness in philosophy came up. In reply, one of the participants, Hari Shankar Prasad—a classical thinker—passionately argued:

Alu Ghobi is Alu Ghobi. Even if you change the masalas (the spices), it remains potatoes with cauliflower. Nothing more, nothing less.

Nothing new, then, according to Prasad, in cooking and philosophy. His culinary illustration remained with me. I am sure that no chef would agree with this statement, but the question about newness in philosophy is ever-relevant. Daya Krishna, one of the five thinkers that I will discuss shortly, strongly believed in the possibility of newness. The illustration used by him when he speaks of philosophical newness is from another department of the culinary field, the department of alcoholic beverages. Dry Martini, Daya Krishna writes in his paper “Thinking Creatively about the Creative Act” (Daya Krishna 1999) is the result of a mixture of Gin and Dry Vermouth; a potent mixture that creates “a very strong drink”. Consequently, Daya Krishna speaks of “a sudden explosion of new meaning” that a mixture of concepts can bring about (Daya Krishna et al. 2011, p. 43). It is implied here that a good philosophical argument is as intoxicating as the best of cocktails.

Five thinkers, then, five philosophical innovators, five instances of continuity and change in contemporary Indian philosophy:

Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya (K.C. Bhattacharyya, KCB, 1875–1949):

KCB, considered by many as “the father” of contemporary Indian philosophy, offers a new reading, a fresh reading, a different reading of classical Indian texts (from Śaṅkara, the 7th or 8th century exponent of Advaita Vedānta to Sāṃkhya and Yoga sources) and at the same time he is a unique commentator of Kant and Hegel. His writings can be classified into three rubrics: the first rubric includes “Svarāj in Ideas” (“freedom/independence in the realm of ideas”), a manifesto of decolonization at the level of thinking, originally delivered as a lecture at the Hooghly College in the late 1920s. Here, he warns his readers about the dangers of “cultural subjection”, in which “an alien culture possesses one like a ghost”. He further speaks of assimilated Western ideas “fixed in language [i.e.,

English]”, which induce “certain habits of soulless thinking which appear like real thinking [ . . . ] shadow mind that functions like a real mind, except in the matter of genuine creativeness” (Bhattacharyya [1954] 1984, pp. 384–85).

KCB corresponds in “Svarāj in Ideas” with M.K. Gandhi’s essay “Hind Swaraj” (1909). In his Journal *Young India*, Gandhi returns (in his case, an “eternal return”) to the concept of swaraj and explains:

I want to write many new things, but they must all be written on the Indian slate. (Gandhi 1924)

But what is, or where is this “Indian slate”? What does it mean for Gandhi, and for KCB after Gandhi? Surely it is not a return, a nostalgic return to classical sources, to the past. Gandhi and KCB strived for something new. Pastness cannot be the newness that KCB and contemporary Indian philosophy after him are in search of. I cannot delve here into the question of Indian-ness, or what is Indian in Indian philosophy, or into the difference—that Bhagat Oinam points out in a recent article (Oinam 2018)—between Indian philosophy and philosophy in India.

KCB’s oeuvre, as I suggested above, is comprised of three sections or rubrics: the first rubric, which includes his essay “Svarāj in Ideas” deals with politics, with decolonization. The second rubric includes his philosophical reflection on classical Indian and on modern European philosophical texts. At the Indian end of the scale, KCB writes on Advaita-Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Pātañjala-yoga, Jainism and the Rasa theory of aesthetics. At the Western end, he offers an analysis of Kant and Hegel. The third rubric includes his independent essays (in correspondence with the abovementioned texts, thinkers and traditions of thinking), namely the quartet of “The Place of the Indefinite in Logic” (1916), “The Subject as Freedom” (1930), “The Concept of the Absolute and its Alternative Forms” (1934), and “The Concept of Philosophy” (1936). However, all three rubrics interface. KCB reads classical Indian philosophy with Kant and Hegel in mind, and Hegel and Kant with Indian philosophy in mind. The striving for free thinking resonates throughout.

Newness and creativity in KCB’s work: in a sense, there is something new in KCB’s entire method of philosophizing and his distinct aphoristic, sūtra-like style of writing. Gopinath Bhattacharyya, KCB’s son and the editor of his collected works, writes almost apologetically in his editor’s introduction:

Much of what KCB has said of Vedānta, Sāṃkhya and Yoga is not to be found in the extant original literature on these subjects. It is an extension or a development in new directions [ . . . ]. It is the discovery of new potentialities (Bhattacharyya 2008, p. xix).

