

Review Article

The ethical context of social philosophy in contemporary India

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Abstract: Public and academic philosophical thinking in contemporary India provides evidence that philosophy and religion have never been truly separated, although there have been attempts to bring philosophy closer to science and, thus, create two autonomous systems. In light of these changes, P. V. Athavale, C. T. K. Chari, N. S. Prasad and some other authors have formed and are developing modern ethical and social theories. Moreover, feminism and gender studies have appeared in the panorama of changing philosophical and sociological thinking in India, embracing gender equality in contemporary Indian society. There has been increasing interest in sociological research and a critical interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi's spiritual message in the cause of India's independence, whose thoughts authors engaged in contemporary ethical problems believe to be impractical and useless today. Existentialism as a philosophical stream earned broad public acceptance and played a significant role in the history of modern philosophical thinking in India in the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords: modern ethical and social theories, feminism, gender studies, Gandhism, existentialism

Introduction

India is a country of contrasts and great cultural synthesis, and, with over a billion inhabitants, one of the most populous countries in the world. A nuclear power with great technological potential, India also remains a country of incredible poverty and social hardship, where prophets and a number of social workers operate in a rural, agricultural environment, and where women are oppressed and yet a large number of women have been and are active in politics, science and education. India confronts external observers with a variety of cultural traditions: Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, Parsism, Sikhism, Islam, and Western ideological and cultural movements, making present-day India's cultural life so kaleidoscopically diverse, multi-faceted and interesting, while inherently also unbalanced, contradictory and seeking solutions. Civil society is in a state of birth. Sociology, social philosophy, and ethics in their academic form of theoretical sciences, as well as in its permanent research, attempt to take a position toward these and many other phenomena of social structure and social life. In particular, sociology is one of India's fastest growing scientific disciplines. The timeliness of the problems solutions to which are being sought penetrates into the whole sphere of spiritual life. It was not by chance that, in evaluating contemporary Hindu prose, Dagmar Marková noticed that "with a little bit of exaggeration, we can call contemporary Hindu literature fictionalised sociology" because most authors seek to show a certain social phenomenon that features a strong sociological subtext. "As a rule, they do so," says Marková, "as a result evok[ing] an illustration to sociological studies" (Marková, 1986, p. 103).

When anyone talks about social theory in India, it means talking about the lives and problems of Indian society. Since its origins in the middle of the last century, Indian sociology has been developing in close contact with the real situation society faces. Only to a lesser degree has it formed an academic theoretical discipline, one developed in particular by Indian scientists working abroad. Sociological initiatives in India, therefore, have not developed as

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ivory-towered theories, but in some ways, have copied Indian reality and the problems arising from it.

No social science other than sociology offers such opportunities to create a relatively objective picture of the state of Indian society. Only sociology can scientifically establish the impressions of Indian life typically encountered in travel essays, experiential texts, diaries and memoirs, and autobiographical notes. This moment is the leitmotif in the efforts Indian sociologists are undertaking. The formation of civil society in India is contingent both on the thousand-year roots of social traditions, which have strong viability in India, and on the close connection between modern theoretical self-reflection and a complicated philosophical background that provides social theories with both methodological and ideological starting points. Modern Indian social theories follow up on the initiatives of such personalities as the economist and sociologist Radhakamal Mukherjee (1889–1968) and the Bengali social theorist Dharendra Nath Majumdar (1903–1960).

Tradition and contemporary Indian philosophical thought at the turn of the millennium

A significant part of the philosophical spectrum in India, in which the foundations of modern ethical and social theories were formed during the 20th and the turn of the 21st century, consists of religious philosophical teachings consciously and programmatically linked to the philosophical traditions of ancient India. These teachings mainly develop upon the mystical and intuitivist tendencies that have for centuries had a fertile context in Indian philosophy. They were and still are evidence of a widely accepted claim that in India the philosophical and religious views of the world and the interpretations of facts were for a long time not separate. In other words, neither was philosophy independent of purely religious concepts. This condition was permanent and, at least in a part of the philosophical spectrum, has lasted till the present day with no prospect of a significant change in the future. It has affected the process of forming modern social and ethical views and, ultimately, the constitution of civil society in India.

The establishment of independent India was marked by the fast development of academic philosophical systems not completely unaffected by the constantly evolving university environment. The main protagonists of this movement in the 20th century, among others were Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), a proponent of the Neo-Vedanta interpretations with his theory of a “universal” and “eternal” religion seeking compromise and synthesis between Western and Indian philosophy as the baseline of the concept of new morality and advanced social arrangement (Hajko, 2004, pp. 8–19); T. M. P. Mahadevan (1911–1983), whose “theory of values” stresses mainly religious values in the concept of ethics; G. R. Malkani (1892–1977), who attempted to epistemically justify the idealistic philosophy and interpretation of the classical Advaita Vedanta philosophy in terms of Hegelian thought; and P. T. S. Ramanujan (1904–1989), a universally recognised “absolute idealist”.

Pandurang Vajrinath Athavale (1920–2003) became a force in a distinctive way, particularly in the development of social theories in India. As a supporter of the Hindu reform movement, he notably managed to connect Vedic ideals and the teachings of Bhagavad Gita with his social views and, especially, with social work in the Indian countryside. In seeking the source of creation and formation of civil society, various followers have linked and are still looking to connect today, with the results that were obtained from the research these important philosophical personalities of twentieth-century India conducted.

This short overview does not concentrate on the many theoretical constructs based on traditional Hindu teachings of Shivaism, Vishnuism and Bhaktism, nor on the various disciplines of Buddhist and Gnostic philosophical theories and yoga schools, because they are not based on radical concepts. Instead, the focus is concentrated on current flows that have only come to life in the final years of the last millennium and appear to be alive today. They

include the philosophy of science (especially in the sense of methodological inspiration for social theories), feminist philosophy, Gandhian philosophy, postcolonial studies (regarding their meaning for social philosophy), and enduring existentialist initiatives often close to views of Marxist origin. Existentialism, like Marxism, still has a certain number of adherents in India, especially in the secular university environment, despite having been particularly “toned down” in the context of European and American philosophy.

