

# Søren Kierkegaard reflected in Indian philosophy

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Recibido: 25/07/2015

Revisado: 20/08/2015

Aprobado: 07/10/2015

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 was not true. 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.*" (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 69) 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.

The high point of the interests of Indian philosophers in existentialism can be dated to the fifties and sixties 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-tsi. (Jaspers, 1957). 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 exists only through its contrast and on the basis of which he claimed that everything is relative, unreal and empty...” (Miltner, 2002, pg. 164). 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!*” (Küng – Stietencron, 1997, pg. 76). 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 its limits or came very close to the limit.*” (Sheldon, 1954, p. 614). 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.

### **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 (Dutt, 1960, pg. 2).

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*" or Jasper's term "*clarification of existence*" (Existenzerhellung) or Kierkegaard's "*religious stage of life*" 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 (Dutt, 1960, pg. 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.

### **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 skeptical 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" – "it's you".

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*." (Chandogya – Upanishada I., 12)

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 Venanta 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. 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 a 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.

### **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.”* (Vajpeyi, 1976, pg. 163)

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. 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.

### **Admirers and supporters.**

The first group, probably also the largest one, is dominated by the opinions of A. C. Mukerji, besides K. G. Dutt, who reflects systematically about idealism and idealistic trends in current India and in Indian philosophy. A. C. Mukerji in his study *Existentialism and Indian Philosophy* observes the unequivocal “kinship”, “non-contradictedness”, and ideological “closeness” between Indian philosophical traditions and European existentialism. (Mukerji, 1963, pg. 260). Mukerji, as well as guru Dutt, who builds upon two basic agreements among the opinions of European existentialists and Indian philosophical classics: firstly, the “*existence is the fundamental principle*”, meaning, it has a greater priority than thinking and from the ontological point of view, it precedes any kind of essence. Secondly, “*the connection between subject and object is not an objective connection*” since it expresses a certain subjective relationship between the individually determined phenomena (Mukerji, 1963, pg. 261). Human existence equals the individual and his/her relationship to transcendence.

Haridas Chaudhury (1913 – 1975), theorist, Bengali “integral” philosopher and psychologist, built his own conception on a similar basis. According to Chaudhury, existentialist philosophy directly “*corresponds to the most important ideas of the Vedanta*” (Chaudhury, 1962, pg. 4). In connection to the previously mentioned

opinion, Haridas Chaudhury emphasizes the meaning of intuition as being symptomatic, and with great excitement he advocates the existentialist' preference of the intuitive perception of reality and the famous existentialist thesis, according to which existence can be known only through personal experience. This thesis reminds him of the brahma-atman principle of the ancient Indian Upanishads and of the teaching of the Advaita-Vedants in their modern neo-vedantic interpretation. Chaudhury's approach accommodated his search for a metaphysical synthesis (which was present, according to him, in the works of Shri Aurobindo Ghosh) and for the formation of the concepts of integral yoga. His trans-cultural interpretations of philosophical, religious and psychological theories were invented in this framework and remained, in many different ways inspiring and attractive to the present time.

Another Indian philosopher, Basant Kumar Lal, developed a quite radical opinion, according to which a famous idealistic philosopher, Hindu, Brahma Krishna Chandra Bhattacharja (1875 – 1939) was very close to existentialism, and his teaching about the absolute may be considered congeneric, maybe even identical with existential principles. It is enough to exchange Bhattacharja's "spiritual Self" for Heidegger's anonymous "Man" (translated as "self" or "it"), or with "anonymous self" ("Je anonyme") of Maurice Merleau-Ponty – and we have the same ground of almost identical philosophy. (Lal, 1959, pg. 31). He considered Heidegger's opinion about existence being revealed through an experience of a person, very close his own. Basant Kumar Lal did not directly say that Krishna Chandra Bhattacharja was obviously an existentialist, but he portrays the remarkable congeniality of his own philosophical opinions with the philosophical works of such existentialists as Jaspers and Heidegger, whom he considers to be the primary follower of the philosophical work of Søren Kierkegaard.

Basant Kumar Lal drew attention to the meaning of Heidegger's term "concern" in connection to the understanding of man as a social being. In interpreting this huge topic, he underlined the similarity of Bhattacharja's attitudes on the one hand and the great existential (German and French) philosophers on the other hand. The similarity is visible in the understanding of the essence of a person as being "finite", whose existence is "the existence unto death". B. K.Lal stresses the fact that both groups of philosophers agree on the fact that only according to this kind of certainty can a person find the fulfillment of his/her existence. If this certainty of death is found, a person is able to give up the addiction to the "sociality of life", which is the permanent cause of all his concerns.