He is right, besides the apologetic overtone. Development in new directions and discovery of new potentialities is what KCB aimed for. Here is an example of KCB’s philosophical newness, taken from his essay “Śaṅkara’s Doctrine of Māyā”, which offers a novel analysis of the old snake-rope parable, often utilized in the Advaita-Vedānta tradition. In his analysis of this famous parable, KCB focuses on what he refers to as the “the third stage of the snake.” In the previous, obvious, referred-to-time-and-again two stages, the snake is perceived (in twilight if you wish) first as “real” and then as “unreal”, namely first as a snake and then as a rope; but what happens next? For Śaṅkara (see his *Brahmasūtra-Bhāṣya* 1.4.6, Thibaut 1994, Part I, p. 251) there is no “next”. When you realize that the snake is in fact a rope, this is the moment of redemption. Your anxiety is over, as is your conceptual error (avidyā), having mistaken the rope for a snake (namely the absolute called Brahman for the limited and limiting phenomenal existence). However, KCB begs to differ. According to him, “though corrected, the snake is not forgotten.” Writing in the Advaitic framework, as the title of his paper indicates, KCB uses the third stage of the snake, in which it neither (or no longer) “exists” nor “does not exist” to rethink Śaṅkara’s notion of māyā (pertaining to the “illusoriness” of phenomenal existence). He writes:

The indescribable should be nought, but is still given in absolute mockery of thought. It marks, in a sense, the frontier between thought and faith, being the

given limit of thought on the one hand and the promise of the annulment of given-ness on the other. (Bhattacharyya 2008, p. 99)

This is to say that despite the “correction” of the snake in the second stage (correction from snake to rope), the snake is still felt (“felt to be given”, KCB writes), responded to, and in a sense (“in absolute mockery of thought”) even perceived. Moreover, following the encounter with the snake (which, in effect, was always a rope), the protagonist of the parable moves on, carrying the snake within him. The snake is imprinted in his consciousness as a *samskāra*, “karmic scar”. As such, it has the potentiality to be awakened whenever the protagonist sees a coiled “something” before him again. KCB’s real problem is the human mechanism owing to which one “produces” snakes (in the Advaitic formulation) and is inclined to be bitten by them (in the “family resembling” scorpion-snake parable expounded in *Yogasūtra-bhāṣya* 2.15, Aranya 2012, pp. 143–49). KCB’s reading of the rope-snake parable is creative in the sense that it shifts the spotlight from the “second stage of the snake,” conventionally taken as the final stage, to a new, third stage.<sup>1</sup> He thus extends the boundaries of the parable, using it as a potent tool for discussing what he sees as the crux of the matter, namely “the hidden subjective defect through which the snake is still given”, even after its “correction” in the second stage (Bhattacharyya 2008, p. 102). KCB’s move is creative to the extent that after reading his analysis, one can no longer be satisfied with the two-stage analysis of the parable. Perhaps this is one of the features of something new and creative: that like the right piece of a jigsaw puzzle, it fits the broader picture so well that one can no longer do without it, and feels that it must have been here all along.

Daya Krishna (1924–2007): again, it is not easy to choose just a single instance of newness in Daya Krishna. His reading of classical Indian sources is so original that I always suspected that there was some *jādū*, magic, in his *chashmā*, his glasses, which enabled him to see things differently. Take for instance his paper “*Adhyāsa: A Non-Advaitic Beginning in Śaṅkara’s Vedānta*” (Daya Krishna 1983). Here he reads Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtra-Bhāṣya*, and is puzzled by the very first sentence of Śaṅkara’s introduction, his famous *Adhyāsa-Bhāṣya*. In this opening sentence, as every student of classical Indian philosophy knows, Śaṅkara states:

The object (*viśaya*) and the subject (*viśayin*), manifested respectively in the ideas of “you” and “I” (*yuṣmat* and *asmat-pratyaya*), are different from one another like darkness and light, and should not be identified with one another. (Thibaut 1994, Part I, p. 3, also see Bansidhar Bhatt 1978)

Daya Krishna is surprised by Śaṅkara’s definition of *adhyāsa*, the initial epistemological error which determines our gaze and imprisons us in the *vyāvahārika*-phenomenal existence, as the mistaken identification of “you” and “I”. From an Advaitic, non-dualistic perspective, Daya Krishna thinks out loud, the error should be the other way around. For the Advaitin, and Śaṅkara is supposed to be the champion of Advaita, anything which diverts from the equation “I am Thou”—as Daya Krishna’s contemporary Ramchandra Gandhi ([1984] 2011) titled his Magnum Opus—is an error. Why and how, then, Daya Krishna wonders, does Śaṅkara choose to open the introduction of his commentary with a formulation of *adhyāsa* which is compatible with the dualistic position of his rivals from the *Sāṃkhya* school of thought, for whom the epistemological and existential error (*adhyāsa*) would be not to differentiate (for Śaṅkara the error is supposed to be this very differentiation) between “you” and “I”, or more precisely in *Sāṃkhya* terms, between the self—who transcends everything worldly—and everything else (everything worldly), including body and mind? Daya Krishna’s full discussion can be found in his paper “*Adhyāsa: A Non-Advaitic Beginning in Śaṅkara’s Vedānta*” (1983).<sup>2</sup>

I wish to push forward with another illustration of newness in Daya Krishna’s (1997) reading of classical Indian philosophy: In his essay “*Socio-Political Thought in Classical India*”, Daya Krishna suggests that every political theorist should be interested in the radically-individualistic implications of the theory of karma, which lead—he argues—to “moral monadism”. What is moral monadism, and how and why would the theory of

karma lead to moral monadism? According to the theory of karma, one's present position in the world is the causal result of one's actions in the past. In the same way, one's present actions will determine one's future position. It is implied, and this is Daya Krishna's concern, that the karma theory leaves no place for the other, for you. The other, at best, is instrumental to enable me to bring to fruition the karmic baggage that I carry along, and hopefully to acquire—owing to my attitude towards him or her—puṇya, merit, “good karma”, that will have positive future consequences. One can hardly effect the other. One's actions determine one's own karma and one's future born of this karma. Morally speaking, then, each to his own.

