

Can Indian Philosophy Be Written in English? A Conversation with Daya Krishna^{*}

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Abstract

The period of British colonial rule in India is typically regarded as philosophically sterile. Indian philosophy written in English during the British colonial period is often ignored in histories of Indian philosophy, or, when considered explicitly, dismissed either as uncreative or as inauthentic. The late Daya Krishna thought hard about this at the end of his life, and we have been thinking about this in conversation with him. We show that this dismissal is unjustified and that this is a fertile period for Indian philosophy in which traditional Indian philosophical ideas were brought into dialogue with the West and advanced with great acumen. In this paper, we present one case study to illustrate this point.

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1. The philosopher's predicament

In conversation in Jaipur two years ago, the late Prof Daya Krishna, then President of the Indian Council for Philosophical Research and one of the most eminent philosophers in India in the second half of the twentieth century, said to us:

I will say that philosophy written in English is not Indian Philosophy. Indian philosophy is not written in English, but in Sanskrit.

Daya Krishna was an inspiration and a primary interlocutor in our research, and we miss him terribly. He poses a dilemma here for anyone who wishes to understand Indian philosophy as it was practiced in Indian universities during the British colonial period. By the *practice* of Indian philosophy, we do not mean the compilation of a history of classical and medieval Indian philosophy, but rather the creative engagement with current and perennial philosophical problems by Indian scholars cognizant of western philosophy, but in the context of the long tradition of Indian philosophy grounded in the Vedas and the Upanishads.

If we take Daya Krishna's remark at face value, and endorse it, there *was no Indian philosophy* in Anglophone universities during the British Raj. To be sure, the Indian Sanskrit scholastic tradition was alive in this period. But that tradition is propagated in isolation from other philosophical literature and practitioners and was not dominant in colonial Indian Philosophy departments or in the Indian Philosophical Congress.

On this account whatever was being written, taught and debated in English by Indian professors or lectures in Philosophy was, despite its authorship, putative subject matter, or venue, *not Indian philosophy*. In virtue of its medium, it was at best either Western philosophy accidentally written by Indians in India, or a mere second-hand, inauthentic reportage on the history of Indian philosophy in a colonizer's argot. Creativity and philosophical agency are out of the question. (Paradoxically, for those who adopt this view of the nature of Indian philosophy, even the pandits were cut off from creativity or agency. They are typically represented as merely parroting, albeit in pukka Sanskrit, the positions laid down in their canonical commentaries, perpetuating fossilized darsanas, out

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of touch with modernity and its philosophical projects. So Indian philosophy was in fact an impossible project in India—those who might attempt it were doomed either to inauthenticity or to pedantry.)

For this reason, most scholars regard the ninety years of the Raj as a period of sterility in Indian philosophy. Histories of Indian philosophy are silent regarding colonial and postcolonial figures. Few today have heard of many of those who were principal figures on the Indian philosophical scene at that time; fewer still have read their work. For the most part, to the extent that figures of this time are still known at all, they are known for their textbooks that have become part of the syllabus. We all know Hiriyanan's *Outlines* as well as Dasgupta's and Radhakrishnan's histories. Most of us have name recognition for BN Seal and RD Ranade. But how many of us have read the systematic work of any of these thinkers, or considered their relationships to their predecessors, contemporaries, or their influence on their students who are our colleagues?

Even scholars who do attend to this literature, such as Prof Raghuramaraju, comment on the sterility and lack of debate in this period. When all that is visible is history, comparison and reportage, there is little room for debate. But can this be so? Can we seriously imagine generations of *Indian* philosophers mindlessly repeating received lore, eschewing all critical thought, chanting platitudes in unison? We think not. Attention to the wealth of systematic philosophy written in English, and attention to its religious, social, political and broader philosophical context reveals not a desert, but a luxuriant garden of philosophical delights, a vibrant intellectual life, continuous with the classical tradition, in conversation with the West, with an agenda of its own, full of contest, and constituting the platform from which contemporary Indian philosophy was launched. Daya-ji's challenge, and it was meant very much as a challenge, not an oracular pronouncement, gave added urgency and point to our investigations.

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2. Speculation.

