The Context of Indian Philosophy

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Indian philosophy has a long and rich history. Numerous texts have survived, and we know that many others have been lost. Many thinkers were involved in writing these texts, and many more studied them. The contents of these texts have been researched, and are still researched, by modern scholars in many countries. These studies inform us what Indian philosophy was about. We learn from them that there were many different schools of philosophy, and also thinkers who did not belong to any one school in particular, who rather elaborated ideas of their own. By and large these thinkers, and their ideas, were associated with the main religions of South Asia. Brahmanical thinkers produced philosophies that are brahmanical, Jainas produced Jaina philosophies, and Buddhists produced Buddhist philosophies. This distinction into some major groups is only approximate, for the different philosophies influenced each other. We know that the Jainas were deeply interested in the philosophical developments that took place around them. The Buddhist and brahmanical thinkers, too, followed closely what others had to say. They informed themselves about the ideas of others, and frequently borrowed some of these, often without explicitly saying so. The shared concerns of all these philosophers—whether brahmanical, Buddhist, or Jaina—is also attested by the fact that they had a number of problems and concerns in common. They may have provided different answers to shared problems, but the fact that their problems were sometimes the same shows that these different philosophers were not isolated from each other.

Who were these philosophers, and why did they compose their sometimes difficult treatises? Asking this question means showing an interest in the context of the different Indian philosophies. We can, of course, ignore this question and concentrate exclusively on the *contents*, rather than on the *contexts*, of India's philosophical texts. Much can be learned from analyzing their contents, even about the relationships between the different schools. The texts themselves often criticize alternative positions, and argue against them. Modern scholars can analyze these arguments, and evaluate them. This is what modern scholars often do, and rightly so. In one sense, this is all the modern scholar who is interested in philosophy has to do. The philosophical arguments are all there in the text, they are part of the *contents*, and not of the *context*. And yet, other issues may be at stake, issues that do not, or only superficially or indirectly, find expression in the texts themselves. In some cases a discussion about a highly technical point of philosophy may cover a difference of opinion of a much more banal kind.

In order to illustrate this observation, I will first briefly mention a relatively recent Sanskrit

author who was both a philosopher and a grammarian.[1] I take this example because here, exceptionally, we have a fair amount of contextual information. The name of this scholar was Bhaṭṭoji, or Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita, and he lived around the year 1600 CE in Benares. Bhaṭṭoji has remained famous until today as a result of a number of technical grammatical treatises which he composed. The most well-known of these is the *Siddhānta Kaumudī*, a text which is still used in India to teach Sanskrit grammar to students. Another text composed by Bhaṭṭoji is a long and extremely learned commentary on his own *Siddhānta Kaumudī* (called *Prauḍha Manoramā*). Whereas the *Siddhānta Kaumudī* was written for students, this commentary is meant for specialists. One has to be quite advanced in traditional Sanskrit grammar in order to understand it, and one might be inclined to think that this learned text is very far removed from the every day life of its author. A closer study reveals that this is not the case.

Bhaṭṭoji's commentary, in its learned discussions, frequently compares different points of view, different interpretations of the ancient grammar of Pāṇini. Bhaṭṭoji discusses these interpretations, discards some of them, and accepts others. Rarely does he specify who held the interpretations he discards, with the result that the text makes the impression of being an even-handed discussion of ideas, without entering into personal matters.

Bhaṭṭoji's contemporaries knew better. Those among them who were themselves learned grammarians, knew that many of the views discarded in this commentary, were the views of Bhaṭṭoji's teacher, i.e., the scholar from whom Bhaṭṭoji had learned grammar to begin with. And criticizing one's teacher, in the milieu to which Bhaṭṭoji belonged, was an extremely serious matter. Instead of showing respect to his teacher, Bhaṭṭoji was here doing the opposite. Bhaṭṭoji did not use inappropriate words, certainly. He did not even admit that he was criticizing his teacher, and modern scholars might not have noticed it. But the descendants and other pupils of his teacher needed no time to find out what was happening, and they reacted. They wrote grammatical treatises which tried to destroy all the points of view which Bhaṭṭoji had presented as his own. Once again, the style of these treatises is very learned and highly technical. There are only some odd remarks, usually at the beginning or end of these treatises, which reveal that their authors held a personal grudge against Bhaṭṭoji, that they could not forgive him for having behaved in an inappropriate manner toward their teacher.

But why did Bhaṭṭoji behave in this inappropriate manner? The situation is not completely clear, but it seems likely that there were reasons for this which our texts do not even hint at. One explanation that has been suggested is the fact that Bhaṭṭoji and his teacher had different religious affiliations. Both were, of course, Brahmins, and both were Vedāntins. But whereas Bhaṭṭoji was an Advaita Vedāntin, his teacher was a follower of the school of Vedānta created by Madhva some centuries earlier. We know about these religious affiliations from other sources. The grammatical treatises of Bhaṭṭoji, his teacher, and all the others who became involved in this long drawn-out debate, do not mention this issue. It is only our knowledge of the context which allows us to guess what was going on below the surface of polished and erudite discussions of details of Sanskrit grammar.

