



# West *meets* East

## Indian Philosophy in Oxford

In 2020 the Faculty introduced a new undergraduate paper in Indian Philosophy. **Jessica Frazier**, one of its architects, tells us about the paper and the history of Indian Philosophy in Oxford.

'The arguments of the ancients are sinuous...' wrote Bimal Krishna Matilal in 1986 in his room at All Souls', 'but they contain important philosophical insight.' A former student of Peter Strawson and Michael Dummett, Matilal had also gained a traditional Tarkatirtha 'Master of Reasoning' degree in classical Indian Epistemology from the University of Calcutta. He predicted a time when philosophical terms derived from Sanskrit would be as central to contemporary philosophical analysis as those that have grown out of Greek.

This year, Oxford's first undergraduate course in Indian Philosophy has opened up a wealth of such ideas to students in the Faculty of Philosophy. Together students explored the philosophical

potential contained in distinctive Indian theories of identity, mind, matter, causation, scepticism, idealism, aesthetics, and ethics. They found that much is familiar, but much is also surprising in this 'looking glass world' where whole cultures lived out philosophies as yet undreamt of in western thought. No prior knowledge was needed: in this course students are introduced to the ideas then encouraged to run a fine toothed comb through their arguments, weighing their success and pinpointing flaws, hunting out new insights and making contributions of their own.

There are many philosophical roads to India. When I first came to the subject through an interest in German thought, what attracted me to Indian philosophy was the rich metaphysics

of the Vedantic tradition that, over two thousand years, devised ever-new ways of explaining the basic ontological substrate of reality. In the face of fierce critique, it argued that there must be a unified material, efficient, and formal cause of everything based on the coherence and causal interaction we see in the world. I wasn't alone in my fascination: Spinozists, Hegelians and panpsychists have often felt drawn to Indian thought, as have those attracted to problems of powers, grounding and 'goo.' But at the other end of the spectrum, many prefer the bold radical scepticism of the Madhyamaka tradition: Jan Westerhoff, who led half of the classes this year, is a key proponent of Madhyamaka's anti-foundationalist model of a world freed from essences or foundations.

When I was a student in Cambridge my own lecturers loved Indian thought for its notorious 'holistic' philosophy of meaning, and its novel form of philosophical theism – and more recently India's distinctive 'direct-realist' account of reference, its yoga-influenced attempts to change the phenomenological structure of experience, and its emergence-based explanations of mind, have all moved into the spotlight.

India's philosophical history is incredibly diverse – a fact shaped by two powerful forces: On the one hand, Hinduism's three-thousand year old Vedic tradition was metaphysically multi-curious, generating atomisms, hylomorphisms, monisms and phenomenologies that grew under the demanding tutelage of sophisticated logical, semantic, and epistemic traditions. But on the other hand, around the fourth century BCE these were challenged by the scepticism of Buddhism, Jainism, and 'materialist' traditions. Together, these two 'metaphysical' and 'sceptical' strands refined each other over the centuries. The Hindu schools of thought developed ever-more sophisticated theories of reality and our

methods for understanding it, while Buddhism's successive waves of scepticism questioned first concrete identities, then the constitution of personal subjectivity, and finally all determinate essences or ontological foundations. Conversation flourished in an 'argumentative' India (to borrow Amartya Sen's phrase) where no view was silenced. As a result every philosophy thrived according to its merits – from the substance-monists to theistic atomists, to ontological nihilists and hedonist materialists. For a western analogy, one might imagine Humeans and Spinozists, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Strawson, Chomsky – and Nietzsche – all debating furiously in a single cafe, overlooked by eagle-eyed epistemologist arbitrators.



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The philosophical yield of this was astoundingly rich, and western philosophers have long been fascinated with it – Arthur Schopenhauer was instrumental in promoting Indian philosophy’s willingness to think in terms of ‘representations’ rather than ‘things’. In his 1818 preface to *The World as Will and Representation* he wrote that access to Indian philosophical sources is ...

the greatest advantage which this still young century has to show over previous centuries, since I surmise that the influence of Sanskrit literature will penetrate no less deeply than did the revival of Greek literature in the fifteenth century.

In England, Hume and Locke both made reference to Indian ideas, whilst in Germany Indophile and Sanskrit scholar Friedrich Schegel revered India’s metaphysical and moral holism or ‘Allheit,’ which incorporated mind and matter, fact and value, and what we call ‘good’ and ‘bad’ into a complete theory. Hegel would take up this idea and read Hinduism’s Vedantic monism as ‘pure being without any concrete determination’ as a stab at the kind of system that he himself sought to develop.

