UNIT 1: NATURE AND SCOPE OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives
1.2 Introduction
1.3 Nature of Indian philosophy
1.4 Scope of Indian Philosophy
1.5 Let us sum up
1.6 Further Reading
1.7 Answers to Check Your Progress
1.8 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- explain the nature of Indian philosophy
- discuss the scope of Indian philosophy

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is a thinking affair. It raises some fundamental questions about the world and our life in it. In simple terms, what the philosophers do as philosophers is philosophy. Also, as many philosophers, so many philosophies; hence philosophy is marked by a wide range of variety. Philosophy has both its process aspect and its outcome aspect. As process, all philosophies are united and are thus called 'Philosophies'. But as final products, they are widely variant and different.

Beginners need not be puzzled by the variety in philosophy—that there is materialistic philosophy and there is spiritualistic philosophy; that there is realistic philosophy and there is idealistic philosophy; that there is monistic philosophy and there is pluralistic philosophy; that there is metaphysical philosophy and there is anti-metaphysical philosophy, and so on.

1.3 NATURE OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

In fact 'philosophy' is a general name given to a wide range of intellectual activities marked off by a hidden unity of pattern and structure. This structure gives them the brand name. Poetry and novel are different in name and content but are united by the essential concern in them - artistic creativity. They conform to the idea of literature. Similarly epistemology, metaphysics or ethics are different in name and content, but they are united by their essential concern for explaining some experiences. They are philosophies. This leads us also to have a rough idea of philosophy as 'an interpretation of experiences'. There can be a dispute over it, but for the time being we can accept it and go ahead. In fact all intellectual activities are interpretation of experience. In science we explain some experiences like those of atoms, molecules, cells, stones, trees etc. In commerce we explain production, distribution, profit and loss etc. In philosophy we explain experiences and concepts like knowledge, truth, goodness, beauty, holiness, happiness, self, person etc.

Philosophy is part of the culture of a nation. What people of a particular culture have deeply thought about certain basic experiences of humanity constitutes their philosophy. What we call Indian Philosophy is the philosophy generated in India. We have similarly Greek Philosophy, German Philosophy, British Philosophy, etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the varieties in philosophy?

.....

.....

Q 2: Mention three philosophies of other countries.

.....

.....

1.4 SCOPE OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy has a long history in India. It began as early as the Vedas were created. But, then it was not so systematic and neat as we find it in the middle ages or today. This is natural. Everywhere it is the same. Even Greek philosophy began by putting simple questions about the fundamental stuff of the universe. The earliest of such philosophy says 'All is water'. It sounds primitive, which it was. But considering the time back then, it was a great intellectual daring. Similarly, the Indian ??is questioned about the possibility of the knowledge of the world; and they were not sure if anybody at all could have final knowledge. Considering that period, that was an achievement. In India, philosophy of a respectable standard shaped up during the Upani?hadic period.

Upanichads are also called Vedanta, which means "the end or concluding part of the Vedas". In fact the Upanichads belong to the final age of the Vedic period and are the records of the highest achievement of the metaphysical enquiry. They are still respected the world over as the store-house of spiritualistic, mystical, theistic and meditative instructions. **The Upanichads are more than hundred in number, but those very important from the philosophical standpoint are ten. These are: Îúa, Kena, Kamha, Mundaka, MâG ûkya, Aitareya, Taittirîya, Œvetâœvatara, B[hadâraGyaka and Chândogya. What we call Indian philosophy actually originated in these Upanichads**.

This is one way of looking at Indian philosophy from the historical perspective. The fully developed Indian philosophy, originating from Upanishads and non-Upanishadic sources, has witnessed a chequered growth. It has an ancient and foundational aspect. It is deeply tradition-bound. There is a debatable view that Indian philosophy is no match to western philosophy, that it is less rigorous in analysis, that it is dogmatic, that it has stopped growing. All these criticisms are misconceived and may be true from a very narrow position. The truth is that Indian philosophy is tradition-bound, but it is fairly modern; it has its modus operandi and

there is enormous scope for debate in it. It is neither dormant nor dead. It is alive, dynamic and growing.

