

Bimal K Matilal: A Retrospect and Homage

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Background

In the beginning was the beginning. The inaugural Spalding Chair lecture that Matilal delivered in 1976 came to me as notes brought back by a graduate from Melbourne University, having read some of Matilal's work at SOAS who had settled in London and went to Oxford for the inauguration event. *The Logical illumination of Indian Mysticism* came out the following year and I obtained a copy immediately; I had already been reading his *Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation* [NNDN, 1968]. Just then I was having difficulty working with my local advisor who, being an avowed Advaita-Yoga philosopher of religion, did not have much sympathy for Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā where my focus grew (and on which I was reading Sanskrit texts with pandits in India on a British Council grant) hence part of the way through I requested my local doctoral committee to invite Prof Matilal to be on the committee: thus began a long-drawn contact and communication with the mentor. At the time of examination he was made the first reader of my thesis. Matilal's report carried the explicative: " his is a brilliant study, original research, ...*tour de force*..."; in subsequent references and testimonials he continued to use this description for my work in more general terms. He selected my thesis for his

Studies in Classical India series (Kluwer/Reidel), and sent me to Prof J N Mohanty to re-work the two volume work (some 800 pages) into a shorter publishable book, which I did while also staying at Mohanty's home in Norman, Oklahoma, for some time, and he wrote Foreword to it¹. It was then that I also visited Prof Matilal as he was visiting/teaching in Chicago and we (JN, BKM, and myself) would have three-way conversation on the house phone on matters philosophical.

I dedicated *Indian Ethics* I, and the *Routledge History of Indian Philosophy* [RHIP], and shortly *Indian Ethics* II also (in part) to the memory of Matilal; and published the first book in his memory with numerous chapters discussing his work (with Mohanty, *Relativism Suffering and Beyond* RSB, Oxford, 1997). Jonardon Ganeri had been invited to submit but decided for some reason not to deliver. Ganeri was also for a while serving as Associate Editor for RHIP but withdrew to work on his own parallel volume for the OUP Handbook.

The association with Mahodyaya Matilal goes back that far; I met him physically first at a back-to-back conference in Kolkata (Calcutta) in 1983 on my way to Oxford to spend a sabbatical term with him in All Souls of the Faithful Departed. The conference in Kolkata, organised by D P Chattopadhyay (East-West philosophy side) and S P Banerjee (Aurobindo part), had luminaries such as Quine, McDowell, Nozick, Mohanty, Ramchandra Gandhi, Arthur Danto, Amy Guttmann, P K Mukhopadhyay, Kalidas] or was it his elder brother Gopinath?), Bhattacharyya, Sibajina Bhattacharyya, and many more from India and abroad; the theme was on questions of realism, objectivity, and subjectivity. While in Oxford, a number of seeds for numerous projects were shewn in the regular interaction with Matilal which resulted in a spate of publications, two of which are mentioned above and more shortly. At that time Matilal was working on his magnum opus *Perception*; as chapters (2-3 at a time) rolled out I would physically carry them to the house of Strawson and pick them up when he intimated they were ready to; I would

1 This comment from the Feature Review by Stephen Phillips, *Philosophy East & West*, Volume 45, Number 2 April 1995, pp 273-279, might be apposite to site here:

Śabda-pramāṇais an excellent example of a properly philosophic study. It is an outstanding example of philosophic engagement with classical Sanskrit texts, ranking with the best of the achievements of B. K. Matilal, Sibajin Bhattacharyya, Kalidas Bhattacharyya, Karl Potter, J. N. Mohanty, and a handful of others. Bilimoria urges us to think with the texts, and this book is the result of many years of his doing just that.

Śabda-pramāṇais: Word and Knowledge. By Purushottama Bilimoria. Studies of Classical India Series, vol. 10. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988. Pp. xvi + 38

