UNVEILING (INDIAN) PHILOSOPHY: AN OBITUARY FOR DAYA KRISHNA

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JUST BEFORE THE PUBLICATION OF THIS JOURNAL, the sad news of Prof. Daya Krishna’s passing (in Jaipur, on the 5th of October, 2007) reached us. We therefore resolved to pay a brief homage to him in this very issue of RiSS. Due to my lack of competence in Economics and Social Studies, however, I will rather focus on his work in the fields of philosophy and Indian philosophy.

Daya Krishna’s contribution to South Asian studies and his influence on South Asian scholars cannot be overestimated. He wrote on Philosophy, Economics, Social and Political Studies, etc., always generously bestowing his many ideas to the public and to all those who had the chance of being closer to him. His ideas have been and hopefully will still be a constant inspiration for many students and scholars throughout the world, who may have at times disagreed with Daya Krishna and may have criticised him for not investigating closely (e.g., by means of critical editions) all the innumerable texts he knew and referred to, but have nonetheless been kept alert in their study of Indian philosophy by his innovative approach to India. In fact, as one of his main contributions, he demonstrated how many self-assumed conceptions of India are indeed groundless. Let me now point out some of the main features of this attitude, starting from its genesis in Daya Krishna’s intellectual biography.

Daya Krishna was born in 1924. He taught in some US universities (Northfield, Hawaii), but was mostly committed to the culture of his country, where he taught Philosophy at the University of Rajasthan, was a member of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research and of the Indian Council of Social Science, and edited the Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research. In his Ph.D. thesis, published in 1955 as The Nature of Philosophy, Daya Krishna identifies the mission of a philosopher as that of bringing clarity upon a certain subject, abandoning the pomp-
ous and useless target of “truth”. Moreover, many of his other essays are
dedicated to the relation between logical and the empirical realities, and
to the many aporias deriving from their clash. This investigation led him
to reconsider the usual view of Indian thought, seen as a sort of integral
philosophy, where epistemology, logic and so forth are developed just to
justify a religious ideal. Daya Krishna argued that as long as we will be
confined within this stereotype we will not be able even to take into con-
sideration a different point of view. Thus he endeavoured to free Indian
philosophy from the common idea (a dominating one since the end of the
18th century and until the second half of the 20th) that Indian philosophy
is nothing but a spiritual quest and that philosophical themes in India are
merely functional to religious ideals. Daya Krishna stated, vice versa, that
religious goals were for Indian philosophers just an excuse to legitimate
purely philosophical interests.

He kept inviting scholars to take seriously Indian philosophical past,
which he often linked to themes dealt with in contemporary philosophy.
In this sense his interest for Indian classical philosophy was never purely
antiquarian; he instead dealt with stalwarts of the past such as Śaṅkara
with the same approach he adopted for contemporary scholars such as J.N.
Mohanty, that is, constantly engaging with them a philosophical dialogue.
The pitfalls of considering Indian classical philosophy just as a spiritual
quest are exposed, Daya Krishna argued, by the fact that today even Indian
philosophers tend to neglect their heritage and consequently deprive both
their reflections and the philosophical debate of its stimuli.

A major outcome of his attempt of bringing Indian classical philosophy
to the foreground has been the volume Saṃvāda: A dialogue between two
Philosophical Traditions, which he edited in 1991. The volume is written in
English and Sanskrit and involves both Indian Pandits and Western Phi-
losophers in a lively discussion of philosophical issues, focusing especially
on logic and philosophy of language. Three years later, in a similar vein,
and possibly following Daya Krishna’s model, Arindam Chakrabarti and
Bimal Krishna Matilal edited for the Synthese Library Knowing from Words,
where an article written in Sanskrit by Badrinath Shukla on Russell’s phi-
losophy has been translated and presented to a Western audience along with
P. Strawson’s, M. Dummet’s, E. Fricker’s, etc., ones.

Daya Krishna’s perspective about the role of religion within Indian phi-
losophy did not prevent him from dealing with religious issues. In 2000 he
edited a volume on Bhakti, in which he seriously investigated the philosophy
of feelings, and of bhakti in particular, which is implicit—and sometimes
even explicit—in Bhakti texts.
His demystifying task culminated in the revolutionary article “Three Myths about Indian Philosophy” and in the volumes which followed it, especially *Indian Philosophy: A New Approach*, and *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective*. In these works he dealt with the most commonly accepted ideas about Indian philosophy and tried to radically (although not always convincingly) uproot them. An example, bearing far-reaching consequences, is Daya Krishna’s criticism of the traditional scheme of six *darśanas* in Indian philosophy. One may argue, indeed, that this number is purely whimsical, for it includes Yoga, whose philosophical concerns are doubtful, and excludes Linguistic Philosophy, Jainism, Buddhism, Materialism, etc. Even Vedānta, whose philosophical status is not questioned by Daya Krishna, achieved according to him a distinct position only in the second millennium of our era (Daya Krishna 2001, 44-52). Consequently, a projection of the six-fold classification of *darśanas* back to the first millennium or even before leads to major misinterpretations of the philosophical scene in India. More specifically, the hypothesis of a Vedānta *darśana* in the first millennium is a “retrospective illusion imposed by the historiography of Indian Philosophy” (Daya Krishna 2001, 44). Moreover, exaggerating the importance of *darśanas* may lead to the undervaluation of cross influences between thinkers belonging to different schools:

It is, therefore, imperative that we get out of the prison-house of systems and focus attention on the problems, issues and questions that troubled philosophers in India through the ages and the way they grappled with them and the arguments they gave for tentative answers and solution to them. Only through some such effort will we able to enter into their philosophical world and see the inner, motivative force of the philosophical enterprise they were engaged in (Daya Krishna 2001, 21).

