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NEW INTERPRETATION OF HINDU PHILOSOPHY: CULTURAL PRESERVATION OR MODERNIZATION OF ANCIENT WISDOM

Hindu philosophy, rooted in the ancient texts of the Vedas, maintains its relevance in contemporary society. It is a source of wisdom not only for Hindus but also for individuals seeking enlightenment across diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds. Nevertheless, the modern socio-cultural landscape requires a reevaluation and adaptation of certain aspects of Hindu philosophy to address the complex needs of humanity of the 21st century. Let us undertake an examination of the thoughts of the contemporary Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik concerning the issue of Astika and Nastika.

The meaning of the term 'Nastika'. During the discussion, Devdutt Pattanaik is asked the question: *"I've heard many interpretations of the word nastik; what is its true meaning?"* [2, Chapter 4].

Before delving into Devdutt Pattanaik's response, it is important to underscore the fundamental significance of the term 'nastika', derived from the Sanskrit root 'asti', meaning 'there is' [1, p. 168]. Conversely, 'astika' carries an affirmatory connotation concerning the traditions and authority of the Vedas. Within the Hindu philosophical framework, two contrasting factions emerge: astika and nastika.

Astika represents the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, known as darshanas. Among them, two primary schools, namely Mimamsa and Vedanta, exclusively adhere to the authority of the Vedas without acknowledging any additional sources. The remaining four orthodox schools, namely Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, and Vaisesika, while upholding the Vedas' authority, also recognize supplementary sources of knowledge. In contrast, the nastika category, which translates to 'there is not' [1, p. 168] in Sanskrit, includes three heterodox schools such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Lokayata. However, it would be correct to say that there are a much larger number of schools,

which are often of less interest to researchers due to their insignificance.

When Devdutt Pattanaik claims that *"It is difficult to say what its true meaning is because there are many meanings",* one gets the impression that he is poorly informed about the essence of this issue [2, Chapter 4]. Within scholarly discourse, it is widely acknowledged that the term 'nastika' pertains to the ideological stance of certain heterodox schools, characterized by their rejection of the authority of the Vedas. Surprisingly, Devdutt Pattanaik refrains from addressing this fundamental aspect. Instead, he introduces the Hindi phrase 'aisa hai', translated as 'it is just like that', which appears incongruous in this context, given the preference for Sanskrit terminology in such discussions. Moreover, he proceeds to state that *"The meaning of 'it' changes, depending on the school of thought and the historical period",* which is essentially a reliable remark [2, Chapter 4].

According to Devdutt Pattanaik, *"astik were those who believed (aisa hai) that knowledge could be found only in the Vedas"* [2, Chapter 4]. However, it would be more accurate to describe the orthodox schools as affirming the authority of the Vedas rather than simply having faith in them. Devdutt Pattanaik further suggests that *"Later in history, those who believed in karma were considered astik, so nastik were those who did not believe"* [2, Chapter 4]. This raises questions about the sources from which the mythologist derives such conclusions. Rather than discussing the conceptual affiliations of philosophical schools within opposing camps, the mythologist focuses on matters of faith. Moreover, he addresses the distinction between these schools in terms of karma instead of addressing the strategic antagonism rooted in the recognition or non-recognition of the paraloka (transcendental world) [1, p. 168–176]. It remains unclear why he does not base his analysis on the fundamental question of the phenomenon of paraloka and instead uses karma as an example. Additionally, the source of information regarding karma in this context is not explicitly stated by the mythologist.

The Vedas are imbued with the concept of paraloka, which

constitutes a central tenet of the faith. It serves as a defining feature that distinguishes orthodox and heterodox schools of thought. Orthodox schools, grounded in the authority of the Vedas, inherently uphold the belief in paraloka as an integral aspect of their worldview. In contrast, heterodox schools, rejecting the primacy of Vedic authority, do not accept the concept of paraloka and instead advocate alternative philosophical positions. Therefore, it is not the theme of karma, but the theme of the existence-non-existence of paraloka that is the key issue dividing these camps.

Nastika and atheism. The next question on the topic, asked to the mythologist, is: *"Usually the word nastik translates into atheist in English – are these terms related?"* [2, Chapter 4].

Before delving into Devdutt Pattanaik's response and analyzing it, it's crucial to say a few words on the topic of the question. While the term 'nastika' is often translated into English as 'atheist', such a translation may not fully capture the nuances of the term. Followers of nastika do not strictly adhere to atheism. The term 'nastika' primarily signifies the disbelief in the existence of paraloka, the transcendental realm beyond the material world, rather than the denial of a specific deity or divine entity.

In his response, Devdutt Pattanaik offers his interpretation of the translation of the term 'atheism': *"The word atheism comes from Europe; it means 'non-believer of theism'"* [2. Chapter 4]. Right from the first lines of his answer, Devdutt Pattanaik acknowledges a certain inaccuracy in the use of the term 'atheism', confusing it with the word 'atheist' and giving this term to an individual who is a *"non-believer in theism",* although atheism is a doctrine that denies the existence of God. Moreover, even if the mythologist had intended to refer to the term 'atheist' to denote an individual, his description of such an individual as a *"non-believer in theism"* would still be imprecise. A more accurate description would be to characterize an atheist as one who explicitly denies the existence of God.

Devdutt Pattanaik claims that *"Here, it refers to the Abrahamic religions –Judaism, Christianity and Islam – where the belief is in one God who created the universe, who also gave certain rules for people which were brought to them by a messiah"* [2, Chapter

4]. While it is accurate to highlight the monotheistic nature of these religions, the expert does not delve into a crucial distinction such as Christianity's belief in the Trinity, which sets it apart fundamentally from other Abrahamic faiths.

Devdutt Pattanaik says that *"Words may have different meanings in different contexts, like spirituality and religion"* [2, Chapter 4]. However, rather than providing a straightforward answer regarding the potential correlation between the terms 'atheism' and 'nastika', Devudtt Pattanaik begins to talk about the "*different meanings in different context"* of terms such as 'spirituality' and 'religion'.

Devdutt Pattanaik's interpretation of Hindu philosophy serves two primary functions. Firstly, the mythologist presents ancient truths in a more accessible form to a broader audience. Rather than relying solely on traditional terminology and abstract concepts, which may be challenging for those who are far from deep philosophy, he employs comparisons with other religions and offers examples from everyday life. Secondly, his approach includes a certain desacralization of ancient knowledge, which can be explained by the strong influence of Westernization, the policy of multiculturalism, and globalization.

References

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