

# Review of: "A Survey: Looking for the best possible way of modern engagement with Traditional Indian knowledge"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

## **A review on “A Survey: Looking for the best possible way of modern engagement with traditional Indian knowledge” by Bebajyoti Gangopathyay**

The paper is prelude to a survey conducted among the participants of Nalanda Dialogue, a forum active since 2005, based on Navanalanda Mahavihara. As the title of the paper makes clear, the effort is to find ways to engage with the traditional Indian knowledge by those who approach the subject basically from modern science and from philosophy.

The discussion begins with a brief retrospective of the Colonial scenario at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which not only the terms and conditions but even the content of the knowledge to be made available to the locals were dictated by the Colonial rulers, and the local participants were the Hindus, ‘English educated Hindu scholars,’ who tried to emulate their Colonial masters. The Buddhists and Jains did not come into the picture for the former had disappeared from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the latter was not ‘pro-active’ in the history of Indian philosophy. The essence of this part of the discussion is: “our pedagogical policies right from their Colonial beginning failed miserably to develop effective modes of modern engagements with the traditional knowledge store.”

The second part of the discussion focuses on the present. The question is: is it better today? The overall answer proposed by the writer is in the negative. He admits that the Nalanda Dialogue has identified areas of meaningful overlap between traditional Indian knowledge and modern science. But the traditional contents are assessed following sharply different methods used for assessing modern knowledge. For the author, there is a question: how should the traditional texts be read, on their own terms, or in compatibility with the modern requirements? This question still remains unanswered. In short, the necessary comparative method is yet to be developed.

The subject of the third part is David Hilbert’s ‘answerability’ issue and the threat of End in sight. The issue is whether or not mind can answer all the questions it raises. On the one hand, there is ‘ignoramus, ignorabimus’ (we do not know, we will never know) of Emil du Bois Reymond and Richard Rorty’s painful admission that philosophy has come to an end of its ability to provide answers, a claim which the author thinks, is not applicable to the Indian traditional knowledge. Hilbert seems to represent the other end, answerability. The fourth and final part of the paper is on new trans-disciplinary frontiers in sight and refers, briefly, to John Bell’s ‘inequality theorem’ and E. M. Purcell who, in his Harvard Lectures (1987), claimed that new philosophical issues may be sorted out in physics labs.

Looking at the paper as a whole, I feel that the author could have developed more fully the issues he touches in two last

parts of his paper. Minus these two sections, the paper is a report of the state of the current debate at Nalanda Dialogue between science and traditional Indian knowledge. The picture drawn is not very promising. But if it is the real ground situation one cannot help it. As is generally known, the debate between traditional knowledge, not merely Indian, and modern science is not new; nor is it unique to India or to Nalanda Dialogue. Among some areas in which fruitful discussions have taken place, comparative philosophy and religion is one, and East and West philosophy dialogues based on University of Hawai'i (and East West Center) and the journal *Philosophy East West* still being published by the Department of Philosophy, University of Hawai'i, provide useful examples. Another interesting and instructive area of comparative studies is the recent philosophical studies, particularly on language and logic based on Navya Nyaya insights by such renowned scholars as B.K. Matilal. The studies in these areas, which I do not need to refer to in detail, may be considered as areas in which the traditional Indian and modern systems of knowledge have been brought closer to produce illuminating and fruitful insights.

What remains in the picture of the traditional Indian knowledge are what may belong to the areas covered by natural sciences and technology. Unlike in philosophy (not in narrow sense of analytical philosophy), religion and logic (rational thinking), the insights of which can have perennial value, the story of the areas such as medicine, technology and sciences of nature appears to be different. The crucial test for the traditional knowledge in these areas is nothing other than practical value, use and usability without which the study will be of mere historical and nostalgic value which by no means is not insignificant or irrelevant but bound to face hard times to secure support.

The paper, as it is, appears sketchy. There are, in particular in the last two parts, issues of philosophical significance that could be developed further. For instance, the answerability thesis of Hilbert may be examined with reference to the Buddhist views on limits of human cognitive and linguistic capacities in answering questions, and the (highly limited) concept of philosophy behind Purcell's claim in favour of physics too may be further examined with reference to the phenomenological school of philosophy. The claim that the centralized new university system was new to India could be a result of not taking into consideration the ancient Nalanda education system, though it was called 'vihara' (monastery), which was universal both in its content and also in its outlook and philosophy, philosophy of universal education for all irrespective of their social or any other divisions. Though not of direct relevance in this context, one may fruitfully reflect on as to why only the Buddhists in ancient India had what may be called 'universities' in modern sense. Another, again not of direct relevance to the main theme, is the issue of disappearance of Buddhism from India in which the role of Brahmins needs to be duly admitted. Finally, directly relevant to the theme, the author could have analysed more fully the outcome of the survey and bring the findings to bear on the broader debate on the rationale of studying the forms of traditional knowledge in India and elsewhere.

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