Daya Krishna does not hesitate to reveal a flaw in one of the foremost assets of the Indian culture—the theory of karma. But this is not all. How does this “moral monadism”, Daya Krishna further wonders, fit with the entire procedure of the Vedic yajña (sacrifice)? In the yajña, the yajamāna, the patron sponsor of the ritual, hires the services of a ṛtvika, a priest, to perform the ritual for him. The labor, the craft, the doing, are all the priest's, hence according to the theory of karma, the fruits should be his. However, surprisingly, it is the yajamāna who enjoys, or is supposed to enjoy the fruits of this action. The whole ritual is formed to enable him to reap the fruits.

In light of this alleged contradiction between karma and yajña, Daya Krishna appeals to an ensemble of pandits (classicists) of the Mīmāṃsā tradition, to ask them if Jaimini, author of the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, “accepts the principle that whoever does the karma [the ritual, the action], its phala [fruit] goes to him only, [ . . . or] does Jaimini have a different theory of action?”

Daya Krishna is in search of sharability, both in karma and in yajña, but finds none. The pandits inform him that the yajamāna is the sole doer (kartā), hence the fruits belong solely to him. The priests who perform the ritual for him are mere assistants, or technicians, and are paid for their services. They do not share the fruits. Two of the pandits, N.S. Ramanuja Tatacharya and Sampat Narayana, suggest that the yajamāna and the priests are like a king and his soldiers. They fight for him—they explain—however the victory belongs to the king. Still, Daya Krishna is hardly convinced. Why can't the king share victory and kingdom with the soldiers?

In his paper “Collective Karmas” (1989), Y. Krishan attempts to develop the concept of collective karma. Like Daya Krishna, he is concerned with the monadic implications of the theory of karma. Krishan draws primarily on the Buddhist notion of anātman, which conveys interconnectivity at the level of selfhood. Since there is no “separate self”, but a network of relations, karma cannot be perceived here as belonging to any separate self. Krishan also draws on the writings of contemporary thinkers from Swami Vivekananda to Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo, for example, speaks (in *The Problem of Rebirth*) of the karma of a family, of the nation and of humankind as a whole, but at the same time insists that “what matters supremely is what I make of my heredity and not what my heredity makes of me” (Krishan 1989, p. 187). “The Hindus”, Krishan agrees with Daya Krishna, “firmly believed in the doctrine of personal responsibility of a man for his moral acts”, and moreover, “the concept of collective karma [which he develops here] is foreign to the Indian religious tradition, and in fact is a negation of the classical doctrine of karma” (Krishan 1989, pp. 189, 193). If Daya Krishna finds a flaw in the main Indian theory of action (the karma theory), and moreover compares and contrasts it with the other central Indian theory of action (the rationale behind the yajña, the sacrificial ritual), then Y. Krishan makes an attempt to solve the problem and to improve the old karma theory, thinking in the direction of collective karma.

Daya Krishna's full Saṃvād (dialogue) with the Mīmāṃsakas, the present-day descendants of Jaimini, can be found in his book *Discussion and Debate in Indian Philosophy* (Daya Krishna 2004, pp. 203–22). His sharp questions—moral monadism? A conflict between karma and yajña?—trigger a new discussion about the main theories of action in classical Indian philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Ramchandra Gandhi (1937–2007), Ramubhai as he used to be addressed by all, is the Mahatma’s grandson and commentator, and one of the most creative philosophers in India in the second half of the 20th century (a definition that fits all my protagonists, except for KCB who lived and wrote during the first half of this century). In a series of publications, such as his essay “On Meriting Death” (Gandhi 1981b) and his books *I am Thou* (1984) and *Svarāj* (Gandhi 2002), Ramubhai speaks of what he refers to as “life in the face of death”. The presence of death, according to him—from the *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad* to his grandfather’s fasts unto death, and finally his assassination—reveals a common human denominator, or equalizer, which he refers to as *advaita* (nonduality), or *ananyatā* (non-otherness). Both notions, according to him, convey a sense of deathlessness. Deathlessness not in the sense of “not dying” in the literal, physical sense. Everyone dies. But as the realization of that common denominator, the crux of humanism, which allows the human person “to merit” one’s death; but what does it mean to merit death?