We take our lead from the late Prof AC Mukerji of Allahabad, whose presidential address in 1950 to the 26th session of the Indian Philosophical Congress inspires the case we build against the dominant view scouted above. In that address, Prof Mukerji says:

I would like to avail myself of this opportunity to give expression to my genuine admiration and appreciation for the work my colleagues in the Indian colleges and universities have succeeded in doing in the sphere of philosophy notwithstanding a hundred handicaps and formidable difficulties. I am fully aware of the general attitude of scorn and contempt, of distrust and discouragement, that has brought discredit upon the contemporary Indian thinkers from within and outside India; but I shall not enquire into the nature and cause of the circumstances responsible for this growing volume of suspicion. Of one thing, however, I am pretty sure and it is this that the adverse critics have neither the inclination nor the courtesy of spending on the Indian attempts a hundredth part of the time and attention they devote to the study of the currents of foreign thought. Philosophical convictions grow through the spirit of cooperation and helpful mutual criticism; it is positively unfair to refuse cooperation and yet wail over languishment. I for one do believe that the philosophers of contemporary India have already given sufficiently convincing evidence of the virility and strength of Indian thought which, given favourable atmosphere, would gradually develop into world views of far-reaching consequences whose value in the context of world philosophy would not be negligible. What is needed is a concerted effort on the part of our countrymen to help the growth of Indian thought rather than harp on the discordant tune. I have long felt that, far from providing an incentive, this apathy and indifference are the symptom of a dangerous disease that produces intellectual paralysis and a moral anesthesia. [\[Human Personality 181-182\]](#).

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We quote Mukerji at length because at the end of his career he gives voice to the legitimate frustration that must have been experienced by so many of his colleagues.

Mukerji is correct in all respects. Indian philosophy under the Raj was and is treated with scorn and contempt. And it is at least as true today as it was a half century ago that the critics of Indian philosophy systematically ignore in their reading and reflection the very literature they do not hesitate to disparage. We agree with Mukerji's assessment of the genuine strength and creativity of Indian thought of this period, and we certainly endorse his conclusion that to continue to ignore this body of work is both an intellectual and a moral failing.

Mukerji himself has suffered the fate he so eloquently laments in these remarks. Despite the brilliance of his work, few outside of Allahabad have heard of him, let alone have read his work.¹ Mukerji is far from alone in this fate. Indeed, even those who

¹ It turned out that even Daya-ji, while he had heard of Mukerji, had never read any of his work. We left some with with him after one conversation, and when we met again after a year, he remarked that here was

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acknowledge the greatness of particular figures from that period, such as KC Bhattacharyya, have often read little, if any, of their actual writing.

Prof Mukerji declines to speculate on the reasons for the ignorance and disparagement of work in this period. We suspect that the neglect of the philosophy of this period is an instance of a more general cultural trope—the contest between a conception of the authentically Indian constructed by an intellectual elite and the valuation of creativity.

3. The Renaissance in Philosophy

The renaissance in philosophy was for the most part not recognized as such, and is still not recognized. This contrasts dramatically with the way the renaissance is seen in the field of art today. Despite decades of critique, we now witness a resurgence of interest in and appreciation of Bengal School and Company School art. There is no parallel resurrection of Indian philosophy. The discussion and debates that dominated the art community, and that have re-emerged in contemporary Indian art history and aesthetic theory about what it means to generate a new but still ‘Indian’ art are almost entirely hidden from view in the field of philosophy.

While the community of artists and art critics were bound by well-known journals, and enjoyed a receptive public, there was no analogous visible community of pan-Indian academic philosophers. *Sri Aurobindo*, *Nobel Laureate* Tagore, *Mahatma* Gandhi, and *Swami* Vivekananda all worked outside of the academy, and those within the academy who came into public consciousness, like *Dr* Radhakrishnan, were few in number, standing as prototypes of philosophy rather than as members of a community of academic philosophers. Not only has philosophy no *public* canon of criticism comparable to that of art, Indian academia, and a fortiori, philosophy, was subject to a regionalism that structured the discipline during this period. As a consequence, Philosophy flourishes in

a philosopher of some stature and creativity. He challenged us again to find more instances of such work. We are pleased to say that we have done so. Unfortunately, we were only able to share some of our research with Daya-ji before his passing. But we look forward to sharing more with the community he led.

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micro-communities that are tied to specific geographic regions and to members of philosophy departments in universities of those regions.

