

Chapter 7

PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS IN ANCIENT INDIA

1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Some of the pious Christians still believe in the immaculate conception of Virgin Mary. Our *Caraka-samhitā* would not accept this. As the example of inferring the past from the present, it mentions copulation from conception. But this will cut no ice with firm believers in scriptures.

Similar is the case of our philosophers who believe in the absolute truth of the world-denying philosophy of the *Upaniṣad-s*, which are supposed to be scriptures. Our Lokāyatas or Cārvākas would laugh at it. For them the very talk of scriptural truth is just fraud. A fraud is something more than an error: an error amounts to a fraud when an exploitative motive is added to it. From the Cārvāka viewpoint the philosophy of the Pure Spirit is a fraud because it has the function of exploiting the working masses by a handful of social parasites. In other words, the philosophy of Pure Spirit had a political function.

Any defence of the Cārvāka today should also include a defence of such a claim. That would surely be most contemptuously resented to. Philosophy is after all a search for truth. How at all can one talk of it having any political function? And for that matter how can one at all talk of politics hidden behind the philosophy of the Pure Spirit?

Instead of trying to answer the question ourselves, we may as well leave it to be answered by Rabindranath Tagore.

2. WHAT TAGORE ONCE OBSERVED

There once swarmed with a piercing clarity before the vision of Tagore the political function of precisely this philosophy of Pure Spirit.

It was 1932. Air travel then was not what it is today. The poet had an invitation from Persia, now Iran. Arrangements were made for his travel by air. This was his second experience of air travel, the earlier one having been but a hop from London to Paris.

En route to Persia, the poet with his party had a stopover at Baghdad. There he was told of the British Air Force carrying on bombing missions to the villages of some dissenting sheikhs.

Rabindranath wondered. For him, it was sheer murder and massacre. Yet how simple it was! How incredibly simple indeed it was for human beings to kill the fellow beings without bothering in the least to discriminate between the innocent and the guilty—between men, women and children. It was just a question of releasing some weapons from the high altitude, which, when reached, the reality of the material world faded out, and, along with it, everything that gave sense to such discriminations.

Apparently, there was something about the technique of attaining altitude that made such an inhuman act so simple for the human beings. Tagore pondered over the whole thing and wanted to understand it in terms of his own experience of air travel. This led him to review the technique of attaining altitude in another recognised form, namely that of the free flight of metaphysical speculation. Dramatically enough, the political function of some time-honoured philosophical views—specially those that undermined the reality of the world—leaped before his eyes.

We shall try to follow his train of thought, though inevitably missing the tremendous power of persuasion of his original writing in our rough English rendering of it.

Observed Tagore :

“As the air-craft took off and went on gaining altitude, the connection of the earth with our sense-organs became thin and thinner. It was eventually reduced to a connection with the visual sense alone, and that too without any immediacy about it. The reality of the earth with its infinite variety carried hitherto a sense of certainty about it. Henceforth, however, it became increasingly indistinct. That which had been a three-dimensional reality got reduced to a two-dimensional flat sketch. It is only within the well-defined context of space and time

that the varieties of creation retain their distinct individuality. With the loss of this context, creation tends towards dissolution. The earth looked involved in this process of dissolution. It was fading out and its claim to reality no longer pressing on our consciousness.

“In such a state of mind when one showers the weapons of annihilation, one may become terrible in mercilessness. One’s hands no longer suffer any hesitation caused by the assessment of the actual crime of those that one is about to kill. The assessment is not there, because the facts and figures on which it can be based just disappear. Man is by nature attached to the earth. With the elimination of its felt reality, that which sustains the attachment simply snaps.

“The philosophy preached by the Gītā is also some kind of an aircraft like this. It carried the compassionate mind of Arjuna to a dizzy height from where, when he looked below, there remained hardly any distinction between the killer and the killed, between the kin and the foe. There are in human arsenal many a weapon like this made of philosophical stuff. These serve the purpose of concealing the real. These are to be found among the theories of the imperialists, in sociology and in religion. Those on whom death is showered therefrom are left only with one consolation: na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre—‘It (the soul) is not slain when the body is slain’ ” (Pārasye—“In Persia”).