Ramubhai’s reflection on death is closely related to the way his grandfather, the Mahatma, met his death on 30 January 1948. “It was *iccha mrityu*”, Tridip Suhrud explains,

a death that he had desired and willed. For months before that day, Gandhi had imagined this death: a violent death at the hands of an assassin, and at that moment his ability to face the bullets on his chest without any trace of hatred for the assassin, and to meet his Maker with the name of Rama on his lips. Such a death, he hoped, would show that he had been a true devotee of God as Truth, Satya-Narayan. (Suhrud 2013, p. 3)

To merit death, if I may try to decipher this somewhat enigmatic phrase (reminiscent of the enigma inherent in death), is to transform the “givenness” of death into *icchā*, i.e., to make it a matter of will. Suhrud implies that Gandhi prepared for his death as a final act of *ahiṃsā*, nonviolence. He prepared or rehearsed for his death most of his life, in the sense that he strived to meet violence with nonviolence, and practiced this rare approach in numerous occasions from South-Africa onwards. But here, face to face with his assassin, and face to face with death, it was the ultimate trial, his final “experiment with truth”. To see that common denominator, and to feel non-otherness even toward one’s own assassin.

I now wish to look into Ramubhai’s commentary on the concept and ideal of *Brahmacharya* in his paper “*Brahmacharya*”. For a full discussion of *Brahmacharya* in Ramubhai’s thought, one needs to first visit the Mahatma’s writings, for instance his two chapters on *Brahmacharya* in his famous autobiography. The Mahatma often explained the meaning of *brahmacharya* as he saw it, and shared his experience of practicing *Brahmacharya*. “*Brahmacharya*”, he suggested, “means control in thought, word and action, of all the senses at all times and in all places. The man or woman who observes such perfect *Brahmacharya* is totally free from disease and therefore he or she lives ever in the presence of God, is like God” (*Young India* 25.5.1924, CWMG vol. 28, pp. 22–23). *Brahmacharya* for Gandhi is a matter of self-restraint as an empowering, even emancipating act. Here I recall Patañjali of the *Yogasūtra* who writes in *sūtra* 2.38 that “when *Brahmacharya* is established, the practitioner acquires power” (*brahmacharya-pratiṣṭhāyāṃ vīrya-lābhaḥ*, Aranya 2012, p. 221).

Ramubhai opens his discussion of *Brahmacharya* with a reflection on Amrita Sher-Gil’s painting “*Brahmacharis*” (1937).<sup>4</sup> A central trajectory in his writings is his claim and belief that the ineffable, which he strived for (like the Mahatma), can only be reached if word and image are interlaced. He implies that the very situation of facing a painting in a gallery reveals the meaning of *Brahmacharya*. Watching the painting is an experience of emptification and transcendence. One’s consciousness is emptied of subjectivity, of “I and my”, as to allow the affect born of the engagement with the painting, with art, to take over. This engagement enables the appreciators of art to transcend their immediate circumstances. Ramubhai further implies that this is how *Brahmacharya* works. I would like to suggest that it was not just the title or the theme of Sher-Gil’s painting “*Brahmacharis*”, but her overall presence in painting and life, life as painting, which made it the perfect choice for Ramubhai. Her short life was turbulent and full of passion. Passion for art, for India

(having been born in Budapest to a Hungarian Jewish mother and a Sikh father), passion for the physical as much as for the metaphysical. For Ramubhai, passion is not the antonym of Brahmacharya. “Brahmacharis” features five Brahmacharis, “traditional pubescent Kerala boy-scholars”, as Ramubhai depicts them. One of them is illuminated, full of light. Two others touch him, and two younger boys complete the circle. Sher-Gil’s twin painting, “Bride’s Toilet” (also from 1937)—which Ramubhai need not mention, since the reference to the former evokes the latter—portrays five young women (pubescent Kerala girls, if you wish) in preparation for a wedding. One of them (the bride) is illuminated. Two others take part in the bridal activities, and two younger girls complete the circle. Illumination, or a sense of clarity, is for Ramubhai one side of the coin of Brahmacharya. The other side has to do with a sense of togetherness conveyed in both paintings. Brahmacharya for him stands not as usual for withdrawal and abstention, but quite the opposite: it is the paradigm of togetherness and engagement. A commentator of the Mahatma, Ramubhai suggests that sexual abstinence and fasting are secondary. Lucidity and togetherness come first. He identifies these features not just in the Mahatma’s writings on Brahmacharya, but in his life as a Brahmachari. Ramubhai is a commentator both of the Mahatma’s writings and of his life and being in the world as a parallel text, as interesting and significant as his writings. Ramubhai connects the Mahatma and Amrita Sher-Gil in order to decipher the meaning of Brahmacharya. Her paintings, and her impact in art and through art, complement the Mahatma’s interpretation of this notion in practice and theory. I would finally add that the interlacement of image and word in Ramubhai’s work, illustrated in his appeal to Sher-Gil’s paintings, finds its utmost expression in his last book, *Svarāj*, a dialogue with painter Tyeb Mehta through his paintings, again with the Mahatma (as the title implies) in mind.