Despite these differences, we find in each case the presence of the trope of the authentic versus the creative in colonial India. For a philosopher writing in that period the challenge is: how to do philosophy that is at once authentically Indian and creative? How can a Sanskritist engage with Russell? How can a Hegelian draw on Shankaracharya?

While in the case of art, tradition and innovation are ultimately no longer seen as mutually exclusive categories to be overcome only by genius artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, this happy resolution does not occur in philosophy. While we now give a multitude of artists of that time and of today freedom to work creatively in continuity with an ancient tradition, this has not been the case in philosophy. Further, there is no recovery effort underway to restore to public consciousness the high quality work of other philosophers of that period. And tragically, the dichotomy of the authentic versus the creative as it applies to philosophy is as unbridgeable as ever in the attitude of present day Indian philosophers. Daya Krishna's lament regarding the putative stagnation of philosophy in India in this era is testament to this state of affairs. He challenges us to provide a corrective.

We do so by undertaking an initial study of the work of Prof. AC Mukerji who worked and taught at the University of Allahabad. This will provide evidence that there were philosophers prosecuting philosophy continuous with the Indian philosophical tradition in an innovative and exciting way. AC Mukerji, however, is only the tip of the iceberg. There are many others working in the universities of India during the British period who did not themselves see tradition and innovation as mutually exclusive categories, who creatively and successfully overcame this divide but who were not, and still are not, recognized for their efforts. The perception that the ninety years of the Raj constituted a period of sterility in Indian philosophy is a mere perception. Its inaccuracy has tragic consequences for our appreciation of Indian intellectual life and of the engagement of India with modernity.

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We now begin our case study of the work of AC Mukerji of Allahabad who, despite his considerable genius, does not live in most collective memory of Indian philosophy in the colonial period. Very few remember or have read his work. In Allahabad, on the other hand, people in the Philosophy Department still refer to the trio of eminent philosophers who dominated that department for decades—RK Ranade, the great mystic; AC Mukerji, the Kantian Vedanta scholar, the positivist AN Kaul—as the Socrates, Plato and Aristotle of Allahabad.

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We quoted earlier from AC Mukerji's Presidential address to the Indian Philosophical Congress in 1950. We now turn to other samples of his philosophical work. His corpus is substantial, spanning a quarter century (1925-1950) comprising two books, and about a dozen essays, one of which could constitute a book in its own right. Unfortunately for his reputation, most of his essays were published in *Allahabad University Studies*, a scholarly journal not generally read outside of the gates of Allahabad University at the time, and now, not at all. (This pattern of local publication was typical of this period.) His two books, *Self Thought and Reality* and *The Nature of Self*, were also published in Allahabad, and are long out of print.

There is of course, insufficient time in the present forum to survey all of his contributions to philosophy. But we want to say enough to convince you of four things: First, AC Mukerji was a philosopher of great accomplishment and his ideas merit serious attention. Second, while AC Mukerji was thoroughly conversant with and attentive to the European philosophical tradition, he was also deeply immersed in the Indian tradition. Third, while early in his career, he takes comparative philosophy seriously as an enterprise, in his mature thought he rejects *comparison* in favour of *systematic* philosophy, drawing on Indian and Western sources indifferently. Finally, AC Mukerji sees himself first and foremost as an *Indian philosopher* prosecuting an *Indian* agenda on an international stage, and his frequent use of Western material is generally in the service of an Indian agenda.

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It is hard to overstate Mukerji's creativity. Most of us would regard Wilfrid Sellars and Donald Davidson (of course along with WV Quine) as the most significant exponents of American pragmatist and neo-Kantian thought of the 20th Century. We would cite as among their principal contributions to our discipline in Sellars' case the identification of and attack on the "myth of the given" and the harnessing of Kant's idealism in the service of realism, and in Davidson's the attack on the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes, and of the scheme/content and world/word distinctions. These contributions were made between 1956 and 1980. Mukerji identified each of these themes and anticipated these conclusions and their arguments long before his better-known American colleagues.