I am aware, of course, that the passage can be much better translated. But that will perhaps make its logic far more devastating. In any case, there is no getting away from a simple fact. Tagore saw in certain trends of philosophy the most sinister social function. He found murder and malevolence in these. For him these were but treasons to human conscience.

But that was only 1932. **One** wonders how he would have looked at the ideological wasteland of contemporary imperialism, trying its best to harness mindlessness to brutality. One wonders how he would have reacted to the actual use of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, specially when the political and military collapse of Japan was imminent, and there was no need for this wanton murder of innocent millions. One wonders what he would have said about the contemporary theories justifying the development of the biological and nuclear weapons of omnicide.

But let us not conjecture on what he could have said. There is enough for us to think and rethink about our philosophical heritage in what he actually said.

His observations just quoted proved highly disturbing for many of his contemporaries, inclusive of some of his closest associates. The main reason for this needs to be noted. The Sanskrit passage with a contemptuous satire on which Tagore concluded his observations—*na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre*—is generally known as occurring in the *Gītā*. This is true; but not the whole truth. In the *Gītā* itself, it is actually quoted from the *Katha Upaniṣad* where, in full, the passage reads:

“The wise one (*i.e.* the soul) is not born nor dies. This one has not come from anywhere, nor has it become anyone. Unborn, constant, eternal, primeval, this one is not slain when the body is slain. If the slayer think to slay
If the slain think himself slain,
Both these understand not.
This one slays not, nor is slain.”

The *Gītā* practically quotes this verbatim from the *Katha Upaniṣad*.

For any student of the *Upaniṣad*, the passage is indeed well-known. But Rabindranath was much more than an ordinary student of the *Upaniṣad*-s. From his early youth, he was literally saturated with *Upaniṣadic* studies. It will, therefore, be gratuitous to imagine that he could be, by any chance, unaware of what he was in fact indicting. He was indicting an *Upaniṣadic* idea as reoccurring in the *Gītā*.

To this remains to be added another simple point. Tagore was too well-trained in the *Upaniṣadic* thought to have possibly missed the question of philosophical coherence. He could not have possibly be assuming that the central idea, namely the soul is not slain when the body is slain, represented simply a stray thought loosely inserted into the *Upaniṣad*-s. The basic fact remains that this idea forms an integral part of the philosophy preached in this *Upaniṣad*: it is impossible to isolate the idea from the general philosophical view of which it is but an explication. An indictment of the idea means in short an indictment of the philosophy as such.

What, then, is this philosophy?

It is the philosophy of the Pure Spirit of Pure Soul exalted to the status of the ultimate reality, which, when done, the material world of men, women and children of flesh and blood is reduced to some kind of phantom of imagination. In this philosophy, the association of the soul or spirit with the mundane body, though temporary, is a product of sheer ignorance or of some kind of aberration of imagination. That is why, one of the names chosen for this philosophy is *Śārīraka*. The name tells its own story. It is derived from the word *śarīra* or the body, by adding to it the suffix *kan*, and this for the purpose of conveying a sense of contempt, degradation or degeneration. In brief, *Śārīraka* means the Pure Soul somehow debased by way of being imagined to dwell in the defiled body, temporarily though.

According to one school of traditional Indian philosophy, which continues to be very powerful even today, the view under consideration represents the quintessence of Upaniṣadic wisdom. That is why, Śaṅkara, the most renowned champion of this philosophy, chose for his *magnum opus* the title *Sārīraka-bhāṣya*. It is a commentary on a work (called the *Brahmasūtra* or *Vedāntasūtra*) intended to systematise the philosophy of the *Upaniṣad-s*.

I have mentioned all this to emphasise only one point. The idea, namely that the soul is not slain when the body is slain, is an inherent feature of a philosophy, in which the pure spirit transcending all change is the only reality.

Secondly, whether this is the only philosophy preached by the *Upaniṣad-s* may be an open question. But the fact is that this philosophy has a very important place in the *Upaniṣad-s*.

In the *Gītā*, the Lord God himself is made to preach the philosophy with a metaphor exquisite in its simplicity. The soul moves from one body to another in the way men cast off the tattered clothes in favour of fresh ones. It is, indeed, a beautiful way of saying that death and birth mean nothing for the soul. As a poet, Tagore was perhaps expected above all to admire the beauty of such a literary craft. However, when confronted with a situation in which humanism is openly debauched, the poet had apparently no patience for such aesthetic appreciation. He was appalled instead by the ugliness of thought hidden behind such literary beauty. He saw this ugliness being shared

in common by many a weapon in the ideological arsenal of the imperialists and by many a theory in sociology and religion.