It has all the elements of a mature philosophy - no matter where it was born or brought up.

The term for philosophy in India is 'darshan'. It means seeing or vision. It is equivalent to understanding, realization or wisdom. Sometimes darshan is emphasized with an extra word 'samyak'. When added to darshan, jt makes 'samyagdarshan', or to be grammatically correct, samyagdarshanam. It will translate as - comprehensive or total understanding, total vision, and complete realization. It is not a partial or relative understanding. It is the final realization that does not have a beyond. It is absolute intuition or insight. Also, philosophy is accepted in India as the special knowledge that saves. (mokshe dhih jnanam). It is that knowledge that gives liberation. In contrast, science or vijnan is that gives us material prosperity.

While dealing with the nature of Indian philosophy one is automatically drawn to the view that it is basically spiritualistic. Excepting for an odd but powerful outlook called Lokayata or Charvaka (to which we come later), all the systems of Indian philosophy believe in certain things that are corollaries of spiritualism; for instance - law of karma and continuity of life. Ethics of altruism and pragmatism too are linked to spiritualism. Another important point to note is that Indian philosophy is a life-centred philosophy. Mere theoretical wrangling is not encouraged in it. Even Cārvāka means business. It has its elaborate hedonistic teaching. Pursuit of pleasure is prescribed here.

Darshan that is Indian philosophy is rigorously practical. It is life-centric. In a way it is existential without resorting to absurdity. A feature that is inseparable from Indian philosophy is its stress on self-culture, that an individual has to improve in a manner that will give them ultimate peace.

When we say like this, we do not want to claim superiority for Indian philosophy in comparison with philosophies elsewhere. It is describing a fact. It is only telling what is the case - it is not to claim that it is good or bad,

or even that what is here is not elsewhere. It is only declaring what is here and how it works.

A huge part of darshan/ Indian philosophy (leaving aside the materialists) is spiritual. It is one characteristic that weighs heavy on it. Corollaries automatically follow from this aspect. That it has a moral dimension grafted onto it. Individuals are taught to beware of their actions. Hence, it lays much emphasis on duties and responsibilities. Major philosophical treatises like Upanishads and Gita give an orientation to it that is developed by other philosophical schools, irrespective of their Vedic affiliation. That is even the so-called heterodox schools, Buddhism and Jainism, seriously believe in the law of karma/action. As you sow, so you reap. It is the appropriation of the physical law of causality in the field of morality and religion. For one thing, in Indian philosophy, the line of difference between religion and morality is very thin. Dharma is the Indian word for religion and it largely consists of moral principles, way of living. Directly following from the law of karma is the continuity of life. One has to live beyond death, either to enjoy the rewards of good works or suffer punishment for the bad ones. This continues till a final redemption is secured. This is called the state of release, liberation or moksha. Of this state and means to it, however, different schools have different notions.

One minor point deserves to be touched upon. That is that some critics think that Indian philosophy is other-worldly and that it is pessimistic. It is born out of a misunderstanding. True it is that different schools teach of a coveted spiritual life, but it is not done to the detriment of a healthy mundane life. In fact it is a very balanced approach. Four aims worthy of emulation have been put before the individual. These are dharma (religion/morality), artha (material possessions), kama (pleasure) and moksha (liberation). And all these are to be cultivated at the appropriate stage of an individual's life. Therefore, this world is not ignored at all. Again, the charge of pessimism is because its reference to misery. But this reference, more pointedly in Buddhism and Samkhya, is only as a point of departure. That suffering is a fact of life and one has to philosophically fight against it. Therefore,

pessimism, if at all, is only initial and a passing phase. Indian philosophy is optimistic in outlook.