From painting and philosophy in Ramubhai’s work to music and philosophy in Mukund Lath’s writings:

Mukund Lath (1937–2020) is an interdisciplinary thinker: historian of ideas, cultural theorist, musicologist, renowned translator between Sanskrit, Prakrit, Hindi, Bengali and English, and philosopher working on the scale between ethics and aesthetics. His theorist-self was complemented by practical engagements in the arts as a classical singer and painter. I cannot aspire to cover even a tiny bit of his enormous body of work in just a few paragraphs. From this vast intellectual body, I wish to mention his magnum opus *Dharma-Samakat* (Lath 2003), “Moral Dilemmas”, with the subtitle “*kiṃ karma kim akarmeti kavayo’py atra mohitāḥ*” (“What is action? What is inaction? Even the poets are puzzled about these questions”; *Bhagavadgītā* 4.16, my translation). According to Lath, it is the poet who is the most qualified, not to answer the pertinent questions raised in the quoted verse, but to articulate their unanswerability in a meaningful way.

Another central work of Lath is his book *Samgīt evam cintan* (Lath 1992, “Music and Thinking”), recapped in two essays in English: “The Aesthetics of Music” (Lath 2009) and “Thoughts on Svāra and Rasa: Music as Thinking/Thinking as Music” (Lath 2016). Here, Lath touches the confluence of thinking and music, which at a first glance might seem altogether different from one another. Both music and thinking, he suggests, have abstraction as their horizon. Thinking strives for sheer abstraction in the sphere of abhidhā, music in the complementing sphere of vyañjanā. “Abhidhā”, Lath explains, “is denotative, indicative meaning, and vyañjanā may be characterized as evocative [ . . . ] the significance of vyañjanā lies in a meaning which is addressed not to our intellect but to our emotive, felt consciousness” (Lath 2016, p. 94). Abstraction, then, in the realms of “pure intellect” and “pure feeling”, which are both part of who we are. The idea of meaning which is addressed not to the intellect but to what Lath refers to as “our emotive, felt consciousness” is intriguing. Lath calls attention to the experiential dimension that vyañjanā brings to the table (and Rāga music, through which he thinks, is sheer vyañjanā). It is the experience of self, self which is not rooted—Mr. Descartes—merely in the “I think”. Music has the capacity to reveal that “felt consciousness”, which is often hidden behind or between

the lines of our thinking consciousness. Lath establishes a dialogue between music and thinking. In the mirror of thinking, he suggests, music can become more reflective, or “thought like”; but he thinks of reflection which bypasses the thinking faculty. Not emotion as an object of thinking, but “a reflexively felt emotion” as he puts it, i.e., emotion that introspects itself through emotion. It is often believed, Lath further suggests, “that only thought can be self-reflexive” and that “reflexivity needs a word-based language”. The experience of music, he asserts, shows otherwise. “Arguments apart”, he writes, “it is not really difficult to realize the reflexive character of music more immediately. One has only to look at *ālāpa*” (Lath 2016, p. 101). *Ālāpa* is the overture of the *Rāga*, and for Lath, the most significant segment of the musical composition. However, a dialogue is a matter of reciprocity. Hence, Lath further maintains that in the mirror of music, thinking—which occurs through language—can rediscover its own *vyañjanā*—evocative—aspect. Since *vyañjanā* is inherent not merely in music or poetry (making poetry what it is, Lath suggests), “but also in ordinary, normal everyday—*vyāvahārika*—usage of language”. Music can work as a reminder that language is much more than its denotative aspect, far more than a practical builders’ language (if I may borrow Wittgenstein’s illustration).

There is plenty of novelty in this dialogue between music and thinking, which I visited only in brief. Nevertheless, I would like to visit yet another instance of newness in Lath’s work, developed in his essay “Identity through Necessary Change”. “Identity”, Lath writes here, “is usually understood as something which remains the same *despite* change”. His attempt is to explore an alternative to this convention. “There are identities”, he continues to write, “where difference is not contingent but *necessary* to identity. Identity in such cases is formed and maintained through a process of change. [ . . . ] This identity does not only accommodate but also invite change and plurality” (Lath 2018, p. 6). Lath’s case-study in his enquiry into “identity through necessary change” is again classical Indian music, *Rāga* music. “The *Rāga* pattern”, Lath explains,

is given and forms the basis of a free and open *ālāpa*, an improvised elaboration according to a set of rules which assume the pattern, but allow room for imagination. [ . . . ] Identity in a *rāga* cannot be restricted to a given pattern or even rules, since a good *ālāpa* reweaves them in its own way, and a great *ālāpa* can even transform them. (Lath 2018, p. 7)

But what is identity through (not despite) change? How can it be thought of meaningfully, if the usual overtones which accompany the notion of identity imply the very opposite? Or to put it differently, if pattern and rules do not determine the identity of a *Rāga*, what does? “To be true to a *rāga*”, Lath provides us with a clue,

is to be true to its *bhāva*. *Rāga-bhāva* is the term in use for the felt identity of a *rāga*. A *rāga* without *rāga-bhāva* is believed to be only the shadow of a *rāga*. *Rāga-bhāva* may be said to be the inner identity of the *Rāga*, an identity sought and created by musicians through *ālāpa*. This is why it has plural possibilities, since different musicians seek the *bhāva* of a *rāga* in different ways. (Lath 2018, p. 10)

Lath’s formulation of identity through necessary change is new and creative since it challenges the convention of identity as overcoming change. His case-study, *Rāga* music, is unique; but most interesting are the consequences of his thought experiment. Is our identity, the identity of each of us, human beings, different from the identity of a *Rāga*? Can we think of our own identity as created by change? Can we stop treating change as a threat? Can we accommodate the plural possibilities that Lath speaks of with reference to our identity, to my identity?