And all these theories are based on some kind of a vanishing trick. The magician tilts the mirror and makes things vanish before your eyes. The metaphysician lures your thought to a dizzy height of speculation and makes the whole material world vanish before your consciousness. The reality of the material world, thus eliminated, gives the imperialists and others free scope for carrying out their own designs. The world-denying philosophy of pure spirit has thus a political function after all.

All this is saying something which a modern revolutionary or a modern materialist has to say, though he says this in his own way.

I need not be told, of course, that Rabindranath Tagore was neither a revolutionary nor a materialist in the modern sense. I have before me his collected works of over ten thousand pages, containing the most massive verdict against the tendency to make him pass as a modern revolutionary or materialist. On the contrary, he was from his early youth a profoundly religious person, with a decisive commitment to the philosophy of the *Upaniṣad*-s.

It is precisely because of this that his observations just quoted appear to be extra-ordinary—indeed extra-ordinarily important. Whether one likes it or not, one expects only the revolutionaries and materialists to talk like that. And, when they talk like that, they are easily accused of having no roots in genuine Indian tradition. But whatever view you may take of Tagore, you cannot conceivably accuse him of that.

Yet there is no getting away from the fact that this profoundly religious person—remembered not without reason as an apostle of Upaniṣadic wisdom—once came out with a train of thought that had almost the appearance of an indictment of his earlier convictions in the philosophy of Pure Spirit preached originally in the *Upaniṣad*-s and later reiterated in the *Gītā*.

When Rabindranath came out with the observations we have quoted, he was over seventy. He had not even a decade more to live. That makes the observations all the more remarkable. Ordinarily speaking, as one listens to the footsteps of death, one is inclined to seek consolation in the philosophy of the immortal soul, for which death is but a passing phenomenon.

But Rabindranath saw in this philosophy something different altogether.

It is not for me to speculate how those who specialise in Tagore studies would propose to reconcile all this with the rest of his life and teachings. This much I am aware that those who profess to evolve a monolithic **philosophy** characteristic of the god-intoxicated *gurudeva* of Santiniketan *āśrama*, generally speaking, prefer not to take note of the passage we have quoted. A blanket of silence is drawn over it, perhaps because of the feeling that it does not smoothly cohere with the poet's image they are pleased to project. Or could it be that the implications, pressed further, have consequences much too disastrous to any convenient mode of evading the social responsibility of the philosophers?

It is not the onus of the present discussion to suggest any way of effecting such coherence. Its purpose is not to discuss Rabindranath's philosophy. We have opened with the passage because of a different reason altogether. It may be argued that it reflects a rather rare mood of the poet. But to those who have cared to follow the train of his thoughts from *Letters from Russia* to *The Crisis in Civilization* the radical turn in his thoughts in the last phase of his life need not appear to be but a vagary in the poet's mood.

In any case, the point that I want to emphasise is that, apart from courage and clarity, the passage contains far more important clues to the students of Indian philosophy than is to be found in tons and tons of books written by scholars in India and abroad eulogising the philosophy of Pure Spirit—eulogies in which hair-splitting scholasticism is often freely mixed up with sheer *cliche*.

Tagore saw political function being served by some **time-honoured** philosophy of ancient India. That opens for us a vast field of new research. It is concerning the relation between politics and philosophy in our cultural heritage. In the present chapter, which has got to be brief, we have the scope only to touch a few aspects of this relation.

3. COROLLARIES OF THE OBSERVATION QUOTED

All this was a way of describing a weapon in the arsenal of the imperialists. Such weapons are there also in sociology and

religion, though made of philosophical stuff. Politics is thus not so aloof from philosophy as is often imagined. The example chosen here by Tagore has a great halo of scriptural sanction. It is Advaita Vedānta, proclaimed for centuries as containing the quintessence of the *Upaniṣad*-s and hence having the highest scriptural sanction. But it justifies murder and malevolence—the indiscriminate slaughter even of your own people. Such gross and gruesome politics apart, the philosophy has political justification even in our common life. You sow while somebody else is entitled to the harvest. The *śūdra*-s labour only to fatten the *dvija*-s. But why bother about such trivialities? There is after all only one Imperishable Spirit—neither one that sows nor the other that reaps, neither the starving *Śūdra* nor the *dvija* that fattens from his labour is outside the phantasy of your illusion. It is no wonder that the law-makers should find this—and only this philosophy—to their taste. It is no wonder that they should suggest the strongest measures against its opposite, namely the Lokāyata or Cārvāka. This philosophy, too, had its political function. Only that was a different one—the very opposite of what the law-makers so fondly approved of.