Mention should also be made of the rationalist and atheistic tendencies found in social philosophy, which appear beyond Marxism or existentialism. A typical example is Akeel Bilgrami (born 1950), a native of India that has spent many years in the United States. He focuses mainly on the philosophy of language, while also noting moral philosophy and the identity issue that seems particularly complicated in the Indian environment. Despite Bilgrami’s proclaimed secularism, he sensitively perceives the function of religion as a theory of communitarianism. He does not consider religion to be primarily a matter of faith and doctrine or the Church as an institution, but rather they are impressive instruments maintaining community cohesion and solidarity, essential factors in building civil society.

The philosophy of science

During the 20th century, apart from mystical-intuitive philosophical-religious concepts, relatively strong tendencies appeared that led to the separation of philosophy (including the philosophy of morality) from religion and turned them into two autonomous phenomena. This meant a general approximation of philosophy to science. It was in the background of this process that the formation of modern ethical and social theories under Indian conditions developed and is continuing to develop. Sociology has evolved as a science as well, using the required instruments found in the general methodology of science. The development of scientific sociology is thereby bound directly to the development of ethics, moral philosophy and modern social theories.

These tendencies have often been directly connected to the construction of India as a secular state and to the secular policy practiced by the Government of India, and ultimately to the building of civil society. Here, the statesman and thinker Jawaharlal Nehru played an irreplaceable role in the process. In many ways, his works bridged classic concepts of comprehending and explaining the world and modern social theories.

One of the first philosophical pioneers and initiators of this flow was C. T. K. Chari, who held various positions at prominent universities in India. The main fields of study in his extremely broad focus were logic, linguistics, information theories, quantum physics, social philosophy and psychology. Even though his beginnings are linked to an interesting comparison of Russian and Hindi mysticism, in terms of the widely understood synthesis of Eastern and Western thinking, he would later conduct research into extra sensory perception (the PSI phenomena). His parapsychological research (Chari, 1973) is marked with remarkable and perhaps unexpected outcomes relevant even in terms of ethics, with his knowledge of scientific methodology, grounded mostly in natural sciences, provoking scepticism towards reincarnation teaching. In other words, he expressed doubts about samsara as an individual cycle of life and also the Law of Karma in relation to retribution for acts; and therefore against teachings of an eminently ethical character accepted axiomatically in Hindi society and cultural environment, which no reformers had dared question in the history of Hindu religious and philosophical thinking (excluding materialist philosophers).

C. T. K. Chari caused a brave and radical controversy with the Canadian-American mental specialist Ian Stevens, the founder of the Society for Scientific Exploration and author of *European Cases of the Reincarnation Type*, a key literary work in that specific area. Chari questioned Ian Stevenson’s exact research, claiming respondents had been biased and misunderstood the problem. It is interesting that Chari, as an Indian philosopher, would have

given way to scepticism regarding the issue of reincarnation and not find the research of Stevens to be scientifically acceptable. The significance of his argument was not only in the factual view taken of the issue, but, first and foremost, in the path philosophy should take as a science in confrontation with traditional ideas of Hindu thinking.

Quantum mechanics, in the foreground of C. T. K. Chari's interest, is also the main domain of a younger scientist, the contemporary philosopher and theologian Mathew Chandrankunnel (born 1958). Taught and advised by Aage Bohr, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker and Ilya Prigogine, Chandrankunnel has devoted all his research efforts to the philosophy of science. As a member of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, he became a pioneer in interreligious dialogue and founded the Bangalore Forum for Science and Religion, thus contributing toward distinguishing between the fields of interest in both disciplines. Mainly due to these efforts, he became a critical figure in the further evolution of ethics as a science and the development of Indian social theory.

Nanduri Said Prasad (born 1944), exploring relationships between science and philosophy under specific Indian conditions (in his books *Science and Hindu Philosophy*, 1987 and *Will Science Come to an End?* 1998), seeks answers to philosophical questions and problems of scientific methodology linked to the exploration of the universe. Kaikhosrov D. Irany (born 1922), a student of Albert Einstein, has throughout his long life specialised in the philosophy of science and of Immanuel Kant. Although, at first sight, all these efforts may seem distant from ethical and social issues, they have had a considerable importance for science as such, mainly from the point of view of methodology.

Feminist philosophy, sociology and gender studies

Feminist theories constitute a movement constantly gaining a stronger position in the panorama of Indian philosophical and sociological thinking, and which has strong ethical consequences. Indian feminist philosophy, sociology and gender studies are specific as in many cases they are based on cognition of classic Indian philosophical sources and their use in the quest to provide women in Indian society with equal opportunities.

A pioneer in this field was Atmaprajnanda Saraswati (born 1954) whose scientific beginnings seem to have been paradoxically connected to the ancient Vedas. As an expert in Advaita Vedanta teachings influenced by the Vedic studies of Shankar, Gandhi, Thakur and Aurobindo, she values the intellectual heritage left in sacred texts like the Shruti for today's world, although her opinion is inclined toward the chief nature of Advaita Vedanta and not mysticism. According to her, the Vedas are supposed to serve as an inspiration for further innovative efforts. The result of her practical adherence to these principles is a whole range of social activities (such as health education, blood donation and educational programs). Based on her studies of classical Hindu texts, Atmaprajnanda Saraswati, a nun and superior of a Hinduist women's order, seeks to explain the right of women in Indian society to enjoy equal status with men. She assumes, in the social sphere, as well as in the sphere of law, education and religion, that women have not had and still have not been provided the same rights as men. Even though she practices Hinduism, she praises the teaching of Gautama Buddha and the opportunity he gave women to participate in monastic life. She longs to bring the teaching of Advaita Vedanta to everyone, including women. In her interpretation and understanding of this teaching, she seeks answers to all questions related to feminist philosophy.

