



Obituary: A. K. Chatterjee (1925–2021)

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Ashok Kumar Chatterjee (November 27, 1925–April 21, 2021), Indian philosopher and Buddhist scholar who was professor of philosophy at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, passed away on April 21, 2021. He is best known for his monumental work on the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism titled *The Yogacara Idealism* first published in 1962 (Chatterjee, 1962). A vigilant reading of the entire *corpus* of the writings of A. K. Chatterjee brings home the idea that *metaphysics* is one of his major concerns while doing philosophy. In his works, one finds that there is a metaphysical “home coming” (Chatterjee, 1976: 7) of A. K. Chatterjee, as “metaphysics is subjective, and (it) reveals the profoundest truth about one’s own being” (Chatterjee, 1971a: 33).

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Early Life and Education

Ashok Kumar Chatterjee was born on 27 November 1925 in Allahabad. He did all his studies at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, where he had a distinguished academic record, first at Central Hindu School of Banaras Hindu University doing his high school and Intermediate (first rank) studies and then joined for his B.A. (first rank), M.A. (first rank), Ph. D. in Philosophy (under the supervision of Professor T. R. V. Murti), Diploma in French and Diploma in German (all from Banaras Hindu University). His command over Sanskrit, English and Hindi is well acknowledged. During his childhood days and later in his formative years to be a thinker, he was first inspired by his uncle Professor A. C. Mukherjee of Allahabad University and subsequently by his *Guru* Professor T. R. V. Murti of Banaras Hindu University. At the same formative period, he used to have very serious philosophical discussions with many of the leading luminaries in Indian philosophy like Professor Kalidas Bhattacharya. He was Sayajirao Gaekwad Fellow from 1947 to 1950 in the Department of Philosophy, Banaras Hindu University (Sebastian, 2008a: xvii).

Career and Recognitions

A. K. Chatterjee taught from 1950 to 1963 at the University of Agra (now Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra, since 1995) and had become the Head of the Department of Philosophy. After the establishment of Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy at the Banaras Hindu University, he joined Banaras Hindu University in 1963 and retired in 1985 as Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Banaras Hindu University. A. K. Chatterjee taught Logic and Analytic Philosophy, but his *forte* was Buddhist philosophy.

Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR), New Delhi, honored him with the National Lectureship in 1992 and Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014. He was the president of the ‘Metaphysics and Epistemology Section’ of the 45th Session of the Indian Philosophical Congress in 1971 (held at Osmania University, Hyderabad). As one finds from his writings, the 1960s and 1970s were the most effervescent period of Professor A. K. Chatterjee’s academic acumen (Sebastian, 2008a, 2008b: xvii). The Research Project Committee of ICPR brought out an interview with Professor A. K. Chatterjee by R. C. Pradhan and C. D. Sebastian in November 2015 (*vide* F.No. 2A-14/2014–15/P&R/ICPR dated October 14, 2015), as part of “the proceedings of interviews conducted by scholars of the eminent living philosophers of the country.”

A. K. Chatterjee never sought after privilege and positions, and he never indulged in partisan self-promoting politics of academia, holding fast to the honesty of the philosopher—‘Socrates is dear, but truth is dearer.’¹ Those who have been

¹ Though this aphorism is attributed to Aristotle, it does not appear *verbatim* in any works of Aristotle. This dictum is a succinct paraphrase of the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle I, 6 (1096a 15): “...for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches closely, especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honor truth above our friends” (Ross, 1966: 7–8).

privileged to listen to him and study with him appreciate him to be an excellent and esteemed teacher. Though his academic relationship with his students was inspiring and enlightening, it was, at the same time, demanding academically. Yet, his personal relationship with his students and colleagues was of an understanding, loving and caring nature. Chinmoy Goswami of happy memory who was A. K. Chatterjee's PhD student wrote: "Professor Ashok Kumar Chatterjee, for many of us, has been a friend, philosopher and guide. ...Among many things, he taught me to think independently through his unreasonable but effective silence" (Goswami, 2008: 19). In 2008 the students of A. K. Chatterjee brought out a *festschrift* to honour him (Sebastian, 2008b).

Works

A. K. Chatterjee was an unparalleled authority on Buddhism in general and the Yogācāra in particular. Professor David J. Kalupahana wrote about Professor A. K. Chatterjee's magnum opus, *The Yogācāra Idealism*:

Ashok Kumar Chatterjee... has produced one of the few detailed and significant treatments of Yogācāra. His work, *The Yogacara Idealism* has not, unfortunately, enjoyed the same publicity as his teacher's work (T. R. V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*). Yet, it is no way second to Murti's treatment of Mādhyamika philosophy (Kalupahana, 1987: 3).