4. LAW-MAKERS AND PHILOSOPHERS

All this leads us to see a peculiarity of the Indian cultural situation, namely the intense interest taken by our law-makers in matters philosophical. Not being myself a student of law, it will be pretentious for me to try to generalise. I am not aware of how many law-makers of how many countries realised the importance of the ideological weapon for policing the state, i.e. over and above the well-known ones employing brute force. This much I know, however, that a number of statesmen and politicians in ancient Greece and Rome realised it. So also did some very eminent philosophers who wanted to assume also the role of the politicians. The most well-known example of the latter was Plato. In his *Republic* while discussing the problem of keeping the working masses under control, he recommended the free use of what he called “the beneficial falsehoods” or “noble lies”—“beneficial” or “noble” not because of their philosophical but simply because of their political expediency. It was for this reason that in his maturest work called *The Laws*, Plato admiringly looked back at the petrified culture of

ancient Egypt where successful propaganda of myths and legends, though without any philosophical worth, most admirably enabled the rulers to keep the masses under complete control. Another Greek statesman, Isocrates, a contemporary of Plato, was also quite outspoken about the use of superstitions for political purposes: the consciousness of the people, kept crippled under the spell of superstitions, was left with no alternative other than abject obedience to the social superiors or the ruling class. It was for the same reason that the sophisticated politician Polybius admired the Romans for using superstition as a veritable pillar of their political success.

Judging from this, we may easily see that the political function of philosophy was not anything new that Tagore talked of. It was realised by eminent thinkers from a considerable antiquity. What appears to be distinctive about Tagore's observation we have quoted is his very clear realisation that the first essential precondition for a philosophy to be politically efficacious is to wipe out from human consciousness the sense of the felt reality of the material world. The precondition, in short, is the removal of materialism. In so far as some philosophers do it on the strength of philosophical considerations their attempt is laudable. However, in order to feel fully ensured against materialism and also against any tendency that may directly or indirectly encourage the danger of the materialist outlook, the Indian law-makers proposed to enforce legal measures against it.

The resulting situation in our cultural heritage was a peculiar one. The law-makers were taking a lot of interest in matters philosophical. But the law-makers were law-makers and not philosophers. So the interest they showed in philosophy must have been extra-philosophical, or, to be more specific, bluntly political. Yet such has become the habit of our modern scholars that, far from realising the point, they often show the tendency of implicitly accepting the law-makers' dictates as basic features of the Indian philosophical situation.

5. CONFORMISTS (ĀSTIKA-S) AND NON-CONFORMISTS (NĀSTIKA-S)

Let us begin with an obvious example. Practically in all books written these days on our philosophical tradition we read that Indian philosophies are to be broadly classified under two heads.

namely *āstika* and *nāstika*. In common vocabulary the former means the theist, the latter atheist. We are reminded, however, that in our philosophical context, the words are supposed to have technical senses, namely “the orthodox” and “the heterodox”; or perhaps more strictly “the conformists” and “the non-conformists”. But conformism to what? In short, it is to the scriptural authority of the Vedas.

How did the words acquire these technical connotations? In matters of etymology, we naturally turn first to the grammatical tradition. But the result is frankly frustrating. The great grammarian Pāṇini as interpreted by the commentator Patañjali, and still later by Jayāditya, wants us to take the words to mean the believers and non-believers in the “other world”—heaven and hell. But this does not fit with the traditional classification of Indian philosophy. According to it, along with the Cārvākas, the Buddhists and Jainas—in spite of sharing belief in the other world—are to be viewed as *nāstika*-s or non-conformists. The conformism under consideration is evidently to something else. It is, as is smoothly assumed, to the scriptural authority to the Vedas. What then, is the source of this technical sense? The outstanding historian of Indian philosophy, S.N. Dasgupta, has boldly answered: “But we have the definition of *nāstika* in Manu’s own words as one who controverts the Vedic doctrine (*veda-nindaka*).” The implication obviously is that one accepting the scriptural authority of the Vedas is an *āstika* or conformist.