I have taken the example of Bhaṭṭoji because, being a relatively recent author, we can find out things about him and his personal life. His own works, but also those of his teacher, and those of some of his critics, have been preserved, and with them various introductory verses and final colophons that throw light upon the situation. Besides this, there are other sources of information that have survived, and which allow us to piece together a coherent picture of what happened. We

know a lot about Bhaṭṭoji and his family: we know the name of his father and of various other members of his family; we also know the names of some of his pupils and the pupils of his pupils. We are similarly informed about his teacher and the children and pupils of his teacher. And we have works composed by many of these people, and other information about their lives. In some cases we know who financially supported these scholars.

About earlier philosophers in India we do not have such detailed information. Great and important thinkers of classical India, among them the Buddhist Nāgārjuna and the Vedāntin Śaṅkara, remain completely unknown to us, except through their own works. We are not sure when exactly Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara lived, or where they wrote the works that made them famous. We do not know the names of their fathers and of their pupils. We do not know for sure at what age they died, and whether their lives had been peaceful or otherwise. We are ignorant as to who supported them, and what encouragement they received from their surroundings. And what I have just said about Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara—perhaps the two most famous philosophers of classical India—is equally true for practically all other Indian philosophers of that period. Sometimes there are legends, but these legends are often late and unreliable, or mere inventions. All this makes it extremely difficult to situate the philosophers of classical India in their respective contexts. The temptation to abandon hope and to concentrate exclusively on the contents of the surviving texts is therefore great.

However, I am of the opinion that this would be a mistake. We need all the contextual information we can get about our philosophers, for sometimes this is the only way to understand what underlies their philosophical thinking. Sometimes, as in the case of the grammarian Bhaṭṭoji, the deeper motivation may be philosophically insignificant, such as a family feud or a difference in sectarian affiliation. In other cases the deeper motivation is of great philosophical interest. As an example I will briefly present a case to which attention was drawn a few years ago by a Swiss scholar, Vincent Eltschinger. He discusses it in his book «*Caste*» *et philosophie bouddhique* ("Caste" and buddhist philosophy) that came out in 2000.

Buddhist and brahmanical philosophers of the first millennium CE were engaged in a long and technical debate about the existence of universals. At first sight this is a purely philosophical question, with parallels in the history of European philosophy. The question, as it presents itself in India, can be explained with the help of a simple example. We know that the nouns of our language can be used to designate a large number of objects. The word "cow", for example, can be used not just for one cow, but for all the cows that exist in the present, in the past, and in the future. The same can be said about practically all other nouns, such as "house" or "car". If we stick to the example "cow", we may wonder whether all these cows—past, present, and future—have something in common that justifies this common denomination. Is there such a thing as "cow-ness", a universal that is different from each single cow but that is yet connected with each of them? The same about houses: is there a universal "house-ness" that justifies the application of the word "house" to so many different objects? Brahmanical philosophers had a tendency to accept that such universals exist; Buddhist thinkers denied their existence.

This purely philosophical debate took a special turn in the seventh century with Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, a brahmanical thinker, and Dharmakīrti, a Buddhist. Kumārila applied his belief in the existence of universals to the classes, or "castes", of society. Being a Brahmin, he claimed that all Brahmins share a universal "Brahmin-ness", which distinguishes them fundamentally from all other human beings, just as the universal "cow-ness" separates all cows from other animals, such as horses. Dharmakīrti and his followers did not accept this line of reasoning. They did not think that Brahmins were essentially different from other human beings.

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1 For details, see Bronkhorst [2005].

Here, then, we see how a purely philosophical debate took on a social dimension, dictated by the fundamental interests of the philosophers involved. In studying these debates it is imperative to know the different social backgrounds to which thinkers like Kumārila and Dharmakīrti belonged, the former being an orthodox Brahmin, convinced of the intrinsic superiority of the Brahmins, the latter a Buddhist, and as such sceptical with regard to all such claims. This opposition between Brahmins and Buddhists was not created by Kumārila and Dharmakīrti, to be sure. The opposition had been there right from the beginning. A number of Sūtras in the ancient Buddhist canon depict discussions between the Buddha and one or more Brahmins, in which the claim to superior status of the Brahmins is rejected, or even made fun of. With Kumārila and Dharmakīrti this opposition took on a distinctly philosophical dimension, it became part of the philosophical debate of that time. The historian of philosophy will need to be able to place this debate in its historical situation, he will need to be aware of the context in order to fully understand the contents.