Professor Samdhong Rinpoche, former Prime Minister (Kalon Tripa) of Tibetan Government in Exile, wrote in 2008 about A. K. Chatterjee's *The Yogācāra Idealism* in this way:

Professor A. K. Chatterjee had made known four-and-a-half decades ago his philosophical acumen and masterly talent through his magnum opus, *The Yogācāra Idealism*, and that has run into different editions after its first publication in 1962. Often it has been said: 'a tree is known through its fruits' and this is true of Professor Chatterjee, as he is known through his erudite writings to the academic world (Rinpoche, 2008: vii).

His works include *The Yogācāra Idealism* (Chatterjee, 1962), *Readings on Yogācāra Buddhism* (Chatterjee, 1971b), *Facets of Buddhist Thought* (Chatterjee, 1973) and *The Concept of Sākṣī in Advaita Ved.,nta* (Chatterjee & Dravid, 1979). His smaller treatises are: 'Concept of Māyā' (1966), 'The Concept of Pramāa in Philosophy' (1967), 'Are Ethical Statements Noncognitive?' (1968), 'Non-speculative Metaphysics' (1969), 'Reasoning in Indian Philosophy' (1970), 'Metaphysics, Subjectivity and Myth' (1971a), "*Pratītyasamutpāda* in Buddhist Philosophy' (1971), 'Idealism and Absolutism: A Buddhist Synthesis' (1971), 'The Mādhyamika and the Philosophy of Language' (1971), 'An Introduction to Yogācāra Buddhism' (1971), 'Insight and Paradox in Buddhist Thought' (1973), 'Truth and Objectivity' (1975), 'Modes of Beings', (1976), 'Predicates' (1978), 'Meaning, Use and Reference' (1979), 'Concept of *Sārūpya* in Buddhist Philosophy' (1984), 'Sautrāntika Theory

of Causation' (1987), 'The Concept of *Sākṣī* in Advaita Vedānta (1993), 'Types of Absolutism: A Re-visitation' (2002) and '*Apoha*: Buddhist Theory of Meaning' (2007) (Sebastian, 2008b: xviii–xix).

Philosophy: Speculative Metaphysics and Subjectivity

A. K. Chatterjee's contribution to Indian philosophy in general, Buddhist philosophy in particular, cannot be overestimated. He taught and wrote on Indian philosophy always putting precisely across the candid stance of each philosophical system in India with a critical mind of a philosopher. He generously unraveled the subtle nuances of Indian philosophical schools and their many ideas in his writings and also to all those who had the fortune of being closer to him. He asserted that there is a difference between Indian philosophy and Western philosophy. "In the West a philosopher always reserves to himself the liberty of looking at things afresh, and of having his own individual intuition. He certainly belongs to a tradition, but questioning his own tradition appears to be built in the tradition itself. Criticism of the tradition is itself traditional. Such a situation is inconceivable in India, where the whole emphasis falls on self-abnegation on the part of the individual thinker. Indian philosophy is a-temporal and a-historical. Systems here are presented as timeless verities" (Chatterjee, 1970: 47). This is true of him as an Indian philosopher. He fell in line with the tradition and contributed his 'share,' though enormous it is for a student of Indian thought in terms of its profoundness. However, he had a critical stance of his own while being truthful to the philosophical tradition he was adhering to.

As I stated at the outset, an observant reading of A. K. Chatterjee reveals that *metaphysics* was one of his foremost concerns while doing philosophy. In his works one finds that there is undoubtedly A. K. Chatterjee's metaphysical "home coming" (Chatterjee, 1976: 7), as "metaphysics is subjective, and (it) reveals the profoundest truth about one's own being" (Chatterjee, 1971a: 33). Further, though he said that the term *metaphysics* is, in a way, an "abuse of language" (Chatterjee, 1969: 5), the act that a philosopher does while doing metaphysics is a "home coming" with or without the use of language. Speculative metaphysics has always had its staunch proponents, though for three quarters of the twentieth century it was very much a marginal enterprise in philosophy. Even now the attitude toward speculative metaphysics among most philosophers remains the same with some sort of antipathy (Baynes et al, 1988).² Among the contemporary philosophers in India A. K.

² Our reference is to the anthology *After Philosophy: End or Transformation* (Bayne et al., 1988) that was meant assess current state of philosophy and the future of philosophy. Arran Gare writes in connection with this volume: "While containing reflections on philosophy of the leading philosophers of North America, Britain, France and Germany, and representing 'postanalytic' philosophy, poststructuralism, critical theory, and hermeneutics, the editors did not take speculative metaphysics seriously enough to allow even one voice to speak for it" (Gare, 1999: 127). This volume contains the papers by Rorty, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Davidson, Dummett, Putnam, Apel, Habermas, Gadamar, Ricouer, MacIntyre, Bloomenbergen and Taylor.

