

---

# REFLECTIONS OF KIERKEGAARD IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY AN INTRODUCTION

**Dalimír Hajko**\*

*University of Žilina in Žilina, Faculty of Humanities, Univerzitná 1, 010 26 Žilina,  
Slovak Republic*

(Received 29 September 2016)

---

## **Abstract**

The ideas of Søren Kierkegaard have attracted the interest of a broad spectrum of creators of modern Indian culture. In the first place, it was the admirers of existentialism who diligently sought reasons to justify a legitimate place for existential thought in the new context of Indian thinking. They were followed by thinkers who categorically refused existentialism, criticizing it from various points of view. There have also been philosophers, who tried to evaluate the function of existentialism objectively and scientifically in a very sober way, first in connection to the traditional attitudes of Indian philosophers and religious thinkers and secondly in connection to the evident presence of existentialism in the context of Indian philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Keywords:* Soren Kierkegaard, existentialism, India, philosophy

---

## **1. Introduction**

Was Kierkegaard uniquely European? Could his philosophical and theological opinions be understood as the views and statements of a genuine citizen of Europe that could not have appeared on the other continents? Does his work contain concepts that are hard to understand or to translate into the languages of other cultures? Can we find the beginning and the end of the intellectual legacy of Søren Kierkegaard only in a European cultural environment? Did his ideas have universal character? Is the spiritual influence of his ideas widely accepted in the sense of the worldwide global perspective influencing the culture in the whole world? Could it be that by emphasizing the absolute European nature of the spiritual legacy of Søren Kierkegaard, one of the Eurocentric myths is supported?

Kierkegaard did not deal with oriental culture. It was quite distant from his interests, since it did not deal with the problem of the individual according to Kierkegaard's understanding. And it was not Christian. That is why, according to Kierkegaard's concept of the Christian message based on the Scriptures, it

---

\*E-mail: dalimir.hajko@fhv.uniza.sk

was not true. Kierkegaard was, in a sense, sharing a narrow, Eurocentric vision with Martin Luther who “set out to ‘Christianize’ Germany, above all, with the hope that his vision of renewed Christendom would catch on in other parts of ‘Christian’ Europe” [1].

One of the few references of Kierkegaard to the Orient is a reference in his book entitled *The Sickness Unto Death*: “Consequently, the self in despair is always building only castles in the air, is only shadowboxing. All these imaginatively constructed virtues make it look splendid; like oriental poetry, they fascinate for a moment; such self-command, such imperturbability, such ataraxia, etc. practically border on the fabulous. Yes, they really do, and the basis of the whole thing is nothing.” [2] Even though the reference sounds controversial, as most of Kierkegaard’s thoughts do, a number of facts show that the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard – and, more broadly existentialist views altogether – outperformed all European or Indian statements about isolation and about the ‘obstructions’ of European philosophical views in traditional oriental, in this case, the Indian cultural environment (the same could be said of Japanese philosophy, but for our case study, we shall stay with Hindu philosophy). In the mid-twentieth century and the following decades Indian philosophers and religious thinkers very sensitively perceived the rise of existentialist beliefs which started to form in Europe after the First World War and shortly after spreading around the world. India (together with famous philosophers from Japan) belonged to the group of great countries where the message of existential beliefs spread around quickly, besides Europe and the USA. Almost all the philosophical currents of Europe and the USA, including existentialism, penetrated and spread around in British India and later in a separate Indian state, especially on the campuses of large universities, even though Kierkegaard and his specific works and beliefs occupied a special position, since in some of its aspects, it surprisingly evokes the spiritual closeness of otherwise geographically remote and at first sight mutually alien cultures.