I shall now examine some of the arguments brought forth by Daya Krishna in relation to my present field of research, Mīmāṃsā. Noticing how the actual performers of Vedic sacrifices (the *yajñika*) neglected Mīmāṃsā interpretations, he questioned the actual status of this discipline in regard to the Veda, stressing the irrelevance of Mīmāṃsā speculations and hence the distance between Vedic praxis and the role of Mīmāṃsā as the allegedly official interpreter of the Veda (see “The Mīmamsaka versus Yajñika: Some Further Problem in the Interpretation of Śruti in the Indian Tradition”, in Daya Krishna 2001). Nonetheless, this scathing attack may also lead to a reassessment of Mīmāṃsā, not any more seen as a ritual handbook for Vedic sacrifices but rather as a philosophical school which uses the sacrifice
portions of the Veda as a model for interpreting texts and for building complex systems (such as the Vedic sacrifices they reconstruct) out of complex masses of prescriptions (such as those found in the Brāhmaṇas).

Furthermore, as stressed by Daya Krishna, today’s Veda does not correspond to the Veda referred to by Mīmāṃsakas. Their Veda is eminently a prescriptive text, where descriptive statements (including all the Ṛgveda hymns largely admired by Western scholars) have only an ancillary role (see “Is the Doctrine of Arthavāda Compatible with the Idea of Śruti?” in Daya Krishna 2001). That this was not the commonly accepted device to interpret the Veda is shown by the very fact that the other branch of Mīmāṃsā, the Vedānta (or Uttara Mīmāṃsā), totally disagrees about it. Moreover, Daya Krishna showed that Mīmāṃsakas are further “picky”, insofar as they maintain that statements regarding the Śyena (a sacrifice undertaken to harm others), though prescriptive, are not meant to be followed (see “Śyena yāga: The Achilles Heel of Śruti in Indian Tradition” in Daya Krishna 2001). The Śyena is a rather debated topic within Mīmāṃsā, since the Vedic prescriptions related to it seem to contradict the Vedic prescription forbidding harm to any living being (na hīṃsyāt). Daya Krishna concludes that the Mīmāṃsā is not a consistent advocate of the validity of the Veda, and that even the Veda itself is not a univocally identifiable Textual Canon. In fact, as hinted above, the Mīmāṃsā somehow forces the Veda into a narrow precinct, that of a sum of prescriptions regarding sacrifice. Better, Mīmāṃsakas represent a hermeneutical current understanding the Veda as a prescriptive text. This allows them to strongly (and coherently, I dare say) argue for the validity of such a restricted Veda. As for the Śyena sacrifice, Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas maintain that the Śyena is not to be performed because of the prohibition to harm living beings. The presence of prescriptions regarding it in the Veda does not amount to its endorsement, because prescriptions are subordinated to the eligibility (adhiṅkāra) for performing them, and in this case the eligibility requirement is to be “one who wants to harm one’s own enemy”, which implies a prohibited status. So, the Śyena is to be performed only by those who are already transgressing the prohibition to harm, and does not by itself enjoin such a transgression. Obviously, such an explanation would sound fully speculative to Daya Krishna, who would sharply criticize such a sophistical way out.

The above discussion may show how stimulating and fertile can Daya Krishna’s remarks be, even for those who do not fully agree with them. Daya Krishna always had the courage of sharing his witty insight, and this makes his studies both thought-provoking and enjoyable.
An insightful collection of studies on Daya Krishna’s philosophy was edited in 1996 by Bhuvan Chandel and K.L. Sharma. Scholars such as Siba-jiban Bhattacharyya, J.N. Mohanty, D.P. Chattopadhyaya, N.S. Dravid and P.K. Sen analyse in that volume Daya Krishna’s ideas and studies. The present and future readers who have not had the privilege of personally meeting this outstanding scholar will particularly enjoy his answers—often critical and always deep and philosophically engaged—added by the editors at the end of each chapter. Thanks to Daya Krishna’s answers, the debate on Indian classical philosophy merges into the contemporary philosophical one.

**Principal Works by Daya Krishna**

Due to the amazing amount of volumes of Daya Krishna, of course this list cannot be exhaustive.

**Volumes authored by Daya Krishna**


*Developments in Indian Philosophy from Eighteen Century Onwards: Classical and Western*. New Delhi: Indian Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture, 2002.

Volumes edited by Daya Krishna


On Daya Krishna