Chatterjee has always been an ardent thinker in *speculative metaphysics* (Sebastian, 2015). He has ever argued that non-speculative metaphysics is a contradiction in terms, as he vehemently says: “Metaphysics is thus essentially speculative. Non-speculative metaphysics is, as I see it, a contradiction in terms. It would have to be, per impossible, a scheme of concepts, involving no conceptual revision which I have called ‘speculation.’” (Chatterjee, 1969: 4). Speculation is part and parcel of doing metaphysics in the rational scheme of A. K. Chatterjee (Sebastian, 2006 and 2015).

A. K. Chatterjee held that metaphysics is not just about the philosophizing on ‘being *qua* being,’ but it is much more than that. According to A. K. Chatterjee, a metaphysician sets himself at the center of his world, and makes his own world. “Impelled by the unconscious stirrings in the depth of his being, the metaphysician fashions a ‘world’ out of his experience, a world that is peculiarly his, and is, and can be nobody else’s, in order to fulfil some profound purpose of existence” (Chatterjee, 1971a: 23). It is fascinating to see how A. K. Chatterjee brings the element of *subjectivity* in the entire scheme of doing metaphysics. According to him, metaphysics is nothing but an attempt to achieve a complete ‘selfhood.’ One’s ego (self) finds itself as an alien among other things of the world. It feels as a ‘thing’ like other things of the world, for other things in the world are not of one’s making, nor are they of one’s choice. It has no other option, but to be with other things. The self (ego), in the face of other things of the world, can feel a sort of ‘nothingness’ which, in turn, can create a tension in itself. Then there arises a need—a need that is not physical, but metaphysical or spiritual—to remove the tension, just mentioned, and this is done by creating a world in which the self (or ego) would feel completely at home. He expresses it lucidly in this way:

The attempt to imagine such a world which would be sympathetically attuned to the self, which would be responsive to its inarticulate needs and aspirations, which would take away the nagging suspicion of being a ‘non-person’ (*Unmensch*) and restore to it its sense of identity and belongingness—such an attempt is metaphysics. Metaphysics is thus self-expression or self-fulfillment. Self is here to be understood, not in any absolutistic sense, not to be spelt with a capital ‘S’, but only as a reflexive particle. It refers to the alienated ego, desperately struggling to find an anchorage in reality. The metaphysician seeks to express him-*self* through his bizarre constructions, by imagining a World which would be his natural habitat. Selfhood that metaphysics strives to achieve is not something rigid and static, not still-born or a finished absolute, but something yet to be completed perhaps never completely attained – something to be fashioned out of the intensity of the experiences of loneliness, anguish and suffering (Chatterjee, 1971a: 24).

A. K. Chatterjee argued that, in this sense, there was a tremendous possibility of alternative *selfhoods* that could be thought of and constructed speculatively in different systems of metaphysics. He further argued that if we could leave aside ‘self,’ for time being, we could come across the next *construct*, that is, ‘World.’ The subjectivity and the world are interrelated. The “World” that a metaphysician speaks of, for that matter anyone, is a product of the metaphysical construction. ‘World’ is not a given fact. It is a metaphysical concept. The world, as we

understand, “as a whole is the horizon of knowing in which the objects known are imbedded. But the ‘World’ is a metaphysical concept. The world itself is never known; what are known are things that belong to the world” (Chatterjee, 1976: 4). But when one knows a thing in the world, that same *epistemic process* will enable her/him to know other things related to that one. A thing, per se, is never known in seclusion. It shall be known only in relation to other things in the world. A. K. Chatterjee explains it in this way: “A thing is never known by itself in isolation, but only supported by other things. The thing known is certainly the focal point, but behind that there is a receding background but for the presence of which the thing would not stand out and be an object of knowledge. When I know a table, I am also dimly aware of there being other things besides the table, so that it is known as one thing amongst others. The table is the apex of a submerged base as it were. When I turn my attention to these other things, they in their own turn presuppose still other things, so that the final analysis the base of knowledge seems to be the entire world” (Chatterjee, 1976: 4).

Thus, as A. K. Chatterjee has shown, if we analyze the speculative games we play while doing metaphysics, we come to the realization that *doing metaphysics is purely subjective*, and it eventually amounts to a *myth* (Chatterjee, 1971a). It is, in fact, not at all a rational enterprise on ‘being *qua* being,’ but it a puzzled mystery, and it is not a problem. This is “a stunningly novel idea we get from Chatterjee” (Boruah, 2011: 148) that calls for further creative enterprise in metaphysics for a contemporary Indian philosopher.

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