## **2. Indian interest in existentialism**

The high point of the interests of Indian philosophers in existentialism can be dated to the 50s and 60s of the twentieth century, although the first contact probably occurred several decades earlier, through the gradual knowledge of some works of Søren Kierkegaard, especially when translated into English. This acquaintance had its counterpart in some existentialist philosophers and their interests in Eastern philosophies. Excelling among them was Karl Jaspers and his reflections on Buddhist philosopher, the representative of Tibetan Buddhism – Nagarjuna, who lived probably in the second century AD, and also the Chinese Taoist thinker Lao-tse [3]. Nagarjuna, the founder of important madhyamika philosophical school of Buddhism developed a remarkable dialectical method based on pushing the antithesis ad absurdum. He proclaimed that everything and every phenomenon exist only through its contrast and on the basis of which he claimed that everything is relative, unreal and empty. In the case of Nagarjuna,

Jaspers takes into account his understanding of the term 'dharma', his dialectics, his teaching about categories, and his teaching about two truths.

Existentialism was very close to philosophers raised in Indian cultural traditions in various ways. It was very close mostly in its philosophical-anthropological emphasis in the search for authentic life, accentuating the importance of discovering subject, focusing on seeking, groping, and the isolated human ego, which is fatally hopeless in its binding 'mundaneness', and in its material finiteness. Some Indian philosophers felt strong connections to the irrational and anti-intellectual message of the philosophy of life. To a large extent they identified themselves with a special understanding of human life, and with the image of the dynamic movement of life, in contrast to inert matter. To some extent they followed the philosophy of life of Bergson's type with its special energy (*l'élan vital*), and creative development (*l'évolution créatrice*). Existentialism, together with associated ideas, was also very close to them from the epistemological point of view: through its respect for intuitive knowledge, the intuition (as one of the two opposing types of human knowledge – intellect and intuition), in the evaluation of human knowledge and, ultimately, of the human situation.

Søren Kierkegaard, in this context, became the closest to them, as the 'first existentialist' or the forefather of existentialists. He became one due to his special understanding of human existence and human relationship with God, experiencing the human as 'being thrown' into the strange world, and certainly due to his religious-mystical understanding of the reality in which existence plays an important role. It is existence understood as a phenomenon that cannot be processed using only the rational, logical processes. It 'cannot be thought through', and, in existentialist understanding, it clearly precedes the rational reflection of matters. It takes precedence over conceptually coherent characteristic phenomena before cognitively formulated and shaped notions, before intellectually processed ideas.

It is absolutely necessary to avoid the oversimplified evaluation of Kierkegaard as being a mystic or a mystically oriented philosopher. Hans Küng notes that, "...it is baseless to point out the typical Christian characters – Luther, Kierkegaard and many other mystics who refer to the message of Jesus' and Paul's theology. Mysticism, originally, is not Christian at all!" [4] American philosopher and religionist Wilmon Henry Sheldon did not regard Kierkegaard as a mystic either. To distinguish him from the mystics, he pointed out Kierkegaard's passion and fervent expressions. Sheldon advocated the difference between existentialist passion and social engagement on the one hand, and mysticism on the other. According to him "mysticism ... is relatively pacifist: the metaphysics of love. That is not the case with existentialism. It is a passionate protest, intensive, heated, more intense than anything else heard before in western reflection from any human being; something simmering for a long time, something exploding in a violent outburst. It is an extreme form of irrationalism. It is extreme because the border of rebellion against the limiting Greek intellectualism reached in it its limits or came very close to the limit [5].

Therefore – indeed, we believe, because of it – existentialist philosophy was in general, but especially in Kierkegaard's interpretation, so provocative and exciting a phenomenon within the modern Indian philosophical environment, both positive and negative.

### **3. Philosophy as a guide to the proper life of an individual**

Søren Kierkegaard assumes an exceptional and very specific position in the history of an extended and significant reflection of existentialist ideas in India. For example, as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and his fundamental ontology was the closest and the most essential concerning the ontological questions for Indian supporters and sympathizers of existentialism, or Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) and the question of the transcendence of being was essential for finding the common or similar attitudes for Indian scholars, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard answered their numerous ethical, theological and philosophical-anthropological problems in most cases.