Although Meera Kosambi (born 1939) is an older pioneer with similar opinions, mainly focused on sociology, her contribution is significant even in feminist philosophy. She works in gender studies and feminist philosophy at the Research Centre for Women's Studies, University for Women in Mumbai, defining space within urban sociology. Ramarao Indira (born 1952), a feminist theoretician and professor of sociology, has devoted herself to similar problems, but from a slightly different point of view. Her work forms a significant part of

current sociological research in gender studies. She points to the lack of education and backwardness women face, often reduced to the issue of a general deficiency in formal education, especially among women, being also a problem of moral relations in present society. Even as illiteracy decreases in India each year in percent terms, it remains high. Besides combating functional literacy among the rural population, there are other projects to eliminate illiteracy among women. Although it is just one of many factors, various surveys in the 1960s showed a decrease in the number of parturitions among women with at least a secondary education. Currently, literacy among women in India does not exceed half the female population, so there is no expectation that enforcement of school education would bring immediate results. The struggle against backwardness implies much more. A survey carried out in Kolkata showed women with all levels of education to have relatively fewer children than anywhere else. Similar surveys in Mumbai proved these findings to be correct. Thus, both surveys confirm that urbanisation and metropolitan lifestyles play an important role in the declining birth-rate. In this context, sociological surveys also sensitively reflect the issue of female employment and provide evidence of a declining birth-rate among employed women in urban agglomerations.

Diverse issues mainly related to post-colonial analysis of women in a specific Indian context (other than in a “Western” context) are perhaps the fastest growing area of sociological research not only in the academic environment within India, but also among researchers of Indian origin working abroad. A typical example is Chandra Talpade Mohanty (born 1955), currently employed at Syracuse University in the US, who formulated a new concept of women in post-colonial society, in the non-Western understanding and in a transnational context. Similarly, C. T. Mohanty “criticises the way feminist texts portray women [in developing countries] as a homogenous being bound to traditions that lack modern political rights” (Atkins, 2006, p. 330). Despite the author’s Indian origins, she takes a Western perspective enlightened by 20th century Euro-American feminist theories and whose attitude towards gender and feminist issues in India and the developing world is remarkable (Mohanty & Russo, 1991).

She believes that such a perspective idealises a distorted image of the “Western” woman as “modern, educated and liberated”, controlling her own existence and having a fully fledged sense in all ways. “This attitude also enables a discursive system of classification that lies in the background of the Western form of governance generated by the Enlightenment. These systems are established on a binary logic that repeatedly confirms and legitimises the central role of the West” (Atkins, 2006, p. 331). Despite the fact that C. T. Mohanty does not live in the Republic of India, her opinions have a significant impact on local philosophy, sociology and culturology. One of the first pioneers of gender studies in India was Vina Mazumdar (1927–2013), a left-wing activist and long-time key figure of the women’s movement in India seeking to overcome the consequences of historical colonialism. Her works discuss political ideology in the women’s movement and study the social status of Indian women living in rural areas within the context of contemporary ethics.

A sociology lecturer from Kolkata, the Bengali poet Mallika Sengupta (1960–2011) played a crucial role in the history of the feminist movement in India, although she is better known for her unapologetically political poetry than for her sociological research. Similarly, Maria Mies (born 1931), a visiting German professor at Indian universities and member of the feminist movement, has shown her interest in the role of Indian women with her criticisms of patriarchal society. Unfortunately, due to her sudden death, Sharmila Rege (1964–2013) could not further develop her feminist thoughts, as were outlined in her book *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (Rege, 2006). A sociology graduate from Stockholm University, Meera Kosambi (1939–2015), was a spiritual supporter of the remarkable, well-educated Hinduist Pandita Ramabai, who had already promoted feminist ideas in the 19th century (Kosambi, 1994).

While at the University for Women in Mumbai, Meera dealt with urbanisation and urban development in the context of gender in contemporary India.

Postcolonial and Gandhian studies

Feminism is partially related to post-colonial literature, which is nowadays widely spread in India. In the second half of the 20th century, India finally gained the independence it had long desired and fought to achieve. But becoming independent also meant leaving the colonial heritage behind. The initiative to provide people with undistorted news both in the press and digital media is a good example. Moreover, India was also the first country in the Non-Aligned Movement to have brought up the need to “decolonise” mass media in order to obtain more objectivity when talking about the political, cultural and social situation existing in the Indian Subcontinent. Consequently, the government had to assume responsibility for creating an educational system and new initiatives regarding university teaching and research in all fields, last but not in the least, including those related to social life in India.³ Moreover, its basis can be found in ethical theories.

It is still necessary to react to a number of radical changes in society, such as newly-organised government administration, urbanisation, the position of women, changes in the traditional way of life, Westernisation, migration of the population from the countryside to the cities, family planning and more. Naturally, social theory has become one of the priorities, especially scientific sociology, arising from collaboration among a wide spectrum of social sciences with other fields of knowledge. The moral specifics that confirmed patriotism and somewhat seamlessly accepted cultural traditions came to the forefront, thus logically gaining ground in the interest of social sciences and becoming one of driving powers in the fight for national liberation.

When the Republic of India became independent, it was not just a political-state rupture, but a change bringing consequences, which intimated an urgent need for a different understanding of the establishment of political and social systems in the new environment then developing. The existing emphasis on relatively narrowly understood traditions and cultural independence started intensively to confront the more common vision of civilisation in the postcolonial age of evolution, in the period of economical, legal, political and cultural globalisation. Questions about the future of a multinational, political state and national identity are still coming to the forefront alongside questions about the perspective between universality and particularism and also between differentiation and integration.

On 12th January, 1950 the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru addressed all developing countries and the new Asian democracies in a talk given at Colombo University in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), providing a peculiar and inspirational statement (known for its conscientiousness and later included in a series called “Basic Wisdom”). In his speech, he said: “Each country has certain special cultural characteristics which have developed through the ages. Similarly, each age has a culture and a certain way of its own. The cultural characteristics of a country are important and certainly retained, unless, of course, they do not fit in with the spirit of the age. So, by all means, adhere to the special culture of your nation. But there is something that is deeper than national culture and that is human culture. If you do not have that human culture, that basic culture, then even that national culture of which you may be so proud has no real roots and will not do you much good” (Nehru, 1954, p. 429).

Jawaharlal Nehru played an extremely important role in the process of “the awakening of Asia”, and thus in the development of sociological disciplines as well. Even though his utopian imaginations about the future of India cannot be assigned from the present point of

³ Academic research is supported by the Indian Council for Social Science Research, development programs are being pursued by the Central Planning Commission with its research program (Planning Commission and its Research Programmes Committee).

view, there can be no denial of any strict scientific value, their strength in terms of moral pathos, its humanistic message and the ethos of “scientific humanism”, however naive they may seem. From this aspect Nehru observed the possibilities of radical change in all of society as a premise for the morals of social development and justice.