A completely different example of a philosophical development which was, perhaps, closely related to a social phenomenon is constituted by a concept which came to play a role in buddhist thought, viz., that of the teaching-body (*dharmakāya*) of the Buddha.[2] We know that worshipping the bodily remains of the Buddha was an important aspect of the religion of Buddhist laymen and monastics alike. These bodily remains were often preserved in stūpas. However, the Buddhist preoccupation with dead bodies was highly impure in the eyes of their brahmanical neighbours. Their sensitivity to the impurity of death and all that is associated with it did influence the Indian Buddhists, too, as may be illustrated by the fact that they tended to turn their attention from the bodily relics to the stūpas, their containers, which became objects of worship in their own right. It is also striking that bodily remains of the Buddha tended to be accessible, to at least some degree, in regions which Buddhism did not share with Brahmanism—China, Tibet, Ceylon, but also northwestern India—, but hardly ever in regions where Brahmanism was important. It is perhaps in these regions that Buddhist thinkers developed the idea that the real body of the Buddha was not his physical body, but rather his teaching (*dharma*). There are, as a matter of fact, canonical statements to that effect. It was but a small step from here to postulating an entity called *dharmakāya*, teaching-body, and to maintain that that is the body of the Buddha that should be worshipped. The *dharmakāya* did indeed undergo a long and interesting development in buddhist thought, and came to be identified, in various texts, with different important concept, among them *dharmadhātu* and *tathāgatagarbha*; most importantly, many Buddhists came to look upon the *dharmakāya* as the absolute.[3] This long development, if the hypothetical reconstruction of the historical background of the *dharmakāya* here presented is correct, began, and finds its original explanation, in the Buddhist reaction to brahmanical social pressure.

These last two examples show that knowledge of the social context of Indian philosophy sometimes helps the modern researcher to understand certain details of the positions taken by its practitioners. However, we also need knowledge of the social context to understand that there was such a thing as Indian philosophy at all. In a way this is self-evident. If one wishes to understand why there is philosophy in the modern world, it is important to know that there are institutions, such as universities, which provide modern philosophers with the support they require, such as jobs, teaching opportunities, funds for publications, etc. etc. Without such support, modern

2 For details, see Bronkhorst [2005a].
3 For a more detailed presentation, see Bronkhorst [2000: 163 ff].

philosophy would have a hard time to survive. The situation in classical and medieval India was not different in this respect. These philosophers, too, had material and intellectual needs. They, too, needed an income, or at least shelter and regular meals; they needed access to libraries, manuscript libraries in their case; they needed to be able to pass on their knowledge, first of all to students, we may assume, but also to a network of other philosophers who read their works; etc. The Indian philosophical texts that have come down to us say very little about these earthly and banal realities, yet it is undeniable that, if the circumstances had not been right, many authors might not have been able to write their texts, or, even after writing them, these texts would not have been read and preserved.

All this amounts to saying that the very fact that there is such a thing as Indian philosophy cannot be separated from the circumstances that made this possible. It seems a priori likely that there might not have been philosophy in South Asia if there had not been people who had the leisure to create and continue it. But the existence of such a group of people, in and by itself, might not yet have guaranteed the presence of a philosophical tradition. To some extent these people had this leisure, they were given this leisure, because other members of society thought that the study of philosophical issues was particularly important and represented a fundamental value of society as a whole. This we know is true. Most schools of Indian philosophy agreed that philosophy is necessary for those who wish to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth which they all believed in; and liberation from rebirth is the highest aim there is.

So far so good. The elements considered so far do not, however, explain why Indian philosophy took the forms it actually took. They would explain the existence of wisdom teachings, perhaps in different varieties for different currents of thought. They do not explain why classical Indian philosophers went out of their way to argue for their positions, sometimes going to the extent of criticizing the positions of other thinkers, they do not explain why these philosophers developed logical rules and rules of debate, why they presented their views in the form of ever more coherent wholes, why they created systems of thought rather than mere collections of wise statements. Why did they do all this? Why did they not leave each other alone, concentrating each on his own method to attain liberation? Liberation, in most religious currents of India, is a highly personal attainment, quite independent of social considerations; why then should the way leading to it pass through philosophical debates whose aim is to convince, or refute others? Obviously the Indian philosophers did all they could to convince each other, to show that the other thinkers, if they really thought things out clearly, should change their opinions and convert to their own points of view.

At first sight one might think that Indian philosophers were concerned with convincing each other because this was part of their missionary intention. We know that Buddhism made a conscious effort to convert people, and that it was extraordinarily successful in this. Jainism, too, we can be sure, made efforts to convince people of the value and importance of their path to liberation. In spite of this, I think that the urge to convert provides at best a very small part of the answer to our question. Buddhism and Jainism did not, or not primarily, carry out their missionary activity by means of philosophical debate, but by preaching their respective doctrines. And Brahmanism, as is well known, was not interested in missionary activity in the ordinary sense at all: no one could become a Brahmin who was not already a Brahmin; agreement or disagreement on complex philosophical issues could not change that.

The correct explanation of the elements of Indian philosophy just mentioned, as I see it, is different. These elements are in an important sense the result of a social custom. They are the consequence of a feature of the social context, that has accompanied Indian philosophy for most

of its history. This feature, this social custom, is the existence of public debates between philosophers of different persuasions.