In his 1927 paper, "The Realist's Conception of Idealism," Mukerji writes

In the thinkers of the Enlightenment, the desire to be clear at any cost grew into such a master-passion that they could not admit the truth of anything except what would stand out with clear-cut features and hard immutable outlines, the consequence being a wide-spread disorganization in the different departments of life. This led Kant to ask for a "further analysis" of the so-called facts. So, if we are to retain the terms Idealism and Realism, we *must give up the old method of contrasting them, and define Realism as the habit of accepting the facts as out there, unconditioned and absolute. Idealism, on the contrary, insists on the conditioned nature of the ordinary facts of experience and holds that apart from their conditions, the so-called facts are reduced to non-entities.* [[Realist's Conception](#) 210]

In the defence of Kant that follows, Mukerji develops a sustained critique of givenness. The idealism he endorses is neither individualistic and subjective nor hostile to the reality of the external world. Instead, Mukerji defends a robust realism about the natural world and an intersubjective account of the constitution of our ontology. A quarter century later, he was to return to this theme, saying in his ironically entitled address "Traditional Epistemology," exploring the quaint traditions of Western empiricism

In reverting to Hume's dualism, and accepting his verdict as final, the logical empiricists, along with the majority of contemporary thinkers, appear to have completely ignored the value of an alternative theory of knowledge, according to which neither the *a priori* nor the empirical knowledge is a species of knowledge by the side of the other species; on the contrary, what is called *a priori* knowledge is nothing more than the knowledge of the universal elements involved in the very existence of an empirical object or an empirically given event. *If, for instance, it is assumed that sense data are the ultimate materials of experience, our analysis, according to this theory, is defective, for it does not take into consideration the conditions of there being a world of sense data at all.* [[Traditional Epistemology](#) 40]

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Mukerji, anticipating Sellars' own Kantian critique in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" of sense datum theories and the foundationalism they represent, argues in this essay that sense data cannot even be granted epistemic status without taking them covertly to be already intentional objects of conceptually rich cognitive states. This late essay is also redolent with themes to be developed three decades later by Donald Davidson, including the impossibility of drawing a scheme/content distinction, the requirement of broad agreement as a background for disagreement and the centrality of truth to meaning and the impossibility of distinguishing between reality and our accounts of it. Mukerji writes:

Every theory of reality... lays claim to truth and consequently challenges the truth claim of a rival theory.... That there is a reality which refuses to be represented by conflicting theories is, therefore, one of the common assumptions uniting the new with the old theory. If reality, as philosophical perversity has sometimes claimed, had been in its ultimate nature the subject of conflicting and mutually destructive judgments, there could be neither science nor philosophy. Even the most radical skeptics or a confirmed misologist, insofar as he claims truth for his assertion that knowledge is unattainable or that reality is inscrutable makes the unconscious assumption that reality has a positive nature by virtue of which it repels conflicting formulations. Thus radical skepticism or total agnosticism is a disguised parasite that feeds upon the sap supplied by the parent tree of absolute knowledge.

One of the results of these considerations is to disclose the utter futility of an unbridgeable dualism of knowledge and reality. [Traditional Epistemology 38]

It is hard to read this material, as well as the rest of Mukerji's corpus and deny that we are reading the work of a first-rate intellect. So far, we have been emphasizing Mukerji's conversation with Western thought, and of course his chosen philosophical medium was English.

In our research we often heard the refrain that the philosophers writing in English during this period did not know their Sanskrit and were not truly conversant with classical Indian philosophical thought. Even Daya-ji would say this in conversation. We have found this in general to be false, and indeed it is false of Mukerji. His two books as well as his articles on Sankara are replete with Sanskrit quotation, copious references to Sanskrit literature, and detailed and nuanced commentary on Indian philosophy. Mukerji was every bit as at home in the Sanskritic tradition of his homeland as he was in the European tradition in which he was also educated. Indeed, this is not surprising, given that his immediate teachers were Dr Baghvan Das and PP Adhikari of Benares.