Turning points during and after Indian independence were not connected only to changes in the moral and content of the theory of society, but also to significant changes in the scientific and sociological community, the most visible of which was increasingly institutionalised sociological research. These institutions, along with many others, mostly university research centres, began focusing not only on generally articulated questions in various sciences about society, but also on many partial problems. Last but not least, they tried to answer fundamental questions related to the terminology and methods of research in the field of sociology.

Homi K. Bhabha (born 1949) is a prolific author and an example of the socially theoretical approach being taken toward issues in postcolonial studies. Through interdisciplinary scientific discourse analysing the evolution of power structures and their reflections in countries that were previously influenced by European colonial activities, Bhabha explores in his many works the phenomenon of post-colonialism using poststructuralist methodology, for instance in *Democracy De-Realized* (2002), *Making Difference: The Legacy of the Culture Wars* (2003), *Still Life* (2005), and especially in his philosophical novel *The Black Savant and the Dark Princess* (2006). The central term of his thought concept – not without any connection to postmodernism – is hybridisation. He attempts to characterise the birth of new cultural forms of multiculturalism, which sees *emergence* as an interdisciplinary principle. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory is connected to Poststructuralism and influenced by the opinions of Jacques Derrida, especially regarding how he defines “deconstruction”.

Analysts and promoters of Mahatma Gandhi’s work and his successors developing his ethical opinions and moral stances formed a specific group among current Indian philosophers. Amongst these authors – university teachers, significant cultural workers, writers and politicians – can also be found representatives of numerous Indian institutions aimed at studying the spiritual heritage of Gandhi’s work. These authors belong to a relatively strong contemporary movement of extraordinary importance in the formation of social and ethical opinions and the development of modern social theories, such as Gandhian Philosophy.

There are dozens of scientific texts, compendia, scientific-popular works, biographical and bibliographical studies on Gandhi, his work and philosophical, pedagogical, political and other beliefs, which to a certain extent embrace the problems of the philosophical and particularly ethical character that frequently merge with sociology, history, psychology, pedagogy and political theory. Studies of moral and social philosophy and philosophically relevant applications of Mahatma Gandhi’s thoughts in particular scientific and socio-political activities dominate his philosophical works.

Gandhi’s traditional topics (morality of nonviolence, peace enforcement activities, national self-determination) are complemented with a number of comparative studies analysing the relationship between him and either other eminent persons (such as Jawaharlal Nehru, B. R. Ambedkar, Karl Marx, Subhash Chandra Bose, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and others) or other less known thinkers; for example, an essay-like monograph by the prominent philosopher and sociologist Chittaranjan Das portrays the relationship between Gandhi and Gopabandhu Das (Das, 1978). This monograph includes an encounter with the pioneer and founder of the Congress political movement in Orissa. Comparativism in modern Indian socio-philosophical tradition is a preferred methodological procedure.

Within this group, an interesting monography written in 2004, *Gandhi and Mao in Quest of Analogy* by Ratan Das, is worth special attention. Here, he attempts to depict a synthesis of

both leaders' ideas that would be instructive in the era of power wars and social fights, while leading readers through the process of the "new chapter of revolution" (Das, 2004, p. 10) that is beginning, even though no one understands its nature. Ratan Das emphasises Gandhi's understanding of the revolutionary movement as non-violent action. In the union of these two distinct views on ethics, thoughts and strategies, he finds a new perspective in the development of society. Even though the author does not see them as completely incompatible, *a priori*, he is actually trying to seek connections between them. It does not come as a surprise that R. Das's writings in this field have earned him a doctorate at an international university in Washington, D.C.

Less controversial works are also being published. Ramji Singh, a professor at Bhagalpur University in Bihar, wrote a very useful handbook titled *Gandhi Darshan Mimamsa: A Handbook of Gandhian Philosophy* to help anyone become familiar with the basic concepts and key ideas of Gandhism (Singh, 1986). More frequently cited are books on relations between Gandhi's philosophical thoughts and social opinions on other fields of scientific research. Leading ideas are economies based on minimising demand and need, alongside trust in the administration of community property to elevate the oppressed, impoverished and depressed classes. Advocates of this idea to create a system of economically-supported values are Madan Mohan Verma (born 1937) in his book *Gandhian Economics* (1995), Romesh Diwan from New York (*Essays in Gandhian Economics*, 1985) and L. M. Bhola, a professor from Mumbai in *Essays on Gandhian Socio-Economic Thought* (2000). Shashi Prabha Sharma (born 1942) offers readers a philosophical analysis of Gandhi's economic thinking in a study dedicated to the Mahatma's ethically-based "holistic economy". He examines Gandhi's philosophy of life, along with the system of values and concepts that accompany it, seeking to find ways to influence philosophical solutions in an inconsistent world of numerous economical principles and political movements (Sharma, 1992).

Mahatma Gandhi is more than a figure uncritically worshipped and adored in contemporary India and its philosophical thought. Yet Gandhism, as an official ideology of the Congress Party, has gradually been secularised and is no longer taboo, with a considerably large group of authors questioning its importance to the Indian way of thinking. A slim volume entitled *Gandhi for the New Generation* by Gunvant B. Shah, with four editions having been published since 1982, levels severe criticism of the opinions expressed by Gandhi. The author (Shah, 1986) believes Gandhi's thoughts, in view of current ethical problems, to be void and inadequate, and moreover out of date and confusing. Shah comments that Gandhi's thoughts have become useless for a young generation living in a world of different values and goals than what had existed when Gandhi was alive.

Although Hardy Singh from Jaynayan Vyas University in Jodhpur claims Gandhi's idealism to be meaningless and difficult to understand, his work *Gandhian Thought and Philosophy* tries nevertheless to find new possibilities of interpreting it. According to Hardy, the reason for the misunderstanding is a connection between Gandhi's philosophy, his idea of leadership, and the Mahatma's political activity in the narrower sense. Gandhi's radical initiative in this field complicates the philosophical component of Gandhi's personality, if not making it impossible to comprehend. There is always an effort to see Gandhi's personality in the totality of his attributes, which also includes his philosophical belief (Singh, 2006).