The history of Indian philosophy is full of references to debates that presumably had taken place between prominent representatives of different schools of thought. Many of these accounts may be legendary, or fully imaginary; others may be less than reliable because coloured in favour of one of the parties involved. It would yet be extremely interesting if someone were one day to make the effort of collecting all those accounts, whether from brahmanical, buddhist, or Jaina sources, whether reliable or not. Such an overview might even include the *paṇḍitapariṣad*s, the "assemblies of wise men", that are still sometimes held in India, and that are occasionally organized at international Sanskrit conferences. These *paṇḍitapariṣad*s are, to be sure, no more than fossilized survivals. But living debates, with sometimes serious consequences for the participants, accompanied Indian philosophy for most of its history. We know, for example, that the brother of Bhaṭṭoji, the philosopher and grammarian whom we referred to above, won a debate at the court of a South Indian king called Veṅkaṭappa. Given that this debate took place at the court of a king, we must conclude that this king allowed, or even encouraged, this debate to take place.

King Veṅkaṭappa was not exceptional in organizing, or allowing, such debates at his court. As a matter of fact, he continued a very long tradition in doing so. It is this social custom—it is really a social custom—which, I believe, made Indian philosophy what it is. Participants in such debates could win much, they could also loose all they had. Participating in such debates was not, therefore, a matter of mere amusement. It was through such debates that philosophers of different orientations combated each other, and tried to obtain a maximum of advantages for themselves and for the groups they represented. But since the stakes were so high, every potential participant had to prepare himself as well as he could. He had to be able to present his views, or those of his school, in such a way that an outside judge, sometimes the king himself, would be convinced by them. In practice this meant various things. First of all, mere wisdom teachings would not impress anybody. Teachings had to constitute coherent wholes, free from inner contradictions and loose ends. Second, the debater should, to the extent possible, know the ideas of his opponent, including whatever weaknesses it might contain. It would of course be very impressive to be able to show, during a public debate, that the opponent held incoherent or even nonsensical views.

As I said above, debates are not a recent phenomenon in Indian philosophy. For the middle of the first millennium CE—the classical period of Indian philosophy, we have a number of reports from foreign visitors. We will look at two of them in some detail. The first of these two derives from the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang (or Hsüan-chuang); since he is called Genjō in Japanese, I will use that name in what follows. Genjō has left us a detailed account of his visit to India in the first half of the seventh century of the Common Era. In this account he regularly mentions debates between representatives of different schools of thought. The debates he refers to normally took place in the presence of a king, and tended to end in victory for one of the two parties, and defeat for the other. According to the biography of Genjō composed by his pupil Huili, Genjō himself volunteered to participate in a debate on one occasion. The event is described as follows:[4]

> At that time a heretic of the Lokāyatika school came to seek a debate and wrote his argument in fourteen points, which he hung on the door of the monastery, while he announced, 'If anybody is able to refute any one point of my argument, I shall cut off

4 Li [1995: 132 f. (modified); translates pp. 245a–c]

> my head to apologize!'

After the passage of several days, nobody came out to accept the challenge. The Master [=Genjō] then asked his personal servant to take down the poster, destroy it, and trample the broken pieces under his feet. Being greatly enraged, the Brahmin asked, 'Who are you?' The servant said in reply, 'I am a servant of the Mahayana-deva.' The Brahmin, who had already heard of the fame of the Master, was ashamed of himself and did not say anything more. The Master sent for him and brought him to the presence of the Venerable Śīlabhadra [Genjō's teacher at Nālandā Monastery], with various virtuous monks as witnesses, to start a debate with him about the principles of his school and the theories founded by other heretical sects as well.

The debate as recorded in Huili's account is somewhat one-sided, presumably because the Brahmin opponent is too shy to speak in the presence of Genjō. Genjō first demonstrates his knowledge of a number of brahmanical ascetic and philosophical schools, and then refutes one of them, supposedly the one to which his opponent belongs, in detail.[5] At the end of this the text sums up the result:

> In this manner the argument was carried on with repeated refutations; and the Brahmin remained silent and said nothing. Then he rose to his feet and said with apology, 'I am defeated, and I am ready to keep my word.' The Master said, 'We Buddhists do not take any man's life. I now make you my slave, and you should work according to my orders.' The Brahmin was glad to obey the Master's orders with reverence, and was brought to his living quarters. All those who heard about this event praised it with delight.

It is unlikely that this passage accurately presents what happened. It is hard to believe that a Brahmin who was seeking a debate would accept total defeat without as much as uttering a word. But nor would we expect historical accuracy in a document that primarily sings the glory of Master Genjō. It will be interesting to see what kind of arguments supposedly led to his victory in debate.

The text does not offer much in terms of arguments, with one notable exception. The Master is recorded to have dealt with the Sāṃkhya system of thought in a rather more detailed manner. First he presents an outline of the system, which agrees with what we know about it. After this exposition he draws attention to what he considers its lack of coherence. It is not likely that a real Sāṃkhya would have felt defeated by the reflections brought to bear on their system by the Chinese pilgrim. It is yet interesting to see that Genjō is here depicted as presenting what is an accurate description of the main features of the Sāṃkhya philosophy, and that, having presented this outline, he tries to show its inner incoherence. The fundamental assumptions of this philosophy do not, according to the position attributed to Genjō, justify the functions it ascribes to the various entities it postulates.

