

DR. SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN: LIFE AND WRITINGS

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Abstract

Radhakrishnan has the rare qualification of being well-versed in the great tradition of both the East and the West. His early education made him familiar with the knowledge of the East particularly of India, and his own scholarly adventure acquainted him with the wisdom of the West. He combined the two traditions with perfect ease, and is able to evolve a philosophy of synthesis. Radhakrishnan's philosophy has been awarded rare honour of being included in the 'The Library of Living Philosophers', together with the philosophy of C.D. Broad, Bertrand Russell, A.N. Whitehead, Albert Einstein, Karl Popper and Jean Paul Satre. Sometimes he is described as nothing more than 'a liaison officer' in philosophy between the East and the West (as put it by C.M. Joad). He has also been characterized as a historian of philosophy and not a philosopher himself. Reacting upon this criticism D.P. Chattopadhyaya observes that, rightly understood, the above partial characterization of Radhakrishnan need not necessarily be considered as negative. Chattopadhyaya remarks that he has no hesitation in saying that Radhakrishnan has philosophized in the grand Indian tradition, criticizing his teachers, following them interrogatively and reconstructing them creatively. Any scissors and paste way of characterizing Radhakrishnan would not only be unfair to the thinker, but would also prove inconsistent with the huge corpus of writings he left behind him.

Life and Works

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was born on September 5th, 1888, at a small place, Tiruttani, forty miles to the north-west of Madras. Veeraswami and Seethamma were his parents. He was the second child of his parents. His early life was spent in Tirupati and Tiruttani, both famous as places of pilgrimage. Perhaps on account of that early influence, he was naturally attracted towards religion. He admitted himself that since then he developed a firm faith in reality of the unseen world, a faith which was never forsaken. Radhakrishnan joined the Lutheran

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Mission High School in Tirupati in his early age and left it in 1900. He then joined the Voorhee's College at Vellore where he studied F.A in 1904. Next year he joined Madras Christian College, there he was successful in his B.A degree examination with a high percentage of marks. In 1905, while he was at Voorhees College, Radhakrishnan married Sivakamamma. She lived with Radhakrishnan more than fifty years and passed away in 1956. They had five daughters and one son. Their son and the youngest child, Sarvepalli Gopal, was a professor of contemporary history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Radhakrishnan's professional career had three phases: teacher of Philosophy, leader in higher education and statesman, which were overlapped. His first book *Ethics of the Vedanta*, a thesis prepared in connection with his M.A Examination was published in 1908 when he was only twenty. After his post-graduation, he took L.T certificate from Saidapet College of Education, Madras. He was appointed as Lecturer in Philosophy in the Presidency College, Madras in 1909 which was confirmed after taking his L.T certificate. Five years later in 1914, he was promoted as Professor of Philosophy in the same College. Principal Hobbs of Madras Presidency College perceived the genius in Radhakrishnan's work and appointed him in the Provincial Educational Service at one hundred rupees a month. In the year of 1914 Radhakrishnan contributed to reputed journals like "The International Journal of Ethics", "Monist" and "Quest" in which he attempted to establish the ethical character of the Hindu religion. In 1917 he was transferred to the Arts College at Rajahmundry (Madras) as a Lecturer in Philosophy. His studies of Rabindranath Tagore led him to the publication of a book on *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (1918). As a teacher, Radhakrishnan made an indelible mark. His speech-making was balanced, majestic, sweet and clear-cut. It flows like an uninterrupted river. His English was simple, chaste and direct.

From 1918 to 1921 he was University Professor of Philosophy at the New University of Mysore. During these three years he published the *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (1918) and *Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy* (1920). During this period he also published a series of articles in *Mind* on Bergson's philosophy. The latter made him well known in the philosophical world. In 1920 the Government of Madras took him to the Indian Educational

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Service. In the year of 1921 Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, was among those who noticed the brilliant scholarship of Radhakrishnan. He offered him the King George V Chair of Mental and Moral Science, a chair that Radhakrishnan occupied from 1921 to 1931 and again from 1937 to 1947. Radhakrishnan himself described the King George V Chair as the most significant philosophy Chair in India.