Anand Kumarasamy's *Gandhi on Personal Leadership* also discusses the issue of leadership as expressed by Mahatma Gandhi. He explores the possibilities of real people making personal changes under the influence of the Mahatma's charisma (Kumarasamy, 2006). B. Mohanan's *Gandhi's Legacy and New Human Civilisation* looks at Gandhi's spiritual mission in his era, which subsequently transcended the narrow time horizon (Mohanan, 1999). The main theme of his work is Gandhi's view on human civilisation, while at the same time seeking solutions to problems arising in the forthcoming era. He pays

attention to problematic secularism, social changes, social revolution, tolerable and sustainable growth of human civilisation. Moreover, he also discusses the forming of the nation, something of extraordinary importance when considering India as a multinational state, and the problems of civilisation interpreted with Gandhi's principle of tolerance.

Man in society from the perspective of existentialism

Out of all the philosophy movements to have come out of Europe, it was existentialism that played a significant role in the history of modern philosophical thinking in India during the second half of the 20th century, having garnered broad public acceptance in the years following World War II. Starting in the 1950s, interest in this philosophy would spread, especially among artistic and intellectual circles, to become literally the kind of fashionable trend that to a substantially smaller extent persists to this day. As proved by Indian admirers and followers of existentialism, even though the European version originated in other contexts, its different forms and the use of diverse notions convey opinions already long present in ancient Indian beliefs. Guru Dutt stressed the observations of existentialist philosophers in a direct connection between the human interest in daily routine and definiteness on one side and in spatial eternity and infiniteness on the other. Thereby, modern thinking has emphasised the terrestrial utility of philosophy, "dropping down to earth" from the heavens where it had resided.

Apart from Guru Dutt, the group of existentialists is also dominated by the thoughts of Abhaya Charan Mukerji, whose 1960s initiatory study *Existentialism and Indian Philosophy* stated "affinity", "consistency" and ideological "proximity" between Indian philosophical traditions and European existentialism (Mukerji, 1963, p. 260). Like Dutt, Mukerji's thinking is based on two basic conformities: (1) existence is a fundamental principle, with primacy over thinking and preceding any substance from an ontological point of view; and (2) the relationship between subject and object is not an objective connection (Mukerji, 1963, p. 261), but it always expresses a certain subjective relation between an individual and defined phenomena.

According to the Bengali "integral" philosopher and psychologist Haridas Chaudhuri (1913–1975) the philosophy of existentialism directly "corresponds with the most important thesis of Vedanta" (Chaudhuri, 1962, pp. 89–99). At the same time, he emphasised the substance of existence and avowed the existential preference of an intuitive perception of reality. He also advocated a thesis of the ability to be cognised only as one's being. It reminded him of the Brahman-Atman principle of the ancient Indian Upanishad and the school of Advaita Vedanta, even in the modern Neo-Vedant interpretation. Chaudhuri's attitude fitted his quest for metaphysical synthesis (for example, he pointed out its presence in the work of Aurobindo Ghosh) and for the formation of the integral yoga philosophy. Within these different philosophies, he developed transcultural explanations of philosophical, religious and psychological theories which are inspiring even today.

Basar Kumar Lal elaborated a radical opinion, claiming the interwar Hindu philosopher Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya (1875–1939) had already come close to existentialism with a thesis and existential point of view that were practically identical. If Bhattacharya's "spiritual self" were substituted with Heidegger's "Man" or even with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "anonymous self", all of them would still stay remain within the scope of almost the same philosophy. Even Heidegger's opinion about "a being expressed only by a human" is close to what Kumar Lal wrote. Basant Kumar Lal presents the collective genius of some Indian philosophies and the works of existentialists, mostly Jaspers and Heidegger, considering them to have been Søren Kierkegaard's successors. Moreover, he brought into focus Heidegger's concept of care, in connection with regarding a human as a social being.

Another group of Indian philosophers assesses existentialism critically or even disapprovingly. Members include S. N. L. Shrivastava from Ranchi University, a historian studying the Daya Krishna philosophy, and P. T. Rajan, an absolute proponent of the idealism doctrine, one of the most influential philosophies in India in the present day. Shrivastava criticises existentialism for its extreme subjectivism and one-sided orientation on the human individual regardless of social context, expressing reservations about existentialism mostly in the field of ethics and the theory of truth. He believed existentialism to have lacked the criteria for distinguishing what is morally good and bad and accused the philosophy of ethical relativism. Similarly, he argued over the differentiation of the truth into abstract and concrete, while questioning the usage of the term “abstract truth”.

In the early 1950s, Daya Krishna consistently rejected the existentialist doctrine by rejecting Sartre’s concept of nothingness. “Once again Existentialist thinking reformulated the problem of Being and Value [and] left us face to face with nothingness” (Krishna, 1955, p. 206). He pointed out the danger of axiological nihilism; claiming existentialism deprived the human of his basic certainties of living and leaving the individual lonesome and powerless. It degraded man to a single being with no ability to generate positive activity and finally it suppressed the value and importance of responsibility. Krishna believes that existentialism has led European and partly even universal philosophical thought down a blind alley. According to him, existentialism is an offspring of decadent culture and a civilisation no longer capable of further development, thus it has no perspective either in India or anywhere else in the world. In this concept, he continued criticising existentialism from the “left”, the section of the political spectrum to which the rhetoric of his texts also correspond.

Criticisms from the “right” are based on orthodox Hindu religious attitudes whose intention is to develop an idea of the human experience as just a fragment of the spiritual being of the absolute. P. T. Raju, an influential philosopher and historian, compared the Western philosophical heritage to the Indian thinking tradition and noticed that existentialism as the philosophical stream expresses inner tension and a part of a general “crisis of cultures” as implied from a study of Kierkegaard’s “paradox”, “despair”, tragic “anxiety” and hopeless “loneliness”. He found no understanding of these attitudes and concepts and assigned them to the cultural crisis and the European complicated drama scenario of Western spirit, considering them to be foreign to the Indian thinking tradition. His conclusion shows existentialism to be incapable of providing a way out of the cultural and civilisation crisis still influencing the contemporary world, mainly because of its “scepticism”, “nihilism”, “individualism” and rejection of the objective criteria in choosing values (Raju, 1962, p. 242).