Accounts like this are extremely interesting, and give us a glimpse, if ever so faint, of situations India's philosophers may have been familiar with. In the present context it is noteworthy to see what could be at stake in such debates. Genjō's unfortunate opponent was lucky to get away with his life, and be merely reduced to the state of being Genjō's slave. We do not know to what extent we are here confronted with an exaggeration on the part of Genjō's biographer, but we will see that death as a result of a lost debate is a recurring theme. But even without death or loss of

5 Surprisingly, Genjō refutes the Sāṃkhya school of thought, even though his opponent is a Lokāyatika. On this question, see my forthcoming article "Pañcaśikha and Lokāyata".

individual liberty, there can be no doubt that debaters could lose their reputation once and for all, and with it whatever privileges were reserved for their group or community. Winning a debate could be very advantageous. Elsewhere Genjō reports that Śīlabhadra, the same Master also mentioned in the preceding passage, had once defeated a Brahmin in a debate, after which he had received from the local king the revenues of a certain city.[6]

Let us now turn to the second example, situated a few centuries before the time of Genjō. It depicts a debate between a Buddhist and a Sāṃkhya in which, this time, the latter is victorious. The story is found in Paramārtha's *The Life of Vasubandhu*. The main character is the Sāṃkhya teacher Vindhyavāsa, who modified the Sāṃkhya doctrine and came to think that the doctrine set forth by him was the greatest, and that nothing could be superior to it. However, Buddhism was flourishing in the world at that time. Vindhyavāsa therefore resolved to refute it. The text continues:[7]

> Accordingly he went to the country of Ayodhyā and beat the drum of dispute with his head and said:
> (The translator of this passage explains in a note that, according to a commentator, 'it was customary for a king in India to keep a drum at the Royal Gate. When a man wants to appeal to the Court or to challenge a dispute, he has to beat it.')
> 'I will dispute (with any Buddhist Śramana). If I am defeated my opponent shall cut my head off; but if, on the contrary, he is beaten, he shall give me his head.' The King, Vikramāditya..., being informed of the matter summoned the heretic and asked him about it, whereupon the latter answered: 'Thou art, O King, the Lord of the Land, in whose mind there should be no partial love to either Śramanas or Brahmins. If there be any doctrines prevailing (in thy country) thou shouldst put them to the test (and see whether) they are right or wrong. Now I intend (to dispute) with a disciple of Śākya-muni [=the Buddha] to determine which party is the winner or the loser. Each should vow to stake his own head.' The King thereupon gave him permission and despatched men to ask all the Buddhist teachers of the country in the following words: 'Is there anyone who is able to oppose this heretic? Whosoever thinks himself competent should dispute with him.'
> At that time the great Teachers of the Law, Manoratha, Vasubandhu, and others were all absent travelling in other countries. ...
> There was at home only Buddhamitra the teacher of Vasubandhu. ... This Teacher of the Law was formerly very learned, but he was now advanced in years and therefore weak in mind and feeble in his speech. He said: 'Now the great champions of the Law are all abroad. The heretic is strong and obstinate and must not be let alone any longer. I will now see to it myself.' He informed the King, who appointed a day on which he summoned a great assembly to the hall of discussion, where the heretic and the Buddhist teacher were to meet and dispute.
> The heretic said: 'Will you first set forth your opinion? Or will you refute the opinion first set forth by me?' The priest replied: 'I am like a great ocean which swallows up all that comes. You are like a lump of earth which will be submerged if it comes to the ocean. You may do as you like.' His opponent said: 'Then you had better set forth your own opinion (first). I will refute it.'

6 Watters [1904–05/1973: II: 109–110].
7 Takakusu [1904: 283 f]. Cp. the discussion in Larson & Bhattacharya [1987: 131 f].

> The Buddhist teacher, thereupon, set forth his doctrine of impermanence and said: 'All composite things are in process of destruction every moment, why? because they disappear in the end.' He further supported this by various arguments. The heretic opponent could repeat all these arguments of the Buddhist priest after once hearing them and began to criticise them one by one by processes of reasoning. On being requested to commit to memory and repeat these refutations the priest failed to do so. He could not even re-construct his own arguments, though requested to do so.
> Thus the Buddhist priest was completely defeated. The heretic said: 'You are a Brahmin by caste and I also am a Brahmin. We are not allowed to kill. I will beat you on the back instead, in order to show that I am the victor.' He did so. The king gave him three lacs of gold as a prize. On receiving the gold he distributed it among the people at large and returned to the Vindhya mountain where he entered a rocky cave.

The story has a happy ending after all, for Vasubandhu, after his return, composed a work criticising the Sāṃkhya doctrine in such a competent manner that the heretics had nothing left for them to fall back upon. In this way, without meeting Vindhyavāsa, Vasubandhu took full vengeance on him and wiped off the disgrace put upon his teacher.

These examples show that loosing a debate could have serious consequences, and winning one could have serious advantages. It is not surprising that debating manuals were produced, some of which have survived. Public debates had to be won, and all possible means were used in order to attain that goal. This included trickery, but also straightforward, and soundly based, criticism of each other's positions. It is this aspect of the debate tradition which has no doubt exerted a lasting influence. Criticism directed at others and criticism received from others had the unavoidable effect that all participants in these debates straightened out their own positions. Incoherent or inconsistent views might not survive scrutiny, not by an opponent in debate, but neither by the thinker who did not wish to be exposed by those who disagreed with him.