Rajendra Swaroop Bhatnagar (1933–2019):

My final protagonist is Rajendra Swaroop Bhatnagar (RSB), another member (along with Daya Krishna and Mukund Lath) of the Jaipur Experiment, a philosophical circle that had a substantial impact on philosophy in India/Indian philosophy in the 1980s, 1990s and shortly after the turn of the millennium. RSB

is the translator of Plato's *Republic* (*Politeia*) from the original ancient Greek into Hindi under the title *Nāgarikī* (Bhatnagar 2014). The Greek Polis, the famous city-state, resonates in the title that RSB chose for his translation. Like Daya Krishna, RSB is not interested in a spiritual-metaphysical "beyondness". His philosophical cuisine does not include Ātman, Brahman and Mokṣa. He is certainly interested in selfhood, collectivity and freedom, but not in the metaphysical or spiritual sense. He is a philosopher of the here and now, of the worldly, of the social. In this respect, Plato's text was a perfect fit. RSB dedicated the last decade of his writing-life to the concepts of violence and suffering, and the experience-and-reality that they point at. He taught us that there is no use in talking (and there is so much talk) about nonviolence, if one does not begin with what is, namely with violence. In his paper "No Suffering if Human Beings Were Not Sensitive" (published posthumously in 2021), RSB takes a cue from Patañjali of the *Yogasūtra* (YS), who writes in YS 2.15:

Owing to the suffering born of change, the suffering of the suffering [i.e., physical and mental suffering] and the suffering inherent in the saṃskāras [i.e., potential suffering stored in our karmic baggage], and owing to the [subterranean] operation of the guṇas [the activators of prakṛti, Matter, which create the phenomenal-objective world that we live in], all is suffering for the discerning.

(pariṇāma-tāpa-saṃskāra-duḥkhair guṇa-vṛtti-virodhāc ca duḥkham eva sarvaṃ vivekinaḥ, Aranya 2012, p. 143, my translation)<sup>5</sup>

It is implied here that for the vivekin, the discerning yogin, or practitioner of yoga, who can see things "as they are" both on and under the surface, "all is suffering". The others, less sensitive and totally blind to the forces bubbling under the surface, are less exposed. Is it preferable, then, not to see, or to look away?

RSB's clear-cut answer is No! For him, to be human is to be sensitive, and moreover, it is my suffering which enables me to see the other, to feel empathy to her or his suffering. Interestingly, in his commentary on YS 2.15, with reference to the phrase "all is suffering for the discerning", Vyāsa, Patañjali's Bhāṣya-kāra, compares the yogin to the eye, which is the most sensitive of organs. A falling cobweb, he suggests, hurts the eye, but is hardly felt by any other body part. In the same way, the yogin is sensitive enough to feel the suffering all around him.<sup>6</sup> RSB and Vyāsa are on the same page regarding sensitivity and suffering. The eye metaphor is strong, since the eye is not just sensitive, but also sees. For RSB, seeing is essentially a matter of seeing the other.

I now reach what I see as a significant instance of novelty in RSB's analysis. In the same paper ("No Suffering if Human Beings Were Not Sensitive"), RSB is critical of the fact that in the Indian philosophical discourse, suffering has become identified primarily with old age, sickness and death, owing to the Buddhist narrative (here the question about the Buddhist influence on the *Yogasūtra* lurks between the lines).<sup>7</sup> The Buddhist narrative, based on the alleged life-story of the Buddha, took over the discourse of suffering, or duḥkha, in the Indian context. "Will this evil (doṣa) affect me too?", prince Siddhārtha asks the royal charioteer when he sees an old man for the first time in his life (I quote from Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*, in Patrick Olivelle's translation, (Olivelle 2008, pp. 70–71)). On illness, he asks the charioteer, "is this an evil (doṣa again) peculiar to him [a sick person he sees], or is the danger of illness common to every living being?" (pp. 74–75). When he sees a dead body he asks: "is such the end that awaits every living being?" (pp. 80–81). Freedom (mokṣa) is projected in this narrative as release from the doṣas, i.e., the "evils" of old-age, illness and death. In the Buddhist narrative, the Buddha seeks a universal remedy for these doṣas, or types of suffering, and the particular people that the protagonist meets on his way are shifted from center to periphery. They are just a case-study, illustrating a broader problem that needs to be solved, namely human life with its inbuilt death sentence. However, RSB strives to shift his readers' attention back from the universal to the particular. He is not interested in general compassion to every sentient being. For him compassion,

in order to be compassion, needs a specific addressee, a specific human being that one reaches out to. Suffering for RSB is first and foremost the suffering of the other, suffering as a social disease with numerous symptoms, from poverty to racism. Social injustice and not illness, old-age and death, which he sees as natural features of being human, of who we are. Thinking of suffering through these features is for him just an example of our usual self-centered attitude. RSB aspires for a more socio-centered approach. He is hardly impressed by the hardships of prince Siddhārtha. He is more concerned with the struggle of migrant workers who pitch their tents—without electricity, running water, education for their children—two-hundred meters from his home in Mansarovar, at the outskirts of Jaipur.