The third group of Indian philosophers expressing their thoughts on existentialism are qualified academic thinkers, mostly university professors. Employing scientific objectivity, a correct methodological approach and precise identification of the issues, they comprehensively reflect the state and possible perspectives of philosophical thinking in a global context. Dharendra Mohan Datta looks for similarities between Western and Indian philosophy, describing the general trend in the Indian understanding of the relationship between an individual and society as spiritual individualism mediated through social organicism. Datta claims that the traditional Indian concept calls for humans neither to prefer terrestrial life, nor to try unilaterally to escape from it through the practice of yoga, but instead to seek balance and harmony (Datta, 1953). Such a harmonious state is defined as a balance between the transcendental and immanent aspects of Brahman.

Research conducted by Ramakant A. Sinari, a phenomenologist and professor at Mumbai University, compares existentialist philosophy and early Buddhism, while refusing any kind of institutionalism and emphasising the spirit of the individual, his ability and the will to improve. In his best-known work, *Structure of Indian Thought* (1970), Ramakant A. Sinari claims that both Søren Kierkegaard and Buddha underwent an overwhelming experience of

“sickness unto death”. His other book, *Paradox of Being Human* (Sinari, 2007), considers Kierkegaard to have most remarkably analysed melancholic depression among the religiously devout and reminds readers that Buddha’s quotes actually express the typical existentialist atmosphere.

All current tendencies characterising Indian philosophy at the turn of the millennium cannot be implemented without social transformations. These include separating philosophy from religion and bringing it closer to science, yet in the background of a still dominating mysticism and intuitivism that clarifies the position of materialism in Indian philosophy, comparativism with the ideal of one world philosophy, existential philosophy, the teaching of Gandhi in all forms, feminism, postcolonial interpretations of the current social reality and other philosophical movements on the Indian subcontinent, with all of these thoughts ultimately sharing the common opinion of the ideas of humanism that are contained in traditional Indian philosophy.

Caste system and social stratification

If anyone were to determine the most frequent – and perhaps most important – sociological issue in India at the turn of the millennium (and also over a much wider time span), it would probably be social stratification, something directly related to the question of the persistent existence and ongoing tenacity – even becoming more intense – of castes as a structuring element of Indian society and their continued presence today.

The first pioneers and initiators of sociological thinking in India were already confronting this issue, one at the heart of Indian people’s everyday lives in all social strata at the end of the 19th century. At first sight, and under the laws of India, caste prejudices should only be a partial or even barely surviving phenomenon, and they should definitely not be influencing lives in Indian society. However, in a tangle of diverse religious doctrines and almost unrelenting caste differences, especially when marriages and family relationships are formed, they are still alive and functional to a considerable extent. Within state institutions and in various public organizational structures they are still present, although sometimes only inconspicuously implicit (and unlawful, of course). Open any Indian daily newspaper and there will be countless testimonies about the issue of “untouchability” at the very least so deeply ingrained in the minds of many Hindus that it cannot be discarded over several decades. It is still alive because it is based on the axiomatic origins of traditional Indian morals. Although changes in the caste structure are permanently present, they do not deviate radically from the traditional view of the stratification of society and from the framework of traditional moral laws.

The theoretical reflection of these problems ranges from the origins of all social theories in India to the latest works in this field, such as the latest extensive textbook by Ranjit Rajadhyaksha and discussing social structure and stratification (Rajadhyaksha, 2015). But the perception of this problem has a long tradition in India. Historians, who have seen the development of sociology as a scientific discipline on the Indian subcontinent, point out some of the oldest “pioneers”. One of them is Ram Mohana Roy (1772–1833), a social reformer and religious thinker operating in Bengal, then a part of British India. In his social agenda, one of the priorities was the fight against “social evil” related to the holdover within Orthodox Hindu society of its system of caste distribution within the population. Ram Mohan Roy considered the custom of burning widows (*sati*), child marriages, polygamy to be the greatest “social evil” of his time, while believing the most important tool for putting the necessary social reforms into place among society was education, upbringing, and the pedagogical influence upon people in the broad sense of the word.

The importance of education in building awareness among the members of society was also emphasized by his successor Satish Chandra Mukherjee (1865–1948), whose ideal

example was Dwarka Nath Mitra, an enlightened High Court judge in Calcutta (Kolkata) and an extraordinary personality that lived at the start of the 20th century. He was an atheistic propagator of Comtean positivism and his religion of humanity in the spirit of his European model enabled him to understand the extraordinary importance of sociology in the formation of the secular state.

These first modest attempts to formulate a modern theory of society were conducted in an atmosphere of traditional Hinduism (practiced by over 80% of the population), which perhaps even today is believed to be extremely strict

“from the social point of view, i.e., in the organization of the society into a precisely elaborated hierarchical structure. This principle of the social hierarchy was disturbed for the first time, but not replaced, by the concepts of equality with members of the Buddhist and Jainist community, yet within the Hindu community itself it was not questioned until the influence of modern reforms and then officially abolished by the secular constitution ratified by the Republic of India in 1950. However, hierarchical relationships based on social inclusion (*varnas* and castes), family status, age, and gender are still present” (Knotková-Čapková, 2012, p. 143).

The Buddhist, Jainist, Sikh and Parish communities that are out of the hierarchy are relatively small and cannot significantly influence the attitudes of the Hindu majority.

A specific problem not addressed here is the Muslims, who live in northern India. Islam is practiced by around 12% of the population of India, who are governed, in addition to the constitution and relevant laws, by the particular regulations of their religion. The need to analyze, explain, and reform living traditions in India is perceived primarily to be a task of sociology. This has been demonstrated by many pioneers of sociological thinking in India from the earliest times to the present. Similarly, as in the early stage of the discipline, the social reformer Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883); later influential and interdisciplinary economists and thoughtful lawyers Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842–1901) and Radhakamal Mukerjee (1889–1968); the writer and journalist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894); Bhupendranath Datta (1880–1961), the younger brother of the famous Swami Vivekananda, and last but not least, the founder of the Bengali Institute of Sociology, Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887–1949), among many others from various times that have left their legacy in the spirit of progress. They are introduced here in order to fill a potential image of the personality vacuum that existed, according to some European ideas, in this area. This idea is indeed not valid, as the specific problems of Indian life have always been the subject of a theoretical discussion. The mindset of these pioneers of social theory was fruitful and remained alive and inspiring into the 20th century. These efforts began – in opposition to the ever-functioning and active conservative (especially Orthodox Hindu) intellectual elites – with Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, a pioneer from the older generation of 19th century Indian sociologists, but with significant overlap to the 20th century. His breakthrough book *Hindu Castes and Sects* (Bhattacharya, 1896) is not only considered the first modern scientific monograph in the area but to some extent, it has defined an essential field of research and outlined the direction and primarily the focus of some of the future sociological research in India.