It is in this way that a social custom—viz., organizing public debates, preferably at the court of a king or local ruler—was responsible for one of the most striking features of Indian philosophy: the search for coherent systems of thought. Interestingly, we know much more about the effect of this social custom than about the social custom itself. Our sources inform us in great detail about the systems of thought that were elaborated, and only occasionally about the debates that took place. The connection between these two seems to me yet close enough to allow us to draw conclusions with regard to periods from which we have very little information about the social context. I suggest that, wherever Indian philosophy gave rise to coherent systems of thought, we can conclude from this that a debate tradition made this possible, or even necessary. Note at this point that not all of Indian thought is coherent and systematic. Most of the religious literature of India contains ideas which are not put into the straightjacket of a system of thought. Examples are the early Upaniṣads, the philosophical portions of the Mahābhārata, and much else. Systematic thought in India dwindles in comparison with the quantity of non-systematized thought. Yet it is systematic thought that interests us at present, because it reveals something about the social context in which it could arise and flourish.

If, with this in mind, we look at the earliest manifestations of systematic thought in India, our attention is inevitably drawn to the scholastic development which Buddhism underwent during the last centuries preceding the Common Era. Buddhist scholasticism of that period, called *abhidharma*, has mainly survived in two bodies of texts, belonging to two schools of Buddhism.

One of the two, belonging to the Theravāda school of Buddhism, shows an ongoing refinement, but little or no attempt to develop a coherent system of thought. The other school, Sarvāstivāda, is altogether different. Several texts of its canonical "Basket of scholasticism" (*abhidharma-piṭaka*) show that serious attempts at systematization were made in this school. Since the innovations concerned were made on the basis of traditional material, the result is often quite complex, and this is not the place to deal with them in full detail.[8] Only some striking features must here be mentioned. The Sarvāstivāda conception of the world is essentially atomistic. The macroscopic, and therefore composite, objects which we are acquainted with from everyday experience do not really exist. What really exist are the ultimate constituents, called *dharmas*. A particularly important composite object is the human person which, too, does not really exist. The atomistic understanding of the world also finds expression in the belief in momentariness: nothing exists for more than a single moment.[9] Various questions linked to this atomistic vision of the world are raised and often answered by introducing an appropriate *dharma*. The question, for example, how different bundles of *dharmas* stick together so as to form different persons (remember that persons do strictly speaking not exist), is answered with the introduction of a *dharma* called *prāpti* 'possession'. Other difficulties were connected with the belief that mental events occur only one at a time in one person. This leads to difficulties in the case where someone observes, say, his own desire. This activity involves two mental events, the observation and the desire, which cannot simultaneously exist. When the observation is present, the observed desire must of necessity be non-present. Observation of a desire is therefore only possible if a non-present object (the desire) exists. The Sarvāstivādins concluded from this that past and future exist. This particular view, incidentally, is responsible for their name, Sarvāstivāda, the "position (*vāda*) according to which everything (*sarva*) exists (*asti*)". Sarvāstivāda, as will be clear from this very brief presentation, made a major effort to rationalise its teachings, Theravāda did not. Sarvāstivāda played a major role in the tradition of debate that came to involve all schools of philosophy, whether Buddhist, Brahmanical, or Jaina; it seems even likely that the Sarvāstivādins were the first to adhere to this tradition of debate in India. Theravāda played no such role, and indeed left India before this tradition of debate had attained a prominent position.

What can we conclude from these attempts at systematization carried out, apparently for the first time, by the Sarvāstivādins of northwestern India? I am tempted to conclude that the same social context which made systematization possible and necessary in later times, existed already in the last centuries BCE in northwestern India, perhaps for the first time. The Buddhists of that time and region clearly felt the need to present their more sophisticated views in such a manner that outsiders would not easily find systematic weaknesses in them. Just like their later colleagues, they had to defend their positions, quite possibly during public debates.

This conclusion raises a number of questions. Who were the rulers in northwestern India who might organize debates at their courts or elsewhere? With whom might the Buddhists of northwestern India have been asked to debate? Who were their opponents? Don't forget that we have no evidence of the existence of systematic brahmanical thought during this early period. What is more, there are good reasons to think that there were few, if any, Brahmins in the regions inhabited by the Buddhists of northwestern India—primarily Gandhāra, perhaps also Bactria. These regions were ruled, for at least some of the time that concerns us, by Greeks. We know that Hellenistic kings in general cultivated the presence of philosophers at their courts, and encouraged

debates between them. Is it possible that the social context which was to accompany Indian philosophy practically throughout its long history, the debates that made the formulation of critical and systematic philosophy a necessity, is it possible that all this began at the Greek courts of northwestern India? I think there is much that pleads in favour of this possibility.[10] We know that a number of Greeks from that area were interested in Buddhism, even converted to that religion. The text called "The questions of king Milinda" shows that, in the imagination of at least some later Buddhists, the Greeks and their kings, most notably Menander, had participated in discussions with Buddhists. It is also known that, even after the Greeks had lost power in northwestern India, their influence took centuries before ebbing away completely.