Existentialist philosophy was perceived as the bearer of new ideas in the realm of ethics and human relationships in an Indian setting. Its inspiration was seen to be the best precisely in this environment, and Indian philosophers reflected it the most. Existentialists, according to famous the Brahman guru Dutt, belong to the exceptions among thinkers, who did not perceive philosophy as pure speculation, as experiment with concepts or terms and the various combinations of terms, but who managed to comprehend the meaning of it – existentialism being seen as a means of a spiritually more meaningful and more beautiful appropriate human life, or as the effective instrument for improving the whole of humanity, especially from the moral point of view. Existential philosophers are those, as guru K.G. Dutt points out, who drew attention to the direct connection between the inner relationship of human concern in everyday life in its finiteness on the one hand and the universal eternity and infiniteness on the other hand. Through this thought, seen for the very first time in modern western thinking, emphasis was placed on the earthly benefit of Philosophy; it was “brought down to Earth” from the heavenly realm, where it had been dwelling in the past [6].

Indian philosophers based their parallels between the classical and present form of Indian philosophy on the one hand and the beliefs of European existentialists on the other hand on similar observations. Separate theoretical specification and distinct scientific-theoretical but also historical and sociological contexts, in which the terms, categories and concepts of both great system of opinions and the groups of thoughts were used, were not so important for Indian philosophers, for various reasons. First of all, there was not enough sense of the historicity of human existence going all the way to non-historicity of their philosophical thinking, but also because of current Indian thinking being strongly ideologically connected to the distant classical orthodox or non-orthodox philosophical-religious systems. Even from the methodological perspective, he did not hesitate to establish direct links between Heidegger's

understanding of temporality thinking about time as “a sense of being in general” [7], or Jasper’s term “clarification of existence” (Existenzerhellung) [3, p. 177; 8] or Kierkegaard’s “religious stage of life” [9, 10] on the one hand, with a differently classified historical teaching of the Vedic Upanishads, the Theravada Buddhism of Pali Canon, Sankara and Ramanujah Vedanta or Neo-Vedantism. For Indian philosophers his work was one of the very few proofs demonstrating the ideological closeness of existentialism and the traditional Indian worldview concerning the terms ‘suffering’, ‘sorrow’, and ‘sorrowful life’. These were the conceptual notions of early Buddhism. K.G. Dutt, in the most important of his works, pointed out that these terms correspond to other important existentialist terms such as ‘being-thrown-into-existence’, ‘anxiety’, ‘disgust’, ‘boredom’, ‘absurdity’, ‘tragedy’, ‘suffering’, ‘life-threatening-situation’, Heidegger’s ‘apprehension’, ‘irrationality of being’, ‘loneliness of individual being’, ‘brightening of the existence’, or Jasper’s ‘wrecked existence’.

Dutt stresses that “Indian way of thinking has a lot of parallels” in relation to existentialism. It “discovers with each step taken the mystery of specific existence, specific being ... ‘Everything is suffering’ – this is the first out of the four most important Buddhist truths” about the miserable nature of any kind of being [6, p. 25], about suffering and eight-part-noble-way leading to liberation from the current misery. Everything that we experience, even life itself, is suffering, agony, torment, said historical Gautama Buddha. This argument is not too far removed from the existentialist interpretation of a bitter and gloomy responsibility of a person for the choices facing history, out of which flows anxiety and hopelessness connected to the inevitability of relying on yourself, and related to the fact that we are ‘condemned to freedom’. For Kierkegaard, the image of suffering is primarily the image of suffering of Jesus Christ. Christ’s suffering was the true content and meaning of Jesus’ life, according to Kierkegaard. Jesus Christ was born into this world *in order to* suffer. It is interesting to notice Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the words ‘*in order to*’, wherever he writes about Christ’s suffering.

The existentialist parallel with Indian philosophy may be seen mainly in the terms: ‘being-thrown-into-existence’, ‘pure existence’, ‘concern’, ‘the humdrum of daily living’, ‘powerlessness’, ‘absurdity’, ‘boredom’ and ‘disgust’. The permanent oscillation of Kierkegaard’s thoughts between subjectivity and transcendence, but also the fact that most of the existentialist’s topics is of a religious background, was of real interest to Indians, because Indian philosophy was never separated from a religious way of thinking.