All these thinkers understood the need for social change on the Indian Subcontinent, specifically in the persistence of the harmful of the caste system, which determined social inclusion from birth and drastically regulated ritually any intercastic encounters. Not only did theoreticians see castes in Indian society as a detrimental phenomenon inhibiting overall social progress but, more than that, they respected the clear need for a theoretical reflection of this state and the processes of changing it, not in the least on the foundation of sociology as (at that time only relatively) an independent and perspective scientific discipline.

In philosophy, history, psychology, political science, pedagogy, and in Indian sociology alike the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas has played and still plays a role in India. In all scientific disciplines and in India's cultural and professional environment, it is taken for granted that countless progressive thinkers from the past who contemplated the path Indian society should take during the 20th century were influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. And among the key issues he sought reform of was social stratification.

Modern interpreters of the Mahatma's teachings emphasize that Gandhi's ideological reference should not be seen only in the struggle for political independence and in notions of Satyagraha and Ahinsa, but also, *inter alia*, in approaches toward more intensely developing areas of the economy, new production relationships, ethical finance, the trade union movement, and the problems of humane use of the power of capital. In light of the sociological research he conducted at the Ahmedabad Gujarati Industrial Center, the contemporary author S. K. Goel observed it in his writings on the application of Gandhi's ideology in the Indian textile industry – one of the most popular industries in India (Goel, 2002). Interestingly, proponents of two different currents in the life of Indian castes find support in Gandhi's teachings. In a similar way, there are both those seeking to purify and improve the status of their caste in the social structure (a process sometimes referred to as "Sanskritization"), and also occasionally those preferring to seize upon the outermost traits of Western culture and reject traditional customs that are less humane and more harmful on behalf of standards of modern developed societies ("Westernization"). While one caste group is trying to gain traditional privileges to increase its importance in the eyes of the surrounding society, the other group rejects the same privileges that have belonged to them since they were born.

From a sociological point of view, several other papers related to India are still relevant to the still alive and respected references to Mahatma Gandhi. Just three of the numerous and varied examples from the past decade are mentioned here: the fundamental study by the Sikh author Surjit Kaur Jolly combining biographical data with an interpretation of Gandhi's thoughts in today's globalizing world (Jolly, 2007), which draws attention to Gandhi's sociologically interesting and still up-to-date theoretical conception of the Swaraj, a practical concept of civil self-government that would be based on a system of economically self-sufficient communities; the search and discovery of the relationship between Gandhism and Marxism by Vishwanath Tandon (2007), and finally the attempt to understand and explain Gandhi's philosophical and socio-theoretical views from postmodernist theories (Pandey, 2007). They represent only a fraction of the dozens of books published every year in India that are dedicated to the words and deeds of Mahatma Gandhi.

Out of a large number of modern authors, the social stratification and caste system are addressed by the well-known sociologist Puthenveetil Radhakrishnan (born 1949), a favourite social critic and historian, as well as the author of a successful monograph on caste, religion, and government in the past and on current Indian society (Radhakrishnan, 2007). Radhakrishnan considers the state in Durkheim's spirit to be the best expression of the life of society. He is aware of the complex rules governing Indian society and takes into account the many roles its members fulfil, including religious rules. Yet, or precisely because of this, there is no other way of social development than developing the role of the state in the sense of coordinating sovereign authority.

When thinking about society, it is unthinkable today to overlook the ubiquitous issue of globalization. A large group of authors sees globalization as a welcome possibility of change, the opportunity for a relatively closed society to cross borders. For example, Yogendra Singh emphasizes the necessity of changing the conditions of life in Indian society, which, according to him, is happening spontaneously as a result of globalization (Singh, 1997; 2000).

However, “crossing borders” has its own specific limitations in India. The “caste system” theories have an impact on the practical policy as the incredibly prolific author Govind Sadashiv Ghurye (1893–1983) proved. He would later especially devote himself to urban sociology, while remaining within the context of his previous interest (Ghurye, 1962; 1963). Ghurye was among the first authors to seriously point out that the caste affiliation of political actors plays a vital role in the political life of contemporary India and highlights the political links between the caste system and electoral voting. He particularly emphasized the fact that, in the elections at all levels of the political system, voters, to a great extent, are influenced by family relations and decide, in particular, on the basis of their caste affiliation. According to current sociological data, almost half of the votes in local elections and up to about 30 percent in parliamentary elections are governed by such links. His observations of the caste system have been published and revised in later editions, and are still considered crucial in India even today (Ghurye, 2008).

A significant factor in India’s current development is industrialization, mostly linked to the development of large cities, which are growing in India mainly through migration. On the other hand, the countryside is not naturally declining in population due to a demographic bulge. Migration from rural to urban areas is also part of the national integration that India has been talking about for decades. However, it is happening in a spontaneous, uncontrolled way, and causes problems. Urban sociology answers a number of questions relating to these phenomena and studies related to urban sociology are currently being addressed by Sujata Patel at the University of Hyderabad (Patel, 2003; 2006). She is attempting to identify universally applicable and valid factors changing the social structure of large cities, such as the development of industry and innovations in production technologies, but also land prices, changes in communication systems and the use of different energies and raw materials. In connection with these and other factors, changes in social stratification are also being modified.