At this point you may raise the following objection. You will admit that a certain knowledge of the context is required to understand at least certain issues dealt with in Indian philosophy. You are even willing to grant that context has to be considered in order to understand that there is such a thing as Indian philosophy at all. However, you will say, what we need to know about this context is relatively little. Two of the cases we have discussed show this. Yes, to understand some aspects of Indian philosophy we need to know that many Indian philosophers were Brahmins, people who claimed a privileged status in society, while others, most notably the Buddhists, did not accept that claim. And yes, you will continue, to understand the inner dynamic of Indian philosophy one must know that public debates were a recurring phenomenon throughout its long history. However, you will insist, both these contextual features are as old as Indian philosophy; they have accompanied it from beginning to end. Even after the disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian philosophical scene, debates continued, as we saw in the case of Bhaṭṭoji. In other words, you will conclude, only contextual features that have not changed in any essential manner need to be known to understand Indian philosophy. Other contextual features, features that changed over the period of two thousand years or more since the beginning of systematic philosophy in India, such other features are of little importance for the study and understanding of this tradition.

This objection is not justified in my opinion. It is true that two of the four examples so far discussed concerned contextual features of great temporal endurance. Both the brahmanical claim of social superiority and the tradition of public debate had a long life, as long as Indian philosophy itself. Yet it would be a mistake to look upon these two features as constants, as some unchangeable and permanent background to the development of Indian philosophy. They were not, as a matter of fact. Some schools of thought developed in environments where there were neither tradition of debate, nor sophisticated opponents ready to criticize their thought in detail. There is also reason to think that the tradition of debate was not always equally strong. I will briefly discuss one example for each of these two cases.

I have already briefly mentioned the Theravāda school of Buddhism, contemporaneous with the Sarvāstivāda school which we studied in some detail. Both these schools developed and preserved an important body of scholastic literature, called Abhidharma. The Sarvāstivāda school, as we saw, remodelled their Abhidharma into a coherent system of thought. The Theravādins did no such thing. This can be seen by considering one of their texts, which is one of the earliest surviving texts in India dedicated to criticising the positions of others. It is called Kathāvatthu "Text dealing with disputes", and was composed, according to tradition, 218 years after the death of the Buddha.[11] It criticises in its oldest portions a position which we know was held by the Sarvāstivādins, mentioned earlier. An analysis of the criticism presented in the Kathāvatthu shows

8 For a slightly more detailed, but still incomplete, presentation, see Bronkhorst [2000: 76–127].
9 Momentariness is not explicitly mentioned in early Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma texts, but can quite safely be attributed to their authors; see Bronkhorst [1995].

10 Cf. Bronkhorst [1999].
11 Hinüber [1996: 70 f].

that its author had not understood, and had perhaps no knowledge whatsoever of, the arguments used by the Sarvāstivādins to justify their position. The Sarvāstivādins held that past and future exist, and their argumentation, as we have seen, was built on their fundamental belief that no two mental events can simultaneously occur in one person. The author of the Kathāvatthu presents instead an argument that is totally nonsensical.[12] The Kathāvatthu, then, is a text which criticises the positions of others without being properly informed about them (at least in this case). No need to say that its uninformed criticism carried little weight. The Sarvāstivādins did not, and did not need to, change their views as a result of the criticism expressed in this Theravāda text. What is more, the Theravādins felt no need to tighten up their own views and develop them into a coherent whole. The question is why? The answer I propose is that the Kathāvatthu was written in a part of India where public debate had not yet forced its author or authors to introduce coherence in their own thought, and had not yet urged them to inform themselves with regard to the details of the opinions they disagreed with. The authors of the Kathāvatthu were under no pressure to do all this, and the result of this is visible in their text.

Regarding the tradition of debate, our information about it is only lacunary, and I have already given expression to the desirability of further research in this domain. It seems yet clear that this social institution was during some periods more active, more alive, than during others. In order to illustrate this, I return once again to the philosopher and grammarian Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita, discussed at the beginning of this lecture. I have told you already that this thinker lived in Benares, around the year 1600 CE. Bhaṭṭoji and his nephew Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa are known for the new development in the so-called "philosophy of grammar" which they initiated. In this philosophy they made use of a new technical terminology that had been created some centuries earlier by thinkers of the Navya-Nyāya, i.e. "New Logic", school of thought. Bhaṭṭoji and Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa introduced this terminology into grammatical thought, from where another school of thought, that of Vedic Hermeneutics (Mīmāṃsā), appears to have borrowed it to use it for its own purposes.