Here in Oxford, interest in India began with the establishment of the Boden Chair of Sanskrit in 1832. Initially, it was aimed primarily at converting and controlling the Indian subcontinent; but academic appointments have a curious way of subverting their original intentions. Over the subsequent decades, Sanskritists began to extol the value of India’s own culture to a global audience. Max Muller, one of the most prolific early translators of Sanskrit texts, was an apologist for both sides, upholding the special dispensation of Christian culture whilst shouldering severe criticism for championing an Indic worldview over church orthodoxy. In an 1879 preface to his *The Sacred Books of the East*, he wrote of Indian works that:

Plato is strange till we know him... so it is with these ancient sages... [T]o the patient reader these same books will, in spite of many drawbacks, open a new view of the history of the human race, of that one race to which we all belong, with all the fibres of our flesh, with all the hopes and fears of our soul.

Of course most translators lacked the philosophical training for a rigorous analysis; and most philosophers lacked the textual resources for detailed study, or their prejudices got in the way. But the paradigm shifted with the arrival of Bimal Krishna Matilal as the Spalding Professor



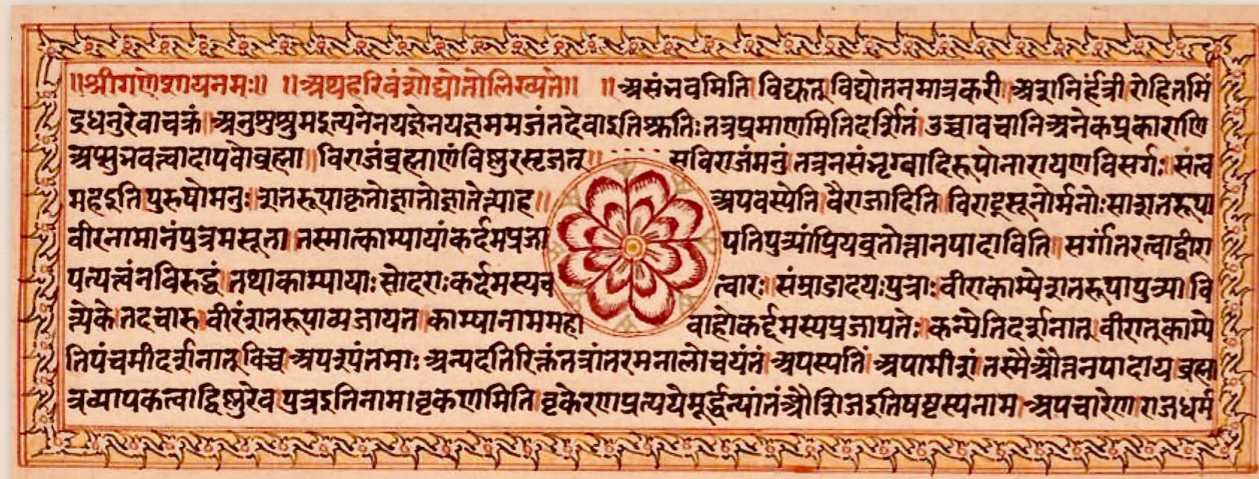
Max Muller  
(photo by Lewis Carroll, 1857)

of Eastern Religions and Ethics at All Souls in 1977. Educated both by logicians working in the Indian tradition and Western analytic thinkers like Willard van Orman Quine, Matilal had done his PhD on innovations in early-modern Indian logic. He

worked hard to inspire a culturally neutral form of analytic philosophy that drew on all relevant sources, regardless of where they came from. His massive output embraced logic, language, epistemology, and ethics, and his students were part of a new wave of global Indian philosophers who today can be found in Universities around the world.

Contemporary philosophy has made immense progress but it has sometimes found itself hitting the same dead-ends, using the same ill-defined ideas historically rooted in Greek thought, and making the same assumptions generation after generation. Untapped traditions also exist, full of ideas. They point to new directions, offer new tools, and turn past assumptions on their heads. Whilst the pandemic was changing world history this year, Oxford Philosophers were changing the world in their own way, showing that they’re ready to see what can be done with fresh material.

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18th-century Sanskrit manuscript of *Harivamsa* from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*.