Professor Biswambhar Pahi-Logician Who Carried a ‘Burden of Poetic Consciousness’

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The winters this year, in Jaipur, were unusually harsh and long, and they ended with a harsher strike, for with their end, they took away the philosopher-king who ruled our hearts with awe, for ages, and as in the ‘fall’, the trees shed their leaves making room for new, the thinker who maintained all his life, a relentless reminder about the transience of the plane of existence simultaneously with an ever anew zeal for life, shed the present plane of existence for another, this spring. Professor Biswambhar Pahi¹, affectionately called Pahi Sāhab or reverentially called Ācārya Pahi, had an academic project for him that defied a lifetime and when the insatiable nature of his academic and textual pursuits—which coupled with his fanatic commitment to the attribute of ‘completeness’ from deductive systems and with his slow pace—was pointed to him, he would smile with a heart-conquering innocence and declare that he used to treat himself as an immortal being.²

The first impressions that he imprinted upon my inner recesses were not that of a logician—I first met him in March 2014, a month after I had joined the university at Jaipur—I hesitated in meeting him owing to the very raw training in logic which I had. Fortunately, and surprisingly, he hardly talked about logic; he left me for the remaining of the meeting, awestruck with his mellifluous recital and submerged hermeneutics of Vālmīki, Kālidāsa, and Tagore. The first meeting ended with an agreement between two of us, that the older of us would train the other in Navya-Nyāya and advanced logic. His training sessions started not before the next year

¹ Prof. Biswambhar Pahi (18.04.1936–03.03.2020) was a logician and philosopher of international repute. He taught at Central Washington State College, Washington, USA, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, and University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.

² The Burden of Poetic Consciousness is also the title of a seminal paper by Prof. Biswambhar Pahi (first author) which encapsulates his ideas on ‘philosophy of life’ and also his understanding of Vedic weltanschauung. All the same, every inch of his personality reflected such poetic consciousness and its burden. [Pahi, B. and Jethmalani, S. (1996). The Burden of Poetic Consciousness. In S. Jethmalani and P. C. Kar (Eds.), *The Burden of Poetic Consciousness* (pp. 1–36). Jaipur: Department of Philosophy, University of Rajasthan.]

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in summers. His careful and gradual unfolding of the very conceptual architecture of history of Indian philosophy, challenged and altered completely one's approach towards it. With a magic wand, he would easily bring a Śunaḥśepa, Gotama, Raghunātha Śiromaṇi back to life.

My brief journey with him, so far as duration of time goes, was nevertheless long enough if intensity were the decisive parameter for measuring time. His written works were far less vital and forceful than his unwritten thoughts, and a combination of these two gave me an idea of his unfinished project with Indian philosophy. His originality and rigor in re-structuring of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika (NV) systems—a work whose importance remains unevaluated with the seriousness it deserves—could be seen as a new model for furtherance of contemporary Indian philosophy, in so far as his fundamental quest in his writings pertaining to NV, has been in seeking room for conciliation between thinker-centric creativity and system-centric commitment. His opening the gates of the closed church of NV systems,³ which in simple words means a re-modeling of NV, had two basic goals: restraining (secularizing) NV within 'bounds of sense' and upholding the Ṛgvedic weltanschauung/philosophy of life. Doing so he found, the notion of an eternal and substantial self, factuality of *Karmavāda*, God, *Viśeṣa*, etc., inconsistent with methodic principles of NV. It remains unobserved though, that he accepted some of these on the demands of 'practical reason'. Two of his endeavors with Indian philosophy, remained unfinished or better un-started; these were: a commentary on Pāṇini's grammar from the perspective of formal logic and a verse-by-verse hermeneutic of the Vedic corpus. His protestant objective to reform NV and classical Indian philosophy at large, so as to facilitate, what he termed as "natural evolution of a system", remains one of the most understated and at the same time misunderstood attempts in contemporary Indian philosophy. Ascertainment of his philosophical position made orthodox scholars of NV, term him a *pracchanna* Cārvāka⁴; he denied these charges of being a conjoiner of materialism and NV by pointing out that for him the 'I' or cognitive attributes are not derivable from material forces.⁵