Andre Beteille (born 1934), one of India’s major sociologists, is studying the caste system in southern India. He is known for his methodological work (Beteille, 2002) and especially his books on Northern India’s social structure, mainly in agrarian communities and global social stratification as well. He believes that the most obvious obstacles to modernization of contemporary Indian society are prejudices inherent in the caste system. Modern, sociologically oriented thinkers often draw attention to the marginal significance of an individual’s personality in relation to the caste where he or she is included. In India, virtually everyone belongs to a caste, although they behave in some situations as if they were not. This system was born in ancient times in India, survived centuries almost untouched, and shows surprising viability despite efforts to suppress it. Even today, it manages the fate of most Indians, controls their privacy, and deforms mental life, predetermining their occupation and social status. The link to the caste’s hereditary profession has evolved into a natural division of labour, and today it is one of the critical criteria of stratification. The specialization that has always taken place at work has caused the number of castes and sub-castes to grow into monstrous proportions. Indian sociologists have come up to a hardly believable number of ten thousand.

Anatomy of poverty and welfare

Although the issue of poverty is, to a greater or lesser extent, the subject of the vast majority of Indian social theories, Two examples are chosen here of theoreticians with different understandings of the issue as well as different solutions.

A typical mirror of the present-day life of India is the specific approach taken to Indian reality by Bindeshwar Pathak (born 1943), a sociologist and human rights activist who has focused on the practical implementation of social reforms through education, sociology of

education in the broad sense of the word, and especially health and hygiene, while also in areas such as non-traditional sources of energy. He uses his sociological knowledge to organise social work primarily in suburban communities. Under conditions found in India, a similar practical approach is extremely socially appreciated and undoubtedly necessary. Surveys have shown the problem of defying simplification, and the beggars that comprise the lowest caste of Indian society to be very diverse (and to be not just immigrants in overcrowded large cities, as is sometimes claimed), reflecting a number of unresolved issues in Indian society. Pathak followed through on “Garibi Hatao!” (Remove Poverty), the old election slogan used by Indira Gandhi in 1971, which became the leading idea of the subsequent five-year economic plan and part of a program to increase employment in rural areas. He identifies the situation as a parallel between the growth of the economy and the individual failure of people overseeing the context of a dramatically evolving society. The crowds of beggars are a product of the declassification of such individuals the economic system has yet to give a chance. They are the final stage in the decomposition of traditional social ties and the decadence of pre-capitalist relationships of production, which has outrun industrialisation – and yet precedes it, leaving behind the devastating trace of millions of destroyed human projects, hopes, efforts and lives.

While Pathak primarily conducts empirical research into the poverty found in contemporary Indian society, Amartya Kumar Sen is deepening existing theories, in addition to reflecting research results in an interdisciplinary spirit. Among other things, he responds to Arrow’s impossibility theorem, critically evaluates the theory of rational expectations, and partly accepts John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, Samuelson’s revealed preference theory, and Paul Streeten’s policy on basic needs. When Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1998, it was already clear that his theory of the development of freedom and democracy as a universal value had outgrown the interpretation of society’s narrow economic framework, while his emphasis on the issue of human potential has gained considerable sociological relevance. Sen’s contribution to the development of a modern theory of social choice was particularly centred on the development of innate human abilities and the further expansion of their potential to the benefit of economic development. However, neither the quantitative aspect of the production of goods nor the way to maximise profits is of primary importance. Maximisation of benefits, says Amartya Sen, cannot express the true nature of human activity aimed at achieving the well-being of behaviour. The theory of “capability” proposed by Amartya Sen has proved to be a faithful alternative model of progress and development, far exceeding the boundaries of economic or industrial growth as is practiced today, but nevertheless including, among other things, a path to development he perceives as an expansion of abilities. More than goods and resources (inputs), Sen believes the focus of access to capabilities to be people and their capabilities (final outputs). It provides a framework for contemplating issues such as poverty and inequality, which cannot be adequately addressed just at the level of economic instruments. His interests range from defining new ways of measuring well-being and poverty, through building links with public choice theory, to empirical studies of famine following up on research into the mechanisms that cause poverty and hunger. He opines them to be a problem of relationships and distribution, not of shortages. There have never been famines in nations with democratic governments, which is why economic disasters can be avoided in a system where political rights and freedoms are paramount. Amartya Sen repeatedly provides reminders that “a real man is not a rational machine selecting Goods X over Y and Z absolutely and unmistakably, based on his own preferences, as is portrayed. Millions of human beings, on the contrary, live in today’s reality and every day face the question of whether they will ever be able to provide any of these goods and ensure their survival” (Zelinová, 2009, pp. 587–599). Amartya Sen has proposed an approach that takes account of the expansion of capabilities in the area of

economic development. People are not just the maximising of benefits but have their own intrinsic value. In his interdisciplinary concept, Sen follows the distinction between economic growth and economic development. Growth means producing a large number of things no matter what happens to people as producers and consumers. Development, in contrast, involves expanding people's abilities. Economic growth increases outputs and earnings per person, economic development means improving life prospects, literacy, health and education.

Not all of the taboos characterising Indian society in the past have been overcome with the same success. A certain – relatively small – breakthrough of the barriers can be observed in relation to castes, partly in conjunction with the development of gender solutions in the background of feminist social theories and sociological analyses of traditional rural society with its prejudices and conservative way of life. Although urban sociology is on the rise, reflected in large urban areas with multi-million populations, the megalopolises with their diverse populations and social strata, multiplying in India every year, might require even greater acceleration.

The overarching content horizon of Indian social theories at the turn of the millennium, in which over the past decades the focus of social stratification has been centred on the caste system in India, but in which gender issues are increasingly being promoted and whose “fixed star” is rural sociology, bring a variety of problems and solutions that probably cannot be found in any other statehood of a limited whole.

Naturally, the boundary between selected areas of theoretical and field research is neither sharp nor insurmountable. Problems of various kinds intersect in the points of view expressed by several authors and the areas of interest are constantly changing and modifying. The extremely broad staffing base, the number of socio-philosophical and sociological institutions, the support of the state and the broad cooperation with foreign countries are good starting points for optimistic future prospects.

Conclusions

All current tendencies characterizing Indian philosophy at the turn of the millennium that include the separation of philosophy from religion and bringing it closer to science in the background of the still dominant mysticism and intuitivism, clarifying the position of materialism in Indian philosophy, comparativism with the ideal of one world philosophy, existential philosophy, the teachings of Gandhi in all forms, feminism, postcolonial interpretations of the current social reality and other philosophical movements on the Indian subcontinent ultimately all share the common opinion that the ideas of humanism, contained in traditional Indian philosophy, cannot be implemented without social transformations.

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