At the University of Calcutta, J.H. Muirhead was one of his close associates and admirers. At his request, Radhakrishnan undertook to write his magnum opus *Indian Philosophy* (in 2 Volumes). He felt it was a unique honour to him since he was given an opportunity to find a concrete form to all his study and research in Indian philosophy, he had been making since 1908. The manuscript of first Volume was sent to the publisher in December, 1921 and the book was published in 1927. This book seems to have launched Radhakrishnan's professional career into global fame. Radhakrishnan came into contact with L.P. Jacks, the editor of Hibbert Periodicals through his articles, who later invited him to deliver lectures in Manchester College, Oxford. These lectures were subsequently published under the title *The Hindu View of Life* (1927) in which he represented Hindu religion as a positive and progressive movement with a distinctive character and asserted that those who adhered to it were torch bearers of enlightenment. It is one of the celebrated works on Hinduism. It describes the Central features of the faith of the Hindus, the different phases of Philosophical doctrine, religious experience, ethical character and traditional faith. Radhakrishnan's world-wide reputation as a philosopher dates from this time.

Radhakrishnan represented the University of Calcutta at the Congress of the Universities of the British Empire in June 1926. He addressed several meetings at different places in England. During this visit, Radhakrishnan was deputed by the University of Calcutta to represent it at the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy held at the Harvard University in America. At this juncture, many invitations came to him, one such invitation was the invitation from the University of Chicago to deliver lectures. Radhakrishnan served as Chairperson of the Executive Council, Indian Philosophical Congress (1925-1937) and General President of the third Session of that Congress in Bombay (1927).

Radhakrishnan received many awards and honours. Andhra University honoured him with the title of D. Litt, at its second convocation, held in November in 1928. He worked with success for the publication of a cultural monthly entitled “The New Era” published from Madras in 1929. During his visit to England, Radhakrishnan gave Hibbert lectures in 1930, which were largely attended. These lectures led to the publication of his work *An Idealist View of Life* (1932). Radhakrishnan was also invited to deliver Jowett lectures in 1930 which were founded with the objective to promote the study of Bible and the History of religion in the light of the available results of criticism and research. He visited Ceylon in 1931 where he gave a lecture on the legacy of Buddha. His lectures at Oxford during 1936-38 constitute *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, another important work of Radhakrishnan. Radhakrishnan delivered the annual lecture in the master mind series under the auspices of the British Academy on “Gautama Buddha” which was subsequently described as a lecture ‘on a master mind by master mind’. Consequently he was elected fellow of British Academy. He was the first Indian to achieve this distinction. His career as University administrator spanned the years from 1931 to 1962. Radhakrishnan succeeded Dr. C.R. Reddy as the Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University. During this period as its Vice Chancellor (1931-1936) he transformed Andhra University into a great seat of learning, and international in outlook. He invited Ludwig-Wolf to occupy the Professional Chair of Chemistry. He took more buildings on rent and started instruction in several social and science disciplines.

In the year of 1941 while being the honorary Vice Chancellor of the Benaras Hindu University, he was invited to occupy the Sir Sayaji Rao Chair of Indian Culture and Civilization. Consequently, Radhakrishnan relinquished the King George V Chair of Philosophy in Calcutta which he held for twenty years and took up the new assignment. At the invitation of the Chinese Government, during World War II, he also lectured at University in China (1944). These lectures deal with Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism. Radhakrishnan was also invited to address a conference on Eastern and Western Philosophy in Hawaii Islands.

Radhakrishnan regarded Universities as great seats of learning whose responsibility is to develop the higher mind of the country. A University according to him is not the expansion of a college, but a place of learning. He was invited by the senate of the Calcutta University to deliver Kamala Lectures in 1942. These lectures led to publication of his thought provoking book *Religion and Society* (1947) in which he expressed the need for religion and how it could help for the creation of a new world order. Radhakrishnan was made the honorary fellow of Calcutta University in 1946. In 1947 he led the Indian delegation to the UNESCO conference in Mexico City. He was member of the executive Board of UNESCO (1946-1951), its Chairperson in 1948-1949 and President of UNESCO's Seventh General Conference in 1952. Radhakrishnan chaired the University Commission of the Government of India from 1948 to 1949. He was President of the Indian PEN Organization from 1949 and Vice-President of International PEN from 1956. PEN is an organization for poets, playwrights, editors, essayists and novelists.