have brief conversations with Strawson, and sometimes he had queries for me, and I for him. But most of the conversations on Strawson's meticulous editing and comments on each page (line by line) in his superb handwriting happened in Matilal's All Souls Office (occasionally at his home or coffee shops); I would make some mild remarks, and at one time suggested he consider including the treatment of *pratyakṣa* in Advaita Vedānta as well since he had already involved the Mīmāṃsā – particularly taken by the 'anti-idealist Prābhākaras' and of course an array of Buddhist dialecticians. I had published back in 1980 a paper on *pratyakṣa* in Advaita Vedānta (in *PEW*); he seemed disinterested since Vedānta did not espouse a realist position, not even naïve realism, let alone the kind of metaphysical realism he was keen to formulate (even a stronger version than the Nyāya had developed). Yet he gave a seminar on Yoga in which we read a classical commentary on *Yogasūtras* that I attended weekly (I believe Matilal had a contemplative side to him, about which he spoke with me when he was struck with the horrendous illness; he confessed he believed in some Absolute but never clarified what that might be.) I note these anecdotal details because it is then that I became aware as to how committed he was to debates on realism versus idealism, phenomenalism, nominalism, and varieties of anti-realism (say the one represented by later Hilary Putnam or certain Buddhists critics – such as the Sautrāntika – of Nyāya epistemology and ontology). Of course, apart from Peter Strawson, the other conversation partners were Michael Dummett, Gareth Evans, and John McDowell (who was still in England then). There were Indian philosophers visiting also, Prabal Kumar Sen, and Debabrata Sinha – who worked in the interstices of phenomenology and Advaita Vedānta, that got Matilal somewhat interested, but also bemused: you could see he was not, as he says, in his inaugural Oxford lecture, a great fan of Advaita Vedānta or Madhyamaka, though he paid more attention to Buddhist critique as the authentic *pūrvakṣins*; he was more drawn to Jaina philosophy outside of his Nyāya *parampara*.

Matilal had also completed a whole long typescript manuscript on 'Logic, Language and Reality' [as a sequel to his earlier *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*, 1971] which he gave me to take to the publishers in Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass in 1984. On the flight back and days after I read the entire manuscript and did some minor editing, as he had asked me to. This is where I am picking up the extensive discussion on the role of sense-data, sensibilia, external objects *ālambana* (as support or as percepts merely for the Yogācāras), atomicity (*paramāṇutva*), the fictionality of material objects despite

their extensional loci (pp 221-223), and what it means for something to be the 'objective' content of our perceptual experiences – be they seeing (*seeing as*), touching, tasting, smelling, hearing. In my published version these passages are marked as are cognate passages in *Perception* and other works and papers. I built up my own library of Matilal's extensive output, everything in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* – where he was publishing, me as well, on 'Jñāna and Pramā', 'Theory of Prāmānya,' 'Conditions of Sentence Understanding,' etc., since 1980 (beat that!); and to this day I surprise myself by finding papers in my library on little-known proceedings of conferences in India (such as the Indian Philosophical Congress), where he is either delivering a lecture or responding, or his views are discussed – not to speak of the many letters from him to me. I also have a video of him delivering a lecture on karma, and a cassette-tape interview on 'What is Happiness'.

Another small anecdote. While in the Oxford, I was spending time in the India Office library in London pouring over classical manuscripts. Jonardon Ganeri was somewhere nearby and made an appointment to come and see me, in the library. We spend some time and he expressed interest in pursuing Indian philosophy (a transition from mathematics I believe); I advised him what apparently Mohanty had also done, to study Sanskrit and go work with Matilal. The rest I believe is history. But I always cared for and reached to help, and involve and engage the young spectacled Harry Potter look-alike scholar whenever I could, and I was appreciative of the fact that he was at Matilal's bedside [with family, and Heeraman Tiwari, also the last student then of Matilal] in Bimal-da's insufferably final traumatic days; I could not be there [except via the periodic telephone calls], though I had taken turns to wheel him up and down hallways to his flat in Honolulu when we were at the Sixth East-West Philosophers' Conference (August 1989). That was to be my last *daśana* of the great exemplary human being endowed with the best of humility and mentorship (in the Ācārya-Tarkatīrtha tradition). It is few of his students have carried that compassionate and empathic torch or baton with him.

The conversations on these matters did not stop with his demise; they have continued with a galaxy of Indian philosophers; at the risk of being charged with dropping names, I could mention a few, of course Mohanty (who I had invited to Australia twice for conferences, and he stayed with me), Daya Krishna, in umpteen conferences and in Jaipur and Delhi, K.T. Pandurangi, Srinivasa Rao, Ramu Gandhi, P. K. Mukhopadyay, Prabal Kumar Sen (who was also a fellow at

Oxford at the same time as I was), Jayshankar Shaw (a committed Nyāya realist on whom I co-edited a book, with Max Creswell contributing), Arindam Chakrabarti, Kishor Chakrabarti, Stephen Phillips, S S Barlingay, Jay Garfield, Graham Priest (for whose course I gave lectures on Nyāya – that was a rather challenging experience), Karl Potter (who was also a reader for the Śabdapramāṇa work, from thesis phase to book manuscript).