#### **4. Irrational foundations**

For Indian thinkers, the most appealing one was the existentialist epistemology which was associated with the criticism of rationalism. The rationalism of European origin, which according to many Indian thinkers, incorrectly divided the world into subject and object, and in such a way ripped

apart and basically destroyed the unity of perception of the world. Existentialists have argued, as well as Indian supporters of Advaita-Vedanta – purely mystical thinkers but also somewhat sceptical Neo-Vedantas, that its big mistake was that it did not prevent this essential lapse from happening. The rationalist reduction of existence – of a particular being – to a mere object of consciousness is not in accordance with the understanding of existence as a unity of subject and object. This contradicts not only the existentialist concept, but in the context of traditional Indian philosophical thinking it contradicts the Upanishad's principle of 'tat tvam asi' – 'that you are' or 'that thou art'.

The Upanishad thinkers, in this case, just like the existential philosophers, did not understand man primarily as a rational being. What is more, the authors of the Upanishads did not understand the person to be gifted with specific physiological instincts, thus excluding people systematically from the realm of living creatures. In any case, a person is not an entity that is irrevocably appointed beforehand. A person is not a subject, but can strive towards self-improvement regardless of whether it is called 'salvation', 'redemption', or 'the road to freedom'. Thus the roads to redemption that are offered by the Bhagavadgita, are not irreconcilable with Kierkegaard's understanding of man's religious experience. In both cases it is a unique experience which goes far beyond any kind of communication.

We discover the image of a person as a being whose essence is identical with the substance of the world in the Upanishads, the last part of the Vedantas, the basic philosophical texts of ancient India of Vedic times. The authors of the Upanishads were asking whether and if, what kind of dependency there is between what is inside me (as an individual soul) and what is around me (the absolute spiritual principle of the whole cosmos). This was one of the basic questions of the Upanishads. The anonymous authors of the Upanishads' texts for many centuries answered the question with the help of a very simple epistemological construction: In order to get to know the world, our 'self' has to be a part of it. The 'it' (*tat*), from which the whole world comes, that is the truth; that is the 'self', meaning 'me', that is you (*tvam*)... ('*Tat tvam asi*' the literal meaning in Sanskrit is 'that is you'). "The most delicate substance, intrinsic to all of it, is the truth. That is *atman*, that is you, Shvetaketu." [11]

There is a complex and definite answer to the question of many later commentators and interpreters of the Upanishads in this formulation. The question is: is there anything that is the one and only cause of the differences in the whole world and knowing this one and only thing would suffice in order to know everything? If I can discover this one and only thing, there is no other secret and from the ethical point of view I am positioned beyond all good and evil. Identification of *atman with brahma*, or human soul with God contains within itself the understanding of the essential unity of everything alive in the whole world, the essential kinship of a person with all the living nature that is, just as a person, filled with the Highest spirit and on the other hand having great possibilities for the development of a human being, towards which Hinduism instinctively aims.

In order to get to know and understand the essence, the inner principle and the moving force of everything that exists according to the Upanishads, our inner self, our 'individual soul' (*atman*) has to be identified with the principle of being that is not openly manifested (*brahma*). This kind of identification is the way to liberation, it is the way to salvation, redemption. The whole philosophy of the Upanishads, the philosophy of the Vedantas (*veda-antah*, the end of the Vedantas, shortcut for the Upanishads and their teaching), is characterized by the vision of the basic unity of the world: the divine essence of everything is present in every single being and it is deeply rooted in the whole reality as the basic essence and, at the same time, as its organic and inseparable component, element, and entity. At this point we get to the key problem that tormented the first philosophers of ancient India. The epistemological problems, the examination of the origin of human knowledge and its character, its foundation and possibilities were directly connected to the basic, essential ontological question: what is the character of being and what is the cause of being in its wholeness?