Radhakrishnan was also member of the constituent Assembly from 1946 to 1947. He played a significant role in the formative years of the Indian Republic from 1946-1950. His academic career entered a new phase when he assumed the office as an Indian Ambassador in Moscow in 1950. The Indo-Soviet friendship had grown culturally, economically and politically during Radhakrishnan's term of office as Ambassador. He was a graceful exponent of the non-alignment policy which led to the expansion of Indo-Soviet relations. As a diplomat, he conducted the office with shining intelligence. Radhakrishnan by his gracious personality led to the future development of relation between the two countries. His contribution to the League of Nations and the United Nations show that his education leadership was felt in the international realm. On 18th April 1952 Radhakrishnan resigned his embassy post in Moscow at Nehru's request in order to become to Congress Party's candidate for Vice-President of India. As the Vice-President of the Republic of India for two consecutive terms, five years each (1952-1962), Radhakrishnan presided over the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) of Parliament in New Delhi.

Radhakrishnan served as the Chancellor of the Delhi University from 1953 to 1962. He was also elected as the President of the Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. The “Preface” to Radhakrishnan’s translation of the *Principal Upanishads* (1953) was written in the embassy. His introduction to translation of and notes on the *Brahma Sutra* was published in 1960. On January 3rd, 1953 the University of Harvard conferred upon him the honorary Degree of Doctor of Law. He was the recipient of the honorary professorship of Moscow University on June 18th, 1956. He visited Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, China, Mongolia and Hong Kong in September 1957 on a good will. The visit of Radhakrishnan to foreign states helped the renewal of India’s friendship with those countries. He attended the East-West Philosopher’s Conference in Honolulu and visited the U.S. He attended UNESCO Conference, Paris, in November 1960. He was elected as the honorary fellow of the British Academy in 1962.

Radhakrishnan won several awards and rewards. He was awarded Bharta Ratna, the highest civil decoration in India in 1954. He received the peace prize of the German book trade in the autumn of 1961. Radhakrishnan was elected to the Presidency of the Indian Republic in 1962. He held this esteemed office for a full term of five years with dignity and respect. Accepting only Rs 2500 per month out of his total Presidential salary of Rs 10000 per month, Radhakrishnan donated the remaining to the Prime Minister’s National Relief Fund. In fact, after deduction of income tax, his salary was just Rs 1900 per month.

Radhakrishnan had a great love for Karnataka music. He liked the songs of Tyagaraja and Purandaradasa. He enjoyed cricket, often joining his grand children in the game. Reading was his favorite leisure activity. Radhakrishnan was a vegetarian, non-smoker and teetotaler. He had a very good taste for art and artistry. President Eisenhower of America had a great respect and admiration for Radhakrishnan’s intellectual qualities. Eisenhower attended a joint session of the parliament, addressed by Radhakrishnan and he showered praise on the intellectual speech of Radhakrishnan.

Radhakrishnan went to England in 1963 on a State Visit. He was a saint without asceticism and president without formality. During his tenure as the President, he entertained complaints from citizens. He made sincere efforts to create intellectual elite in the country. He made the significant contribution in

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handing over the Regal Lodge at Simla for purpose of education in which an Institute of Advanced Studies was established. His work on religion and philosophy had the stamp of his distinctive genius for clarity and precession. His works reflect a deep understanding of the subject. Radhakrishnan's work on *Essentials of Philosophy* was published in 1920. This was hailed in the West not only as a scholarly piece of writing but also as authoritative on the subject and it put him in the first rank of secular thinker. He recorded in *East and West* (1954) his reflection on the relations of the East and the West. Radhakrishnan was the author of over 45 books on different subjects. He was honoured with the Templeton Award for progress in religion in February 1975. In May, 1967 the seventy eight years old statesman retired as the Hon'ble President of India and left New Delhi. His retirement years were spent at Madras. Since 1968, four orient paperbacks containing selections from his earlier writings were published by the Hindu Pocket Books, *Religion and Culture* (1968), *The Present Crisis of Faith* (1970), *Our Heritage* (1973), and the *Creative Life* (1975) are some of these publications. Similarly Vision Books Paperback has also appeared on *Indian Religions* (1979). The appeal of these books is the testimony to the ability of Radhakrishnan's philosophy.