I had already discussed the relation between knowledge and language drawn specifically in relation to Matilal’s insights from my other papers on “Bimal Matilal’s Navya-Realism, Buddhist ‘Lingo-Phobia’ and Mental Things’. An early version of this study was presented at the joint conference of Australasian Association of Philosophy and the Australasian Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, in Auckland University, New Zealand back in 1997; and developed for the 20th World Philosophy Congress, in Boston, later that year, titled ‘Bimal K. Matilal’s Navya-naive Realism vis-a-vis Putnam-Dummet-Mīmāṃsā Anti-Realisms: Some Metaphysical Worries’, *Paidea* :Proceedings of the 20th World Philosophy Congress, Boston University. 1998. It goes without saying the relation between language and knowledge was also discussed in the Śabdapramāṇa work in connection with Matilal’s work, nine of them, from 1964-1985 (chapter 8 in the thesis).

When I was back teaching in Melbourne, *Perception* had come out (1986) and Matilal had a copy sent to me to show to the philosophers in Australia. Armstrong had developed his own brand of ‘direct realism’ to which Matilal was palpably drawn (*Perception* p 218). He was keen that philosophers such as Frank Jackson, Richard Routley [they corresponded on Jaina logic] and Jack (JJC) Smart should become familiar with this work. Jack Smart was among the leading hard-nosed realists in Oceania, pitted against his brother, Ninian, who had frayed into “Śāṅkara and Buddhist idealism” (Though Jack confessed to me he was drawn to this strain in Indian philosophy when he served in India during the war and did his Honors thesis with Bradley, but lost his ‘unitarian faith’ when he arrived in representationist-realist Australasia and brought act-utilitarianism with him as; and he loved to watch the Indian team play cricket, but barracked for Australia, as he was not a rule-utilitarian, he explained to me.) I presented a short seminar to the philosophy postgraduate group in which noted philosophers were invited; there was some interest, and the editor of *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* asked me to write a review of the book, which I did (AJP 1992 Reviews, , 70:1). I draw attention to this review as one will see that I am building a case against

representationalism (in perception) from the position that Matilal had developed. This to me was a novel and in some ways unique trajectory he set out for a dialogue between the representational empiricism (of the Jacksonian-Smart kind, since they rejected Berkeley's empiricism and Humean scepticism) and the 'direct realism' of Matilal (which I later dubbed as Matilal's Navya-realism), and explored the implications for epistemic objectivity (as a supplement to, or regardless of, ontological objectivity) – i.e. what it means to be 'objective'? (Perchance you do not see the play on 'unique' or 'innovative' that is my loss and the weakness of my Indic-Australian humour, to boot.)

One may attest how early in the piece the review had come out. This led me to work on a series of papers, which I describe in the next section. While in Berkeley in 1995-6 I attended John Searle's lectures and was struck with how, while he rejected the rigid Australian mind-brain identity thesis (central-state materialism, monism) even functionalism dualism, he remained committed to epistemological objectivism and functional dualism tied to his concept of social ontology (the shared world). Matilal refers to Searle in the context of act-object-agent model of analysing cognitive event; but he also draws on Geach and Sellers and Armstrong. ('Knowledge as a Mental Episode', Chapter ,*Perception*). An analysis continued in his gripping chapter on 'What do we see?' 7.1 'Phenomenalism, Representationalism, and Direct Realism': it is obvious that he wants to go beyond the first two plus *naïve* realism: because the latter does not pay due attention to the agentive episodic disposition (*noema*) in the act of cognising, which is not just a statement on mind-independent, or reductively mind-dependent, phenomena. (Mohanty once called this plea the Fregean reading of Husserl.) I can cite tons of pages in each of Matilal's writings on epistemology, *pramāṇavāda*, perception, realism, idealism, representationalism, phenomenalism, nominalism, yogism, phenomenological content, object-given, object-idealised, object-empiricism, and such tropes as are connected with the discourse of the objective, objectivity, objectivism vis-à-vis the subjectivist counterparts; I was sold.

The other reason I was drawn to this discourse harks back to my earlier training in Kant-Carnap-Sellers and Husserl (in Auckland, New Zealand), and more especially Philosophy of Science (with the southern Popperian, Alan Musgrave in Otago, New Zealand, who billed himself as a 'Mad-dog realist', and he was often in Australia when I moved across the Tasman expounding his representative realism). Popper had revised the understanding of objectivity into