Who, then, was this Manu who flatly flouted the grammarians and gave new meanings to the words? There are fables, of course, of his having been a direct descendent of the Creator God. But in cold fact, he was none else than the most influential of the Indian law-makers. It is thus not flattering for us to note that without being a philologist he dictated terms to philology and without being a philosopher to philosophy. Is it not a worse shame that practically all the modern scholars accept all this without any question and stick to the classification of Indian philosophies as determined by these dictations?

6. PHILOSOPHY : LEGAL AND ILLEGAL

But Manu did not stop here. He further declared that of all philosophies the only pious—and hence also legally

sanctioned—one was that of the Pure Spirit being exclusive reality, inasmuch as it alone was sanctioned by the scriptures or Vedas. Whether this was in fact so—whether the Vedas did contain only this philosophy—is of course a different question. To an objective reader of the Vedas the answer to it cannot but be in the negative. But the law-maker was least bothered. To him the Veda was more of the nature of a political slogan than a strict body of codified texts. Besides the risk of everybody actually reading the Vedas was considerably eliminated by the further law enforced by them putting restrictions to the persons entitled to do it: the *Śūdra*-s and women were debarred from this privilege. As Karl Marx once sarcastically remarked that the Brahmins preserved the holiness of the Vedas by reserving for themselves the right to read these.

In any case for the political safety of the society considered ideal by them the law-makers realised that it was not enough to enforce on the people their basic behaviour pattern with the age-old provision of the police and prison; the task became comparatively easier if moreover was enforced a definite thinking pattern on them. For this purpose they decreed mainly two points. First, the Vedas alone embodied scriptural declarations, transgression of which was a punishable offence. Secondly, the Vedas declared the philosophy of Pure Spirit as the only one, hence any tendency to develop a counter-philosophy was a mark of heresy and hence had to be stopped.

Understandably, the materialist view was the first casualty. Stern legal measures were proclaimed against it in various ways. No less interesting, however, was their proposed measures against free thinking, or the branch of knowledge we call logic.

Why was this stricture against logic? Manu himself left nothing vague about it. For him, the proclivity to question the scriptures had one source and that was the technique of uninhibited reasoning or argumentation. As he put it, “because of the reliance on logic” one was led to question the absolute validity of the scriptures.

As a law-maker, Manu had no objection to logic in so far as it renounced any efficacy of its own and agreed to rationalise the scriptural faith. But the trouble with logic was that it had the inherent tendency not to remain within the strict bounds of faith and encouraged people to raise questions inconvenient

for the law-makers and thereby made people restless and even rebellious. Hence was the decree to hound them out, along with the heretics of course. As he decreed, "One must not even speak with the heretics (*nāstika-s*), the transgressors of caste discipline, the hypocrites, the logicians (*haituka-s*), the double-dealers."

7. THE PROPAGANDA MACHINERY

It is not necessary to quote here more passages from the legal literature condemning an unqualified enthusiasm for logic, an enthusiasm which was freely equated to abject heresy. But it is of some interest to note a peculiar problem faced by the law-makers in this connection. How were the toiling masses of the country to be accustomed to the extreme undesirability of an unqualified confidence in logic – in *hetu-śāstra*, *tarka-vidyā* or *ānvīkṣikī*? The problem was a formidable one, not only because these toiling masses were condemned to remain illiterate, but moreover because – according to the claims of law-makers themselves – their law codes (*dharmaśāstra*) had some kind of scriptural status (*smṛti*), while the *śūdra-s* were declared too polluted to have any right to study the scriptures. Thus the undesirability of logic or *hetu-śāstra* as such, if allowed to remain codified only in *smṛti-s*, could hardly be expected to have a direct impact on the minds of the masses. Yet the masses were somehow or other to be told about this, because it was primarily for the purpose of keeping them under control that the law-makers were so keen on the damnation of mere logic.

How, then, was this problem to be solved? It was solved by the redactors of the great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*, i.e. those through whose hands the epics passed before assuming their present forms.