Radhakrishnan died of heart failure in a Madras nursing home on 17th April, 1975, after a prolonged illness. He was cremated the same day with full state honors. After elaborate Hindu rites, his son Dr. Sarvepalli Gopal, lighted the funeral pyre. A famous teacher of philosophy, educational leader, and statesman passed away. The whole world was deprived of a great philosopher and a man of matchless eminence and moral authority. It is befitting that his birthday which falls on September 5th, is being observed as the Teacher's day. This is a tribute both to the ideal profession and to the ideal man who dedicated his life to knowledge and scholarship.

Nature of his Philosophy

Radhakrishnan has the rare qualification of being well-versed in the great tradition of both the East and the West. His early education made him familiar with the knowledge of the East particularly of India, and his own scholarly adventure acquainted him with the wisdom of the West. He combined the two traditions with perfect ease, and is able to evolve a philosophy of synthesis.

However his fundamental convictions are deeply rooted in Indian tradition. The basics of his own philosophy are derived from ancient Indian philosophy particularly from the vedantic tradition, but he has skills of presenting such ideas into idioms and models of western thought. In his works, Radhakrishnan presented the old and traditional ideas in a refreshingly manner.

C.M. Joad describes Radhakrishnan's metaphysical stand point as the function of a liaison officer. "He seeks to build a bridge between the traditional wisdom of the East and the new knowledge and energy of the West". This statement does contain an element of truth, because Radhakrishnan made persistent efforts to bring about an East-West synthesis. His basic philosophical position is a kind of synthesis of advaita vedanta and the philosophy of absolute idealism. He takes up the monistic character of the vedantic reality and combines it with some of the important aspects of absolute idealism. Like a vedantin he believes that the reality is one, like an absolute idealist he shows that everything is a necessary aspect of one. Consequently one finds it difficult to reduce his philosophy to any of the current metaphysical models. It can broadly be described as a philosophy of monistic idealism. It is monistic because reality is conceived as one, and it can be also called idealism for the reason that it emphasizes upon both idea-ism and ideal-ism. The former (idea-ism) means that reality is of the nature of an idea -that it is mental or spiritual. Ideal-ism, on the other hand, emphasizes the ultimacy and value of some ideal. Radhakrishnan is an idealist in both of these two senses. He is an idealist in the first sense because he conceives the ultimate reality as spiritual. He is an idealist more particularly in the second sense because he is convinced that the world process is serving some purpose, is steadily trying to reach some goal. He seems to have the feeling that the scientific and technological advancement have made life's ways mechanical and that the materialistic competitions have almost leveled that soul of human-kind to sleep. Therefore he thinks that what is required is a reawakening of the soul, a recovery of the spiritual faith. His philosophy, thus, is nothing but an attempt to illustrate that the ultimate nature of the universe is spiritual, and that unless the spiritual sense is awakened, man's life will remain confused, a life of anguish and evil. On account of such a tremendous emphasis on the ultimate spirituality of everything,

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Radhakrishnan at times appears to be a mystic. However his mysticism is mysticism only to the extent to which idealistic thought of the monistic variety tends towards it.

Conclusion

Radhakrishnan's philosophy has been awarded rare honour of being included in the 'The Library of Living Philosophers', together with the philosophy of C.D. Broad, Bertrand Russell, A.N. Whitehead, Albert Einstein, Karl Popper and Jean Paul Satre. Sometimes he is described as nothing more than 'a liaison officer' in philosophy between the East and the West (as put it by C.M. Joad). He has also been characterized as a historian of philosophy and not a philosopher himself. Reacting upon this criticism D.P. Chattopadhyaya observes that, rightly understood, the above partial characterization of Radhakrishnan need not necessarily be considered as negative. Chattopadhyaya remarks that he has no hesitation in saying that Radhakrishnan has philosophized in the grand Indian tradition, criticizing his teachers, following them interrogatively and reconstructing them creatively. Any scissors and paste way of characterizing Radhakrishnan would not only be unfair to the thinker, but would also prove inconsistent with the huge corpus of writings he left behind him.

Radhakrishnan was influenced by two different traditions of religion and philosophy: Indian Hindu and Western-Christian. He was deeply stirred within by these two traditions. It can be said that if B. Croce was justified in discerning what was dead from what was living of Hegel, Radhakrishnan was justified in disentangling what is living of Indian culture from what is dead in it. His interpretation of Indian culture in general and its philosophy in particular is not mechanical but a creative transformation of the same.

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