It is no accident that the Indian followers of existential philosophy pointed out these parts of Upanishadic teaching. Søren Kierkegaard, similar to the Upanishads and the Vedanta deriving from them, refused stern rationalism, intellectualism, historicism and the idea of solving contradictions through various means of intermediation in the framework of human society. The examples of the means of mediation are religion, the state, church, science, culture, education, society, etc. A person according to the understanding of existentialism (a special example would be a person viewed from Kierkegaard's point of view) is a lonely individual who, when facing God alone, has to come to the highest type of knowledge (for Kierkegaard it is religious knowledge) in a radical way, solely by making a 'jump' even for the sake of personal suffering and personal anxiety, loneliness and hopelessness, that emerge from the uncertainty about the presence of God [12-14]. Abraham's deep faith is closely connected with anxiety. Even though the journey, portrayed by Kierkegaard, does not have eight parts and it is not called 'noble' as in Buddhism, even though the life-journey of each human aiming to the highest, religious stage has only three parts, a similarity is hidden in it in spite of the differences and the goal is very similar, too.

Specific reverberation of the existentialist thoughts in India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dependent on the (frequently accidental) choice of opinions and works of specific European authors. The attitude of Indian thinkers was formed in relationship to the basic existential categories, and their function concerning the understanding of human reality, despite the variety and diversity of philosophical, political, atheistic (Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus), or religious (Jaspers, Marcel, Berdjajev) opinions of existentialists. They did not adhere to a clearly articulated position concerning specific works of specific philosophers, including the variety of their philosophical opinions. The Indian recipients unified and organized (frequently even simplified) a variety of opinions of European existentialists in that they used existential

categories (nothingness, death, anxiety, uneasiness, loneliness, concern, freedom, everydayness, absurdity, etc.). Søren Kierkegaard, the forefather of existentialism, was the only exception in this case. The availability of his works played an important role. Indian thinkers living in Great Britain at that time knew a large and substantial part of his works, especially those parts translated into English from original Danish. The high quality English translations were done on the basis of Danish originals and by experts with knowledge of the original works of Kierkegaard (like Alexander Dru, David F. Swenson, Douglas V. Steere, Thomas Henry Croxall and Walter Lowrie) and were published by Oxford University Press around year 1930. It really is remarkable that Kierkegaard's complicated, tragically inconsistent and multilateral personality was perceived in India to be homogenic and unified. It was considered to be the basis and the starting point for the initial thinking about human problems, as established by existentialism. Kierkegaard's opinions were the starting point for all the other efforts in this realm of thought (or activities in the sphere of existentialist philosophy and literature). The literary work of Søren Kierkegaard and his whole philosophic legacy were understood in the Indian cultural environment as the biggest and the bravest philosophical work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – regardless of the positive and the negative evaluation of the heritage of existentialism in general.

## **5. The Indian perspective**

The ideas of Søren Kierkegaard attracted the interest of a broad spectrum of creators of modern Indian culture. There were not only philosophers but also writers – both novelists and poets – and artists from all the other areas of art. When KailashVajpeyi, the author of the introductory study to the anthology of Indian poetry, introduces the names of European authors, who in the fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the era of the freshly gained political independence of India, influenced the Indian writers who wrote in Hindi the most, the first place belonged to Søren Kierkegaard amongst others: “Hindi writers were always seen as artists exposed to the influence of Freud, Eliot, Shaw, Lawrence, etc. Søren Kierkegaard, Kafka, Rimbaud, Jung, Hulme, Jaspers, Sartre, Mallarmé, and Camus, etc. are the closest and the most familiar to them.” [15]