The role of the Indian epics as media for mass-propaganda is already noted. By the recital of these particularly in the rural areas of the country, certain values – both theoretical and practical – were sought to be firmly fixed in the minds of the masses. "The lower classes were necessary as an audience and the heroic lays of ancient war drew them to the recitation. This made the epic a most convenient vehicle for any doctrine which the Brahmins wanted to insert." "The two epics of India... contain... numerous passages bearing on many topics of the

dharma-śāstra (i.e. law-codes) and were relied upon as authorities in medieval and later works." The *Mahābhārata* itself claimed that among the subjects on which it was an authority, the first place was that of the *dharma-śāstra*. Further, as Kane wants us to note, "the *Mahābhārata* had become, long before the seventh century A.D., a work for popular education, and was being recited before general audiences of men and women in India, as in the nineteenth century." The same is broadly true of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the impact of which on popular consciousness is perhaps greater.

With this point in mind, let us return to our main theme, namely the desirability or otherwise of any unqualified reliance on *hetu-śāstra* or *ānvīkṣikī*.

8. A PARABLE IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

In the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma narrated to Yudhiṣṭhira a parable known as that of Indra and Kāśyapa. Once upon a time, a merchant – arrogant of his immense wealth – hit with his chariot a Brahmin of the Kāśyapa clan. The latter thought that since there was no redress to such an abject injustice, life was not worth living at all. So he was about to commit suicide. To prevent him from doing this, Indra, the king of the gods, appeared before him in the disguise of a jackal and described at great length the miseries of being born as a low animal. His main point was that the great fortune of being born as a human being was too precious to be deliberately destroyed. But the jackal, as he says, was not always a jackal. In the previous birth, he was a human being – in fact a veritable Brahmin. But he was condemned to be reborn as a low animal because of a grave sin committed by him in his previous human existence. It was the sin of indulging exclusively in logical considerations, which led him even to the extent of questioning the scriptures. As the jackal put it :

("In the previous life) I was attached to logic, the technique of fruitless argumentations. I was a scholar in a degraded sense, because in the capacity of a logician, I was a vilifier of the Veda. In the assemblies, I used to put forth sheer logical considerations, which was the most improper thing to do. I used to refute the Brahmins and

was hostile to what they said. I was a heretic (*nāstika*) and I entertained the spirit of doubt. Hence, I was just a fool only with pretensions to learning. O Brahmin, this life of the jackal which I am now suffering is the result of all this." Could the horror of indulgence in logic be better described for mass consumption?

In the *Rāmāyaṇa* practically the same damnation of logic was preached, though with the added suggestion that it had the tendency to develop into the materialist outlook. Rāma advised Bharata never to entertain a follower of the Lokāyata, because in spite of the wonderful scriptures being there, such a person relied on logic – the useless technique of fomenting dispute and disbelief.

9. TECHNIQUE OF EVADING CENSORSHIP

All this gives us some idea of the political climate in which the philosophers – specially the representatives of logic – were placed. What then could they do to save the fundamentals of the philosophy?

An open defiance of the ideological demands of the law-makers is perhaps feasible only when there emerges a revolutionary class in society to take up the cause of non-conformism, as it happened e.g. in modern Europe with the rising middle class, or as it is happening today with the rise of the modern working class. For all that we know of Indian history, however, no such class emerged in ancient India and the economic basis of the society remained on the whole stagnant.

Were then the logicians to surrender abjectly to the demands of the law-makers? But this was as bad as renouncing their basic discipline. Or could they brave inquisition in defence of it?

From the *Nyāya-sūtra* of Gautama and its commentary by Vātsyāyana it seems that our logicians tried a third alternative. They attempted to evade the censorship of the law-makers by paying a very heavy ransom to them, and this in the form of apparently conceding to their ideological demands, notwithstanding the anomalies this created for the Nyāya philosophy.

S. C. Vidyabhusana has observed, "It seems that the unfavourable criticism to which *ānvīkṣikī* had long been exposed terminated when, under the name of *Nyāya-sūtra*, it accepted the authority

of the Vedas." This is true, though to see the whole truth we have to take note of something more.

The law-makers demanded that the authority of the Vedas was obligatory for the philosophers. Gautama and Vātsyāyana apparently professed this authority, and thereby saved themselves from the possibility of being branded as *nāstika*-s or heretics. At the same time they left enough hints that this submission to scriptural authority was not to be taken very seriously: it was rather of the nature of ransom paid to the authority for the purpose of saving their science of logic.