### Conclusion: Change and Continuity

One of the main features of contemporary Indian philosophy is that often it is in dialogue with classical Indian sources. I chose five protagonists that besides plowing in Western fields (with Indian philosophy in mind, whether offering “Indian solutions to Western problems”, or “calibrating Western philosophy for India”, if I may borrow these two phrases from A. Raghuramaraju),<sup>8</sup> have closely read classical Indian sources. In their reading, they inject life into these classics: KCB to Śāṅkara, Daya Krishna again to Śāṅkara and to the theory of karma, Ramchandra Gandhi to an amalgam of classical texts explicating the ideal of Brahmacharya (and to the writings of the Mahatma), Mukund Lath to aesthetic theorists such as Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, and RSB to the Buddhist narrative of suffering, drawing for instance on Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita*. They inject life into these classical sources and use them in a contemporary discourse. This is the continuity aspect of their work; but there is also an Orphean quality in their gaze. It is not implausible that Orpheus looked back, despite Hades’s sharp warning—if I may divert from the conventional interpretation of this famous myth—not just out of love and longing, but since he wanted (or part of him wanted) to lose Eurydice forever. My protagonists are hardly nostalgic or romantic. They read tradition-texts with new eyes, and do not hesitate to challenge old, “accepted by all”, conventions. “I understand a text better”, Daya Krishna explains his reading method, “when I ask myself what this person [the author] is trying to do. I make that text my own [ . . . ] I get into his work, into his thought process [ . . . ] and carry it in a direction it was not taken before” (Daya Krishna 1999, p. 21). Gayatri Spivak, discussing her own way of reading, speaks of “locating the moment where the text teaches you how to turn it around and use it” (Paulson 2016). Daya Krishna, again, titles an essay which offers a new reading of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*, “The Undeciphered Text: Anomalies, Problems and Paradoxes in the *Yogasūtra*” (Daya Krishna 2006). So much has been written on the *Yogasūtra*, both traditionally and contemporarily, yet Daya Krishna treats it as “undeciphered”. It is this “undecipherability” which makes the text philosophically enticing. Daya Krishna is not interested in “the truth of yoga” (the title of a new book that reached me while writing these lines). He is interested in a dialogue with Patañjali, despite more than a thousand years between them. This act of contemporizing the past is a common feature of all my protagonists, each in their distinct way.

In closure, I wish to change direction. I argued for newness and creativity in contemporary Indian philosophy, and gave five examples of thinkers who continue and at the same time renew and change tradition-texts. A footnote to thinkers of the past? Alu Ghobi is Alu Ghobi? NO, with capital letters, I plead. At the end of the day, I wonder if my main question—what is new, is there anything new?—is not phrased too conservatively and facing “pastward” instead of “futureward”. Perhaps the real question is actually this: is there anything relevant in philosophy as it has been done so far? Don’t Plato and Yājñavalkya, Uddālaka, Śāṅkara, Descartes, Hegel and even Sri Aurobindo—all unique thinkers who contributed immensely and broadened the spectrum of thinking—belong to the museum of ideas, together with their beautiful but outdated ideas such as “truth”, “objectivity”, “mind” and of course “god”, “soul” and “Brahman”?

In a letter to his friend and colleague D.P. Chattopadhyaya, dated August 2006, Daya Krishna writes:

Philosophy as it has developed up till now has become irrelevant to the emerging situation where “engineered transformation” of all reality, including man himself, life in general, along with the exploration in space are questioning everything. The earth-centricity and bio-centricity of man have determined his thinking. In the realm of nuclear physics, new forms of matter are being created, with properties which question the old notions of matter, space, time and causality. In the field of economics, and to some extent of politics, the situation is even more alarming. The basic parameters on which the sciences of economics and sociology were based are in jeopardy, as the notions of land, labour and capital have gone a sea-change, as they are not there as something “given”, or as a constraint, but instead as something which can be overcome by human ingenuity and effort. This is the challenge to philosophers, as I see it. Whether we can come to terms with it in any meaningful way is difficult to say, but we must become aware of it, and try to deal with it, so that our thinking may be relevant to the incoming generation which increasingly finds all past knowledge irrelevant to their “living” concerns.<sup>9</sup>