His scholarship of Saṃskṛta, Greek, Bāṅglā literature complemented the stringently positivist Naiyāyika; with the *krāntadṛṣṭi* of poets, he saw through and propagated the organic, interconnected, life-affirming Vedic philosophy of life, which impelled on every member of human race, as per him, an insurmountable toll of duties (dharma) via the pathways of both poetic and theoretic consciousness. What also remains lesser known is his deviation from the lineage of Ingalls and Matilal, in

³ Gokhale, Pradeep (2018). Professor Biswambhar Pahi: The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Reformer. In R. P. Sharma and A. Varshney (Eds.), *Philosophical Thoughts of Professor Biswambhar Pahi: Critical Reflections* (PTBP) (pp. 19-30). Jaipur: Department of Philosophy, University of Rajasthan.

⁴ Mishra, Sachhidananda (2018). Ācārya Biswambhar Pahi ki Vaiśeṣika Dṛṣṭi. In PTBP, pp. 125-139.

⁵ Pahi's reply to Gokhale, in PTBP, p. 29.

so far as he attempted a re-phrasing of Western formal logic in the jargon of Navya-Nyāya; his lifelong attempts to relate the two traditions of logic may be seen as an extension of comparative philosophy, something that dominated the department at Jaipur since P. T. Raju. In formal logic, an associate of the legendary F. B. Fitch and G. H. von Wright, his journey started with implicational calculi, and later his primary concern was what he termed as the Jankov's problem; which was subsequently developed as the 'bridging problem'.

It is difficult for me to do justice to him and to myself, in attempting a reminiscence of his persona or academic life. Let me then just try to offer a small gallery of pictures that get painted pell-mell around, when I remember him. Clad in dhoti and kurta, with his brown karakul hat, sometimes as soft as a dewdrop and sometimes hard as a rock, he personified Bhavabhūti's *vajrādapi kaṭhorāṇi mriduni kusumādapi*.⁶ Talking to the plants of his garden and pillars of the portico of the department building, he used to make Kalidāsa's *pātuṃ na prathamam*⁷ and Īśopaniṣad's *sarvātmya darśana* alive, preaching to everyone around, the burden of poetic consciousness. His style of conversation, though didactic and completely un-Socratic, always had a Socratic modesty deeply ingrained; in almost every episode of his conversation, he and his audience did not lack clue of time but actually transcended it. About a month before his send-off, one night, he suddenly summoned me to his home, which would turn out to be my last visit to him; he narrated his plan to see Jagannath, to read *Ṛgveda* at the seashores of Puri and visit his native village. He recited to me, from the first Maṇḍala, the woe of Śunaḥśepa on being sacrificed: *kasya nūnam katamasyāmrītānām*; symbolic it was of his own unfathomable love for life and his scorn for hereafter. As he approached to bid me adieu for the night, he kept waving his hands until I disappeared from sight. The academic and departmental commitments that he obtained from me do not deserve a mention here.

As I tread-on in the relatively tranquil research centre of our department and I beseech the pillars of the building which he had designed, I am reminded of *śamameṣyati me śokaḥ katham nu vatse twayā racitpūrvam; utajadwārvirūḍham nīvārbaliṃ vilokayataḥ*⁸; but then the bard reminds, *artho hi kanyā parakīya*⁹; in a sense the present life appears to be a 'daughter' meant finally to go to someone else; the hereafter is *parakīya* here. May our daughter find serenity in the other plane of existence. Now when I reflect upon my own life, I finally find something about which I may take pride in myself: I have been the last student of a teacher who was not a sage but one who sacrificed much of his life for his students.

⁶ From *Uttarāmacarita*.

⁷ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (A), 4.9 (R. D. Karmarkar {2013}: *Abhijñānaśākuntala of Kalidāsa*, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan).

⁸ A. 4.21. Kaṇva asks how would his grief be mitigated while he shall be looking upon the corn-offering made by Śakuntalā, growing at the door of the cottage.

⁹ A. 4.22. A daughter is a property belonging to other.