There is a tradition of classifying Indian philosophy into Orthodox and Heterodox schools. This is determined by the allegiance or otherwise of the schools concerned to the Vedas. The word 'veda' means wisdom. Therefore, what we know as the Vedas are the collection of experiences. wisdom and aspirations of the very early Indian thinkers. They are called rshis, wise persons. Technically the Vedas have no authors. Truth is purportedly revealed to certain seers and they have received the wisdom and passed that on for the posterity. Upanishads are only the final portions of the Vedas. Well, these Vedas form a huge reference point for deciding if a particular school is following the mainstream trend in philosophy or otherwise. For instance, Indian materialism (Cārvāka/Lokayata) is a staunch critic of the Vedic way of thinking. It is against the Vedas. It is therefore called nastika or heterodox school of philosophy. In this context, orthodoxy or heterodoxy (astika-nastika) does not mean belief in God or otherwise; it only means following the Vedas or not. For instance, Mahayana Buddhism believes in God - and yet it is a heterodox school for its antivedic stand.

Of these heterodox schools there are three in all. They are: Cārvāka (also called Lokāyata, Materialism), Bauddha (Buddhism) and Jaina (Jainism). Cārvāka is the Indian version of materialism, hedonism and common sense realism. It traces its philosophy to the teaching of a saint called Brihaspati. Buddhism is based on the teaching of Gautama the Buddha and Jainism on the teaching of Mahāvira. While these three schools are heterodox, there are six major schools that are orthodox. These, again, are astika/orthodox not because of the question of belief in God, but because of their ultimate allegiance to the Vedas. While Samkhya does not believe in God, the Mimāmsā concept of God is obscure. But both these schools are astika/orthodox. These six systems are together called saddarshan, six philosophies. These are - Nyāya (of Gotama), Vaiseśhika (of Kanāda), Samkhya (of Kapila), Yoga (of Patanjali), Mimāmsā (of Jaimini) and Vedānta (of Badarayana). These six systems also come in the group of two because of their basic teaching. Hence, Nyaya-Vaiseshika, Samkhya-Yoga and

Mimamsa-Vedānta are sister systems. Either of the pair emphasizes one aspect of philosophy and the other another aspect. Together the pair form a whole. Hence Nyāya logic supports Vaiśeshika metaphysics; Sāmkhya is the cosmology of Yoga and Yoga is the psychology of Sāmkhya. Mimamsa deals with the karma kanda of the Vedas and Vedanta deals with the jnanakanda of them.

Asking for the specific nature of Indian philosophy is often a way to distinguish it from non-Indian philosophies. There one is likely to be biased and carried away. Impartially speaking, Indian philosophy shares the nature of philosophy the world over, whether British, Continental or American. It is the same conglomerate of epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, theology, aesthetics, politics etc. Its method of operation might slightly vary from others or its thrust areas might differ. It might appear to be laying stress on spirituality, continuity of life, karma.

If at all, the basic distinguishing mark of Indian philosophy is its practical aspect. It is a guide to meaningful living. It refuses to be purely theoretical. It is not entirely speculative. It has a robust pragmatism attached to it.

As far as its scope, Indian philosophy covers the same basic elements of philosophy as elsewhere. It has its logic. India had created the most intricate classical logic in Nyaya, Buddhism, and Mimamsa. Dinnaga, Prabhakara and Gangesha are renowned logicians. Its atomic metaphysics in Vaiseshika, its evolutionary metaphysics in Samkhya and spiritual metaphysics in Vedanta rival with any metaphysics anywhere. Similarly Buddhism, Jainism and Vedanta had developed intricate and applied ethics. All these are basically humanistic in nature. In fact India had created applied ethics fairly early in its history.

The scope of Indian philosophy is cosmic, global and social. It has a balanced approach to any subject and relates to its roots unmindful of the criticism that it is being tradition-based. It has also developed materialistic interpretation of life and world. Charvaka is the living example of that. Students get carried away by the spiritual overtone of Indian philosophy. That is unfair. This cannot be taken as a special quality of India or Indians.

Spiritualism is a human phenomenon and is available elsewhere in abundance. Therefore there is no point in making reference to spiritualism as either weakness or strength of any philosophy. Also, contrary to popular perception, Indian philosophy is a living entity. Philosophers like Radhakrishnan, K.C.Bhattacharyya, Aurobindo, Vivekānanda, Rabindranath, B.N.Seal, J.N. Mohanty, have interpreted and enriched the basic findings of Indian philosophy and raised its standard to an appreciable height. Indian philosophy is in the process of continuous self-discovery and innovation.