The *Nyāya-sūtra* made a vigorous show of defending the authoritativeness of the Vedas; no less than twelve *sūtra*-s are devoted to this purpose. Yet, when we carefully read these, we cannot but wonder at their real content.

The strongest charge against the validity of the Veda is of course the allegation that it contains falsehood. Such a charge, argued Gautama and his commentator Vātsyāyana, was baseless. But how did they argue this? Vātsyāyana mentioned the typical argument of the opponents of the Vedas as follows: The Vedas prescribed a ritual (called *pitrestī*) by performing which one was supposed to get a son; but the fact remained that in spite of its performance many people did not get one. Vātsyāyana used a lot of ritual jargons to give us the apparent impression of answering this objection. But what exactly was his answers? He did not argue that the performance of the prescribed ritual necessarily resulted in getting a son. He admitted that one might not get a son in spite of its performance. But that was easily explained. A son was not born in spite of the performance of the ritual, when there was male sterility, female disease or perverse coition. Was this a defence of Vedic ritual or really a defence of empirical knowledge made to appear as a defence of scriptural injunction?

More peculiar was the final argument offered by Gautama in defence of the authoritativeness of the Veda. The Vedas were authoritative, he argued, because all the marks of authoritativeness were to be found characterising these. But what were these marks of authoritativeness? These were to be found in Āyurveda or medical science. The argument, in short, amounted to the assertion that the model of authoritativeness was to be found in Āyurveda and only by answering to this model the

Vedas too had claim to authoritativeness. Was this a genuine defence of the scriptures?

As if to leave nothing vague about the point, Vātsyāyana in his commentary sprinkled certain clever hints:

“The scriptural statements (*vaidika-vākya*) are not essentially different from the statements in ordinary discourse (*laukika-vākya*), because both are composed by persons who are guided by critical judgement.” It was admitted, of course, that the sages or *ṛṣi*-s were the makers of the Vedas; but there was nothing super-normal or super-natural about their knowledge. As Vātsyāyana said, “The validity of the Veda is due to the trustworthiness of its speakers and this is common with the validity of ordinary words.” Further, “A trustworthy person is the speaker who has the knowledge of an object as directly known to him... This definition (of a trustworthy person) is equally applicable to the seers (*ṛṣi*), noble (*ārya*) and barbarian (*mleccha*).”

Yet the same Vātsyāyana made a grand show of defending the scriptural authority of the Vedas! What else could the logician do when the law-maker demanded that a philosopher without commitment to the Vedas was to be hounded out of society?

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

So Tagore was not wrong after all. There are weapons made of philosophical stuff in the arsenal of the imperialists, in sociology and in religion. Their function is to conceal the real and, under this coverage, to bring disaster to the common man. In Indian philosophy, if the Cārvākas or Lokāyatās alone had the courage to fight straight against such weapons, others sought safety under subterfuges.

It is tempting to add here only one point. Denounced as abject heretics the Cārvākas were sought to be hounded out by the law-makers. The philosophers came out with a barrage of polemics against them. But could this instinctive adherence to materialism of the masses be completely stamped out by all these? The answer seems to be in the negative. It was called Lokāyata because of its prevalence among the masses. If so, it was not an easy matter to uproot it completely from their

consciousness. There survive in the country today a considerable number of non-conformist groups which, in default of a better descriptive epithet, S. B. Dasgupta has described as "obscure religious cults" They continue to sing songs ridiculing the authority of the Vedas, describing heaven and hell as but figments of imagination, deny soul and extol above all the importance of the body. Nothing is for them more important than the body and no source of knowledge more significant than direct sense-perception. In our part of the country, they pass by various names, the most common of which is Sahajiyā. H. P. Sastri has boldly conjectured that they are but the stragglers of the ancient Lokāyata. If there be anything in this, we have to admit that the Lokāyata view is not fully extinct even today. This does not surely mean that there is any question of returning to their primitive materialism, mixed up as it inevitably was with all sorts of primitive imagination and also later superimposition on their basic outlook of all sorts of religious and quasi-religious hotch-potch. But the fact that the people – particularly the lower rung of the people – still instinctively stick to some form of materialism is not to be overlooked.