Fifteen years have passed since these lines were written. Daya Krishna’s plea for new thinking for a new world is even more urgent than it was in 2006, and his invitation to philosophize without the security net of the “wonder that was” is still valid. Daya Krishna passed away in October 2007, just as he was starting to write an essay which aimed to illustrate the “philosophical re-start” that he envisions in his letter. The title of this unfinished essay is “Thinking without Things, Without Identity, without Non-Contradiction and Yet Thinking Still”.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Yogācāra Buddhism also offers a threefold analysis of the rope-snake parable. Here, this parable is utilized as an illustration of the “three natures” theory expounded in Vasubandhu’s *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*. In the first stage, one believes that he sees a snake. In the second stage, he realizes (“on a closer inspection”, as Gadjin M. Nagao, whom I draw on, puts it) that it is in fact a rope. In the third stage, one realizes that “the rope is also illusory and less than the final reality”. It is in fact made of fibers of hemp, and these fibers are made of the elements. According to the Yogācāra scheme, the snake is the “imagined nature”, the rope the “other-dependent nature” and the hemp or elements stand for the “consummated nature” (Nagao 1991, p. 67). Besides the three stages, this analysis is altogether different from KCB’s reading of the parable. He is of course not committed to the “three natures”. Moreover, if, for the Buddhists, it is a snake-rope-hemp parable, then for him it is a snake-snake-snake parable. It is the worldmaking (or snake-making) gaze which prevails despite “the correction” of the snake in the second stage, which is the focus of his philosophical attention.
- <sup>2</sup> Almost all of Daya Krishna’s writings both in English and Hindi (essays, books, recorded lectures), including this paper, are available online at “Daya Krishna: The Open Library”, an open-access library at [www.dayakrishna.org](http://www.dayakrishna.org) (accessed on 29 November 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> My present discussion of Daya Krishna and the “moral monadism” of the theory of karma is extracted from the chapter “Concepts and Actions: Daya Krishna and Social Philosophy” of my recent monograph *Daya Krishna and Twentieth-Century Indian Philosophy* (Raveh 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Nalini Bhushan and Jay Garfield underscore the significance of aesthetics in what they refer to as “Philosophy in the Indian Renaissance”. See “Indian Ways of Seeing: The Centrality of Aesthetics”, chapter 12 of their book *Minds Without Fear* (Bhushan and Garfield 2017). They suggest that the question of self-identity, of Indian-ness, of “authenticity”, at the heart of Indian philosophy under colonialism, is dealt with in art, with an open eye both to classical Indian forms of art and to European

influence (or “assimilations”, as KCB puts it in “Svarāj in Ideas”). Hence, the incentive to write on art philosophically. Moreover, the question of newness and creativity, even newness as creativity, that I discuss here, is pivotal in art at large and modern Indian art in particular. Furthermore, the transformational dimension of the aesthetic experience, with its sense of freedom (which transcends the boundaries of the atelier or the gallery and has social and political impact) is again common to modern Indian art and philosophy. Bhushan and Garfield focus on Indian philosophy under the British Raj, but their point—the centrality of aesthetics—is also relevant to the category of contemporary Indian philosophy, including Ramchandra Gandhi, who thinks, as the following paragraphs show, in dialogue with painting, and Mukund Lath who thinks through music.

- 5 In his recent book *The Yogasūtra of Patañjali: A New Introduction to the Buddhist Roots of the Yoga System*, Pradeep Gokhale shows that Patañjali borrows the three categories of suffering from the Buddhists. His pariṇāma-duḥkha, he explains, draws on the Buddhist viparināma-duḥkhatā; his tāpa-duḥkha is equivalent to the Buddhist duḥkha-duḥkhatā; and saṃskāra-duḥkha is the Buddhist phrase itself. According to Vasubandhu, Gokhale explains, the latter phrase “means the painful character of all composite things which is due to the very fact that they are composite things”. However, Vyāsa, Patañjali’s foremost commentator, “ignores the Buddhist technical sense of the word saṃskāra (composite thing or conditioned thing) completely and interprets the term as [karmic] impression” (Gokhale 2020, p. 79). This is part of Vyāsa’s grand-project, Gokhale suggests, of distancing Patañjali from the Buddhists and situating him on the “right side” of the philosophical map, namely the āstika side (the Buddhists and the Jains are on the other side, the nāstika, or allegedly heretic side). According to Gokhale, Vyāsa is pro-Sāṃkhyan, whereas Patañjali is closer to the Buddhists. “Vyāsa”, Gokhale asserts, “must have been aware of the Buddhist background [of the *Yogasūtra*], but he seems to have knowingly avoided acknowledging the Buddhist influence. He interprets the whole of the *Yogasūtra* as a Sāṃkhya text” (Gokhale 2020, p. 11).
- 6 Vyāsa’s eye metaphor, Gokhale further shows, is borrowed from Vasubandhu, even if the latter uses it with regard to saṃskāra-duḥkhatā alone, and Vyāsa to all three types of suffering (Gokhale 2020, p. 79).
- 7 Here, again, the readers are referred to Gokhale’s book which is all about Buddhist influence on Patañjali.
- 8 See the section “Indian Solutions to Western Problems” in A. Raghuramaraju’s book *Philosophy and India: Ancestors, Outsiders, and Predecessors* (Oxford University Press 2013), especially the first part of this section, titled “Advaita to Kant”, which focuses on KCB’s response (or Advaitic solution) to the issue of unknowability of the subject/self in Kant. See also Raghuramaraju’s book *Calibrating Western philosophy for India* (Routledge 2019).
- 9 I wish to thank Prof. Chattopadhyaya for his kind permission to quote from this letter.

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