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It is a conceit of contemporary metaphilosophy that “comparative philosophy” is a phrase of deprecation, indicating the mind-numbing enterprise of itemizing points of similarity and difference between canonical texts of disparate traditions, the stuff of an undergraduate “compare and contrast” assignment made into a pseudo-specialty of our profession in mock deference to excluded others. But let us step back for a moment to the origins of the phrase itself and of the enterprise it denotes. How many remember today that the phrase itself was first used by the patriarch of Indian Anglophone philosophy, BN Seal? Seal writes that “historical comparison implies that the objects compared of coordinate rank.” [Seal 1] Many Indian and Western philosophers followed Seal in this path, pre-eminently in India Dr S Radhakrishnan and PT Raju. Mukerji’s philosophical career, on the other hand, was marked by a persistent critical engagement with the very *idea* of comparison. He opens his volume, *The Nature of Self* with the following remarks:

Comparative philosophy has so far been either predominantly historical and descriptive, or it has contented itself with discovering stray similarities between the Western and Indian thought. No serious attempt, as far as I know, has yet been made to undertake a comparative study for mutual supplementation of arguments and consequent clarification of issues. Yet, this alone can suggest the paths to new constructions and thus help the development of philosophical thought. [Nature of Self v-vi]

The book itself, as several contemporary reviews in the Western press note [Pratt, Schrader], is remarkable in its systematic eschewal of comparison in favour of the dramatic joint use of philosophical texts and insights for systematic ends.

His 1928 essay, “Some Aspects of the Absolutism of Sankara (A comparison between Sankara and Hegel)” addresses the methodology of cross-cultural philosophy. In this essay he criticizes the attempts by some philosophers (citing Radhakrishnan most prominently) “to infuse the spirit of the latest systems of European philosophy into the old bodies of Indian metaphysics.” [Some Aspects 375] He writes instead,

The object of the comparative study of philosophy, we believe, is to discover the dialectic movement of universal thought; but this will remain a far-off dream or a mere pious wish till the different interpretations are dragged out of their subjective seclusion in the enjoyment of an oracular prestige into the region of objective criticism. [Some Aspects 375]

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In this essay, Mukerji argues persuasively and meticulously that if there are useful comparisons to be made in philosophy, they require the juxtaposition of entire textual traditions to reveal the dynamics of philosophical dialectic and progress, and not the juxtaposition of individual texts. He writes:

If... we want to profit by thinking modern problems of European philosophy in Indian terms, without misrepresentation of either and yet with a considerable clarification of both methods of thought, *we must give up the practice of finding Kant and Hegel for instance in the Upanishads; these are misrepresentations which do not clarify but confound problems.* [[Some Aspects](#) 379]

In Mukerji we see an example of a genuine cross-cultural philosopher, adept at philosophizing with Hegel, Sriharsha, Kant and Sankara and conversant with the psychology of his time as well. He is no comparativist, not due to isolation, but because he sees philosophical *problems* and not *texts* as the business of philosophy.

Indeed, Mukerji's philosophical agenda, despite his concerted engagement with Western philosophy and his masterful command of English as a medium, is Indian through and through. In keeping with his own proscription on finding the solutions to modern problems in ancient texts and vocabulary, Mukerji builds upon but does not rest content with the conclusions of the classical and medieval Advaita Vedanta tradition. His central project has its origins in the *Bṛhadharanyaka-Upanishad* and the voice of Yajñavalkya. Much, though to be sure not all, of Mukerji's philosophical energy was devoted to developing and defending a version of idealism that he regarded as thoroughly *realistic*.

Mukerji's formulation of this problem and the direction of its solution is related to that of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, Mukerji never read Wittgenstein. Nonetheless, there is an affinity here, as Wittgenstein arguably came to his thought about this problem via Schopenhauer, who acknowledges Vedic and Upanishadic sources of his own views about this matter. Let us begin with Mukerji's formulation with what he took to be the central problem of philosophy. He begins not with Descartes, but in the Upanishads.

The doctrine that the Self the existence of which none can seriously doubt is yet essentially unknowable through the ordinary avenues of knowledge is as old as the Upanishads. The puzzle was started by Yajñavalkya...: That, through which everything is known, he urged, cannot itself be made an object of knowledge, none can know the

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knower.... This puzzle has remained ingrained in the Vedanta philosophy of a later age, and has found in Sankara one of its most powerful exponents. [Nature of Self 22]

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Mukerji insists that the proper structure of this problem is not what it is taken to be in much of Western philosophy, *viz.*, to navigate the choice between excluding the self from the domain of knowledge and taking it to be one more object in that domain (*e.g.* Kant vs Locke). Instead, he takes up the project of understanding *how* the self is to be known *despite* not being an *object* of knowledge.