The question that presents itself here is the following. Why did it take several centuries before the new technical terminology was taken over by grammarians and Vedic Hermeneuts? And why was it then taken over by both grammarians and Vedic Hermeneuts, almost simultaneously, in the city of Benares? The new terminology was apparently used for several centuries inside one school, with hardly anyone bothering to take notice (even though Prof. Wada informs me that certain Vedāntins may have started using it somewhat earlier than the grammarians and Vedic Hermeneuts). How can this be explained? The answer, as I see it, lies in the fact that Benares around the year 1600 was a centre where debate between representatives of different schools of thought had been revived, for reasons which are too complex to analyse here at present. For some centuries before this time, philosophical schools existed and even flourished in a certain sense. However, they remained largely isolated from each other. A new centre and a new political and social situation were required to oblige these philosophers again to take serious notice of what happened in other schools of thought.

I think I have said enough about the changeability of the context in which Indian philosophy began and developed. To conclude, I would like to very briefly touch upon an aspect of Indian philosophy which is claimed to be central to it. I had occasion to point out that most schools of Indian philosophy agree that philosophy is necessary to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth. How practical was this claim? How serious were Indian philosophers about reaching this aim

during this life? Was this claim mere lip-service to a high ideal, without practical consequences, or did Indian thinkers combine the study of philosophy with other activities they believed were necessary to reach the highest goal?

It is not possible to answer these questions in general terms that are valid for all Indian philosophers. The seriousness with which thinkers dedicated themselves to the attainment of liberation may have differed from one school to the next, from one person to the other. In many cases it is extremely difficult, or even impossible, to find information that may allow us to answer these questions. It is for this reason all the more interesting to refer to some recent studies that throw light on the practical commitment to liberation among Buddhist monks of northwestern India during the first centuries of the Common Era. I am referring to the studies of Gregory Schopen, more specifically to those that have recently been brought out in a collection called *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters* (2004). Many of these studies are based, at least in part, on a detailed analysis of portions of the large collection of monastic rules known by the name Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, which appears to date from that period. It is not possible to do full justice to Schopen's volume here. All I can do is quote a short passage which contains a clear statement about the issue that interests us:[13]

> Forty years ago André Bareau said not just about [the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya] but about all Buddhist monastic Codes: "It is true that the Vinayapiṭakas ... do not breathe a word about the numerous spiritual practices, meditations, contemplations, etc., which constituted the very essence of the Buddhist 'religion'." And although this is something of an exaggeration, still it should have given pause for thought. Our Code, for example, does refer to ascetic, meditating monks, but when it does so in any detail, such monks almost always appear as the butt of jokes, objects of ridicule, and—not uncommonly—sexual deviants. They are presented as irresponsible and of the type that give the order a bad name. There are texts in our Code where, for example, ascetic, cemetery monks manage only to terrify children; where ascetic monks who wear robes made from cemetery cloth are not even allowed into the monastery, let alone allowed to sit on a mat that belongs to the Community; tales whose only point seems to be to indicate that meditation makes you stupid; texts about monks who meditate in the forest and cannot control their male member and so end up smashing it between two rocks, whereupon the Buddha tells them, while they are howling in pain, that they, unfortunately, have smashed the wrong thing—they should have smashed desire; and a tale about another monk who meditated in the forest and, to avoid being seduced by a goddess, had to tie his legs shut. The goddess being put off by this then flung him through the air, and he landed—still legs tied—on top of the king, who was sleeping on the roof of his palace. The king, of course, was not amused and made it known to the Buddha that it would not do to have his monks being flung around the countryside in the middle of the night. The Buddha then actually made a rule forbidding monks to meditate in the forest! Texts and tales of this sort are numerous in our Code.

Remember that these remarks are made about the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, an expression which Schopen translates either "the Original Vinaya of the Sarvāstivādins" or "the Vinaya of the Original Sarvāstivādins" (p. 25). Either way a link with the Sarvāstivādins is implied by its very title. The Sarvāstivādins, you may recall, where among the first systematic philosophers of India.

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12 Bronkhorst [1993].

13 Schopen [2004: 26].

Schopen's observations suggest that these philosophers, who in theory subscribed to the connection between philosophy and liberation, were in practice united in a monastic corporation which had no place whatsoever for monks who wished to meditate.

This is not the occasion to elaborate the implications of these observations. It is however clear that here we may be confronted with a situation in which the context and the contents of the philosophical writings concerned do not easily fit together. The question does require further reflection, but it does seem allowable to conclude that these Buddhists from the first centuries CE only paid lip-service to the ideals which were supposed to be the justification of their philosophical efforts.

Indian philosophy is not a collection of timeless truths. Like everything else, its doctrines were produced in certain times and in certain places—in other words, within a context. Extracting Indian philosophy from of the context in which it was created is doing it an injustice. Worse still, it may deprive us of possibilities of understanding which only an awareness of context can provide. Why did Indian philosophers accept these ideas rather than others? Why did they defend them the way they did? What was philosophy good for in their eyes? These and many other questions can only be answered by situating the texts and their authors in their own environments, by finding out what was important for them, which were the problems they had to deal with, etc. Any other way of trying to understand Indian philosophy, for example by merely looking at questions and issues that it has in common with modern western philosophy, is fundamentally mistaken, and may give rise to major misunderstandings. Context, seen in this way, is not an extra, an indulgence for those who are interested in it. No. Trying to understand Indian philosophy in its own historical context is obligatory, the only way one may hope to arrive at an optimal understanding.

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