something more like *inter-subjective* collaboration of unfalsified propositions or hypothesis. Gone were the days when to be objective truth meant proposition *P* corresponds to an object or state-of-affairs *P'* in the external world: the idea of this being mind-independent. There was something else at stake. So I was looking for the equivalent of the inter-subjective as another way of taking about objectivity in Indian philosophy as well, and Matilal provided me with some inkling for it in his own work. In Australia, there was Max Deutscher who was a mix of a realist-objectivist and subjectivist-antirealist; in other words, he was trying to find an Archimedean point (as was Rorty in the US, and now more recently his student and colleague of McDowell, Bob Brandom) between the two philosophical paradigms at loggerheads – just as Mohanty was between Frege and Husserl on meaning, reference and intentionality. I might have been seen as someone sympathetic to this trend with both my phenomenological-Indian and analytic-Musgravian background. I would get papers to review in this area and was once asked to chair and moderate a session in which Deutscher presented (it of course was a very heated session and Australasian philosophers can be rather unruly to contain). Whenever I could I gave voice to all I was learning from Matilal to throw light on this drawn-out dispute ('we have them too, but not all the answers, some inklings and suggestive forays', I would say).

Another small anecdote I am reminded of is when Kishor Chakrabarti came to Sydney as a visiting scholar and apparently had many conversations with David Armstrong. Later when I met with Armstrong at an AAP conference, I asked him whether Kishor managed to persuade him that Nyāya subscribed to real universals: 'Ahh, the Nyāya is committed to nominalism' he quipped! Meaning that they don't have a view of universals as natural kinds: a pet theory among Australian analytic philosophers. Alan {father of Dave} Chalmers had² proposed a view of 'unrepresentative realism' according to which the real world exists independently; but since most of the things investigated by science are excluded from the real world, it follows that science does not support existence of real objects independent of the mind, unlike in commonsense realism. (K H Sivers 'Chalmers on Unrepresentative Realism and Objectivism' *AJP* 69(1) 1990:89-102).

I might add at the same time, Peter Singer had asked to write a chapter on Indian Ethics for his volume on the now famous Blackwell *Companion to Ethics*; I had sent a draft of this essay to Bimal Matilal, who sent it back with helpful comments; in our next meeting wherever, he suggested we do a book on Indian

2 Alan Chalmers, *What is this thing called Science* (Queensland) 1982.

Ethics for western philosophical audience: hence was born the two volume project on Indian Ethics (but he passed prematurely before the project took off). That spawned the two-volume work on *Indian Ethics*.

While, I worked with Bimal-da in Oxford, I kept notes from his seminars on dilemmas in Indian ethics as he was working towards couple of books, one being *Epics and Ethics*, planned with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In chapter 2 of *Indian Ethics* vol I (Ashate/OUP 2007/Routledge 2017), I reconstructed his theorizing from two essays of his, which I titled 'Dharma and Rationality.' I also contributed a chapter on 'Apovak: Between Kant and Matilal' for a book I edited on Gayatri Spivak's thinking, with a Response from the major postcolonial-feminist scholar with a deep interest in Indian philosophy.

One last anecdotal note. Gottorm Fløistad, the Norwegian philosopher was putting together a series on *Contemporary Philosophy*, with a volume on Asian Philosophy. He asked Matilal who directed him to me (Daya Krishna was a contributor). This essay outlines a defence of Navya-Nyāya against the charge of what Mohanty called 'psychologism' in the context of the controversy between realism and phenomenism, Naïve realism and metaphysical realism, like that of Kripke and early Putnam (p 141) (Mohanty's own view is that Husserlian phenomenology combines intention, sense, and reference (in a more Fregean style) (*Explorations of Philosophy*, p 149, 156). This assignment began in 1989 and I acknowledge Matilal for reading the paper and commenting on it. I mention this paper on 'Pramāṇa Epistemology – some recent developments' because here I brought together a number of different strands in Nyāya epistemology with a decisive rearticulation that Matilal had pioneered. One could say that my understanding of Nyāya since my earlier papers in *JIP* and in efforts in Śabdapramāṇa had been transformed by Matilal's work; I could not return to classical Nyāya, nor caste Nyāya as Naïve or in any sense given to commonsensical beliefs about the contents of cognition. It is more complex and it is this complexity I have been trying to bring out.

Moving on, I continued in this vein were informed by Matilal's *The Word and the World: India's Contribution to the Study of Language*. (Delhi, Oxford, 1990). It was about the time Matilal and I edited a volume on *Sanskrit Studies and Related Studies* (Satguru Publications, Delhi, published in 1990). Working directly with Matilal was always a source of inspiration, and his thinking – along with Mohanty's – helped mold my own thinking and path to the 'life of mind'.