In the West, only those few Vedanta-influenced philosophers, Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein follow Mukerji this far. But Mukerji's thought is more Indian, more Advaita, than even theirs. In the end, *their* self is a transcendental subject and a transcendental agent. But Mukerji goes further, and emphasizes, in his two monographs, the importance of the self as *enjoyer*. His emphasis on the centrality of what we might call the aesthetic dimension of transcendental subjectivity and its role in self-knowledge, consistent with, and possibly influenced by, the *lila-vada* of Sri Aurobindo, is a uniquely Advaita Vedanta insight. There is a deeper sense in which Mukerji's project is Indian. He is neither agnostic nor naturalist. Mukerji instead proposes that self-knowledge requires a distinct form of objectless self-understanding to be gained in philosophical reflection, a form of intentionality *toto genere* different from ordinary perception, more akin to *yoga-pratyaksa* than to any cognitive attitude to be found in the post-Kantian tradition.

For all that, however, Mukerji is not a traditionalist, not an advocate of a "return to the Vedas," or of reviving ancient doctrines in the 20th Century. He is sharply critical of this tendency in Radhakrishnan. His use of Sankara, Sriharsha and other Indian sources is like the use a contemporary Western philosopher such as McDowell might make of Aristotle, of a touchstone for thinking in a way appropriate to the present. In particular, Mukerji is a realist about the external world, and is deferential to science as a measure of the empirical. His idealism is consistent with realism. He argues that, while consciousness might have *epistemological* priority, as the condition of knowledge, it has no *ontological* priority over the external world. While as *object*, any object of knowledge can be known only subject to the conditions of consciousness, objects do not depend for

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their existence *per se* on minds. *This* Advaita position is hence a critique of the transcendent view from nowhere, as opposed to a rejection of the reality of the external world.

4. Pan Indianism vs Regionalism

What made Mukerji and his colleagues possible? And why are philosophers of Mukerji's stature unremarked today, and indeed why were they of such limited repute even in their own days? To answer these questions, we must recall the pan-Indian context in which academic philosophy was practiced as well as the curious regionalism of Indian philosophy during the period of British rule. We have already referred to a bit of the pan-Indian story. The *academic* philosophers were profoundly influenced by those national intellectual leaders, but themselves had more limited spheres of influence. This was for multiple social and logistical reasons, but also due to the prevalence of in-house academic journals to which we referred earlier. As a consequence, there are a host of specific regional stories to be told, each with its own account of influences, central ideas, and political engagement. Mukerji and his colleagues, while working in the context set by Aurobindo and his colleagues, led local lives. So did the Bhattacharyyas of Calcutta, and Mahadevan, Iyer and Hiriyanna in the South.

National interaction occurred only at annual IPC conferences or at the occasional seminars at Amalner. Such journals as *Allahabad University Studies* were never distributed nationally, and now exist only in seriously moth and termite-infested almirahs scattered throughout India. This is a reason for the obscurity into which so much of the work of these figures has lapsed, while the work of their non-academic contemporaries who set their agenda remains so well-known. It is also the reason for the urgency of detailed research into their work so that these regional stories can be stitched together to provide a comprehensive history of Indian philosophy in English, an urgency Daya-ji recognized as he spoke with us and encouraged our work. His passing only heightens this sense of urgency as we recognize how few of those whose memories form the tenuous bridge of consciousness between ourselves and those times remain with us.

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5. Conclusion

AC Mukerji was not unique. This period saw a vibrant engagement with philosophical ideas and questions emerging from the Indian Vedic tradition. Indian philosophers under the Raj are conscious of that history, as well as of the resources European philosophy can supply to its future. They strove to usher Indian philosophy onto a global stage; they used the English language in order to call attention to Indian philosophy and in an effort to bring India into dialogue with Europe. In prosecuting this project, they did not abandon Indian philosophy, but advanced it, bringing Western voices and techniques into its tradition, in the process constructing its modern avatar. Simultaneously, their work enriched Western philosophy with Indian voices and insights.

In this process, they have brought English into the family of Indian philosophical tongues, and have made possible the practice of Indian philosophy in English. Alas, for the reasons we have scouted, their efforts have remained obscure. Nonetheless, we owe them a great debt; their story is a rich and fascinating one, and, inspired both by Daya-ji's friendly challenge and by his kind support, we will continue to tell it.

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