There is a specific point for the serious students. That is the expression "Indian Philosophy" itself. When Indians doing/reading philosophy made in India, designate it as 'Indian', they alienate themselves from the process of philosophy so designated. It should have been thought of as 'Philosophy' and not 'Indian Philosophy'. For this leaves scope for imagining that what they are doing is 'Indian' while philosophy is something else, that is philosophy made elsewhere (= west). While there are specific occasions for referring to philosophy as Indian philosophy, most of the time the expression is superfluous and detrimental to the creativeness of philosophy in India. We can go and do philosophy and call it philosophy. We can name it realism, idealism, monism, pluralism, hedonism, humanism, as the context demands. But there is no philosophical expediency to call it 'Indian' except under certain circumstances.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Write the meaning of 'Vedānta'

.....

.....

Q 4: Mention the names of three Upanishads.

.....

.....

Q 5: Write the meaning of the term 'philosophy'.

.....

.....

Q 6: Briefly make a distinction between science and philosophy.

.....

.....

Q 7: Write the meaning of the word 'Veda'?

.....

.....



1.5 LET US SUM UP

- Epistemology, metaphysics or ethics are different in name and content, but they are united by their essential concern for explaining some experiences. They are philosophies. This leads us also to have a rough idea of philosophy as 'an interpretation of experiences'
- What we call Indian Philosophy is the philosophy made in India. We have similarly Greek Philosophy, German Philosophy, British Philosophy, etc.
- Greek philosophy began by putting simple questions about the fundamental stuff of the universe. The earliest of such philosophy says 'All is water'.
- Upaniṣhads are also called Vedānta, which means "the end or concluding part of the Vedas". In fact the Upanishads belong to the final age of the Vedic period and are the records of the highest achievement of the metaphysical enquiry.
- The Upaniṣhads are more than hundred in number, but those very important from the philosophical standpoint are ten. These are: Īśa, Kena, Kaṭha, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya, Aitareya, Taittirīya, Śvetāśvatara, Brhadāraṇyaka and Chāndogya. What we call Indian philosophy actually originated in these Upanishads .
- The term for philosophy in India is *'darshan'*. It means seeing or vision.
- Darshan that is Indian philosophy is rigorously practical. It is life-centric. In a way it is existential without resorting to absurdity. A feature

that is inseparable from Indian philosophy is its stress on self-culture, that an individual has to improve in a manner that will give them ultimate peace.

- Major philosophical treatises like Upanishads and Gita give an orientation to it that is developed by other philosophical schools, irrespective of their Vedic affiliation. That is even the so-called heterodox schools, Buddhism and Jainism, seriously believe in the law of karma/action. As you sow, so you reap. Four aims worthy of emulation have been put before the individual. These are dharma (religion/morality), artha (material possessions), kama (pleasure) and moksha (liberation). And all these are to be cultivated at the appropriate stage of an individual's life. Therefore, this world is not ignored at all. Again, the charge of pessimism is because its reference to misery. But this reference, more pointedly in Buddhism and Samkhya, is only as a point of departure.
- The word *'veda'* means wisdom. Therefore, what we know as the Vedas are the collection of experiences. wisdom and aspirations of the very early Indian thinkers. They are called *rshis*, wise persons.
- Indian materialism (Charvaka/Lokayata) is a staunch critic of the Vedic way of thinking. It is against the Vedas. It is therefore called nastika or heterodox school of philosophy. In this context, orthodoxy or heterodoxy (astika-nastika) does not mean belief in God or otherwise; it only means following the Vedas or not.
- If at all, the basic distinguishing mark of Indian philosophy is its practical aspect. It is a guide to meaningful living. It refuses to be purely theoretical. It is not entirely speculative. It has a robust pragmatism attached to it.



1.6 FURTHER READING

1. Chatterjee, S. C. & Dutta, D. M. (1968). *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. University of Calcutta.