The reiteration of Matilal's position on the 'myths and misperceptions

about Indian philosophy, notably that Indian philosophy is primarily spiritual, mystical and intuitive, in contrast to the rational West' in the British Philosophers entry is a well-worn tract that a number of scholars writing on Matilal have noted – Mohanty (in the introduction), J L Shaw (with whom Matilal edited a book on *Analytical Philosophy in Comparative Perspective*, 1985), Stephen Phillips, and couple of contributors to the Relativism volume, including myself, as far back as in my PhD thesis (1983) (revised and published in 1988, p 4+ fn 5, p 10, 147, 167ff, citing Matilal in *NNDN* Mohanty in Bilimoria (ed.) (1993a); and Bilimoria 1993b. In 1994 a presented a paper on the tension in the World Sanskrit Conference (Philosophy Section) on 'The Paṇḍita Tradition and Western Episteme' (building on my earlier review of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and a collaborative Research Council funded project called 'A Report on Indologism and Philologism'.

I have since been invited to write three biolined-discussions of Matilal's philosophy: 20th Century British Philosophers, APA Newsletter of Asian and American Philosophy (on "Three Dogmas" of Bimal Matilal), and the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy of Religion* (2022)

Thus, this is the extent of the background in my learning from and with the mighty Prof. Bimal K Matilal to whom I here pay my humble homage. In my Introduction to *Indian Ethics I* (p. 16-17) I note the following (as footnote):

Although a version of this chapter appears in print, spread across two chapters, in Matilal's Collected Works, vol. I, I have tried to recreate the chapter here in the spirit (indeed to the 'letter' from my notes) of the lectures Matilal gave on this theme in Oxford at various times (during my fellowship with him in All Soul's College, 1983, and seminar visits, 1987, shortly after a symposium on Śabdapramāṇa and Testimony). This is exemplary of 'narrative ethics.' I am grateful to Jonardon Ganeri for sharing with me the papers as these were being collated, and to Professor Gayatri Spivak for reminding me of the importance of the 'Epic and Ethic' work of Bimal-da, which he or they never quite managed to complete. For which see notes in P. Bilimoria, 'Postcolonial Critique of Reason: Spivak between Kant and Matilal', in *Interventions Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, vol. 4 (2), 2002, pp. 160–67.

I should say Vol II; and *2000 is mentioned because that is when I was given the early draft of the manuscript by Ganeri at his home in Cambridge after the first conference commemorating Bimal Matilal [it was dubbed as marking

the 10th anniversary of his passing] held in London, co-organized by Richard Sorabji. One may note here a small vignette on my time with Bimal Matilal back in 1983 in Oxford, and my habit of taking copious notes from his lectures and seminars (and our variegated discussions which went on till his last days). And one may note the acknowledgement to Ganeri for sharing the material from vol II [in the draft form], as well as Gayatri Spivak with whom a manuscript by the title *Epic and Ethics* was being written (* she noted it as ‘forthcoming’, Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p.45 n55], though as JNM and I note in the List of Publications of the Matilal Memorial volume (BRS), 5 of the projected 12 chapters were completed at the time of his death under the working title ‘The Indian Ethics: Studies in Ethics and Moral Emotions in the Great Epics and Narrative Literature of India’ (which are collected under Parts I and II of CW volume II). There is also the essay ‘Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Ethics’ which I had read back in 1989 which came out in the book Matilal edited *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla.

In the APA paper I discuss the relation between knowledge and language which is drawn specifically in relation to Matilal’s insights from “Bimal Matilal’s Navya-Realism, Buddhist ‘Lingo-Phobia’ and Mental Things’ (referenced in fn). An early version of this paper was presented at the joint conference of Australasian Association of Philosophy and the Australasian Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, in Auckland University, New Zealand back in 1997; and developed for the 20th World Philosophy Congress, in Boston, later that year, titled ‘Bimal K. Matilal’s Navya-naive Realism vis-a-vis Putnam-Dummet-Mīmāṃsā Anti-Realisms: Some Metaphysical Worries’, *Paidea* :Proceedings of the 20th World Philosophy Congress, BostonUniversity. It goes without saying the relation between language and knowledge was also discussed in the Śabdapramāṇa work in connection with Matilal’s work, nine of them, from 1964-1985 (8 in the thesis).

I never refrained from sharing my papers as I wrote them or as they got published with scholars, students and, dare I say, sometime protegés, near and far, close and not-so-close, so that the field would develop and Matilal’s legacy would live on. Numerous scholars of Indian and comparative philosophy would attest to that. And I have tried to live up the wonderful response I once received from Swami Ranganathananda, sometime President of the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Mission, seeking permission to distribute one of his essays to my students, in these disarming words: ‘*Wisdom knows no copyright, knowledge is universal; please go ahead, with blessings.*’ So be it.