Indian theoreticians of art and writers, but, first of all philosophers and philosophical-religious thinkers, who in some way, directly or indirectly reacted to existentialist philosophy in general and Søren Kierkegaard especially, can be divided into three main groups: The first group covers admirers of existentialism, who diligently seek proofs of a legitimate place for existential thought in the new context of Indian thinking. They were, in a good way, dependent on existentialism. They tried to provide proof that European existentialism arose in different connections, in different forms and in different words expressing original, classical thoughts that were present in ancient thought-systems; they arose at times from different circumstances but they have much in common with existential philosophy [16]. The second group consists of

thinkers who categorically refused existentialism and commented on it ironically and sarcastically. They criticized it from various points of view (sometimes from a left-wing point of view). The final reason for their refusal was the incompatibility of existentialism with the axioms of Indian understanding of the world. They usually closed the discussion with a strict assertion that existentialist thought is inconsistent with Indian thinking on principle, so their place is in the decadent European or American West. There is no real place in Indian culture and spiritual tradition for existentialism and it is of no practical use; it should be avoided at all costs. The third group consists of philosophers, quite often university professors, who tried to evaluate the function of existentialism objectively and scientifically, in a very sober way, first in connection to the traditional attitudes of Indian philosophers and religious thinkers and secondly in connection to the evident presence of existentialism in the context of Indian philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **6. Conclusions**

Even though the opinions of Indian thinkers on existentialism, timewise concentrated in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were unusually multifarious and included a wide scale of attitudes from the wholeheartedly admiring to the harshly critical, even condemning his work, we can say that the object of their interest, the forefather and the initiator of the rise of existential philosophy Søren Kierkegaard received more praise than criticism in general. Kierkegaard's teaching was discussed in India in the context of the Upanishads, Vedantas, Neo-Vedantas, but also in the context of early Buddhism. In the Indian philosophical environment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Søren Kierkegaard belongs to such western thinkers who influenced the direction of Indian philosophy the most and who contributed to its larger self-understanding in a global perspective. The cognition of some elementary features, but also the relative accessibility of Kierkegaard's texts through English translations, contributed a great deal to Indian understanding of him. The fact that the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard resonated so significantly in a very different cultural environment, witnesses to the global meaning and universal validity, crossing the borders of cultures and civilizations. His legacy seems to overcome "a general tendency of much of modern [European] theology to rationalize, psychologize, or historicize" [17] some basic religious ideas, limiting thus their applicability to other cultural contexts.

## **References**

- [1] M. Valčo, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(4)** (2016) 181-188.
- [2] S. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong (eds.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, 80.
- [3] K. Jaspers, *Aus dem Ursprung denkende Metaphysiker*, Piper Verlag, München, 1957, 19.

- [4] H. Küng and H. Stietencron, *Křesťanství a hinduizmus. Na cestě k dialogu*, Vyšehrad, Praha, 1997, 76.
- [5] W.H. Sheldon, *God and Polarity. A Synthesis of Philosophies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1954, 614.
- [6] K.G. Dutt, *Existentialism and Indian Thought*, The Wisdom Library, Philosophical Library, New York, 1960, 2.
- [7] M. Heidegger, *Being and time: A translation of Sein und Zeit*, Suny Press, New York, 1996, 187.
- [8] K. Jaspers, *Philosophy of existence*, English translation, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1971, xii.
- [9] S. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way. Kierkegaard's Writings*, Vol. 11, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, 122.
- [10] S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong (eds.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987, 18.
- [11] \*\*\*, *The Chhandogya Upanishad*, part I, S. Krishnananda (ed.), Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, 1984, 12.
- [12] M. Pavlíková, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(4)** (2016) 111-119.
- [13] P. Kondrla and M. Pavlíková, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(3)** (2016) 101-111.
- [14] R. Kralik and L. Torok, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(2)** (2016) 65-74.
- [15] K. Vajpeyi, *Hindī poetry. Introduction*, in *Indian Poetry Today*, Vol. II, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi, 1976, 163.
- [16] M. Antosova, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(1)** (2016) 129-137.
- [17] M. Valčo, *Alternative Viewpoint: Edwards and the World Religions*, in *Understanding Jonathan Edwards, An Introduction to America's Theologian*, G. McDermott (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, 197.