### **Critics and doubters.**

The second group of philosophical authors criticizes the philosophy of existentialism in a very negative and antagonistic way. This type of author is represented by professor S. N. L. Shrivastava, former dean of the philosophical faculty of a university in the northern Indian city of Ranchi, who in the 1970-ies lectured at the philosophical faculty of the Comenius University in Bratislava and in the Slovak Scientific Academy. The next critic would be the historian of philosophical thinking and the author of the history of the world's philosophy Daya Krishna and the last one is P. T. Raju, who is famous for the doctrine of, so-called "absolute idealism", which is quite influential in the realm of philosophy in India.

S. N. L. Shrivastava reproached existentialism for being radically subjective, focused primarily and one-sidedly on the human individual without adequate consideration of his social context. Shrivastava focuses on criticizing the existentialist opinions in two main problematic areas – ethics and the concept of truth. (Shrivastava, 1960, pg. 306 – 307). Shrivastava criticized the absence of clear articulation that existentialism lacks the criteria needed to distinguish between the

moral good and moral evil and thus supports ethical relativism. In a very similar way he opposed the division of truth into abstract and concrete compartments, questioning the legitimacy of the use of the term "abstract truth".

Another critic – Daya Krishna – understood existentialism (regardless of its specific form present in all the known versions, including the message of his spiritual father and the forefather of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard), as a radically subjectivistic philosophy. He refused it in a very critical way, being highly sensitive to Sartre's term "nothingness". He warned about the danger of axiological nihilism. "Existential thinking", wrote Krishna, in his work from the middle of the 1950ies (where he was inquiring about the essence of philosophy) "*reformulated once again the problem of Being and the Value and left us facing Nothingness*". (Krishna, 1955, pg. 206). According to Krishna, existentialism through its subjectivity deprives a person of all the basic certainties of life. The image of total helplessness, of the individual left alone and lost facing "nothingness", reduces a human being to an existence without the ability of positive activity, and suppresses the value and meaning of responsibility. According to this Indian author, existentialism does not offer a person any real hope for the future: on the contrary, it eliminates him/her from history and deprives him/her of the positive perspective of the creative formation of his own fate. A person is thrown into a void without any kind of solution, so from the perspective of the creation of human world, existentialism is definitely counterproductive. A philosophy which promotes this kind of concept of a person together with the image of the present and the future, does not fulfil, according to Daya Krishna, its basic and the most essential, "sacred" vocation. A philosophy should not question nor kill human self-confidence. Existentialism, according to the opinions of this author, led the European (and partially universal) philosophical thinking up a dead-end-street. That is the reason why existential philosophy has no prospect in India, nor anywhere else in the whole world, according to Daya Krishna;

it is a product of a decadent culture and of a civilization which is unable to develop any further.

P. T. Raju, the influential philosopher and historian, the author of the *An introduction to comparative philosophy* (Raju, 1962 b) and some other significant works from the area of comparative philosophy, is surely the most consistent and philosophically founded critic of existentialism. Raju knew very well the ins and outs of the history of European and North American philosophical thinking. He managed to discover the delicate relationships and connections between both cultural phenomena. While comparing the so-called western philosophical heritage with Indian tradition, in existentialism as a philosophical movement, Raju clearly recognized the inner tension and general "crisis of the culture". Raju clearly meant so-called western culture and its creators; the culture of European or Euro-American, or Jewish-Christian civilization with clearly articulated its Mediterranean historical roots. Raju notices Kierkegaard's "despair", tragical "anxiety", and his hopeless "loneliness"; he did not find these terms and their understanding appealing, and he did not fully understand the concept of "paradox" in Kierkegaard's works. He assigned the feelings of despair and loneliness which belong to the cultural crises in Europe, mentioned above, or to the complicated scenario of the drama of the western spirit. These terms and the way in which they were treated seemed strange, even hostile to his understanding of Indian spirit and the Indian philosophical tradition. We can agree with him to some extent. The Indian tradition of thought did not find an adequate place for the heroic message of the individual projection of his/her own existence, struggling with his/her own fate and deliberately programming his/her earthly life. The space, where there is no Karmic law, no brahma-atman principle, no rules of reincarnation, etc. could not evoke the sympathy or positive feeling of the follower of neo-vedantas or advaita-vedantas.

The Indian spirit presented in Indian philosophical and religious systems is, according to him, internally strong enough and quite able to discover new positive stimuli for subsequent development, based on the teaching of the Vedantas and its actual form in the Neo-Vedantas. Existentialism, as viewed by "absolute idealist" P. R. Raju, has never been able to show an unambiguous way out of the "dead-end-street" of the cultural-civilizational crisis, which extends to the whole world, to every continent. It is not able to do anything, thanks to its deeply rooted "scepticism", "nihilism", "individualism", and "*its refusal of objective criteria in choosing right values*" (Raju, 1962 a, pg. 242).

### **Academics and professors.**

The last group of philosophers, who focused on Kierkegaard, is made up of theoretically based and highly educated academic thinkers, mostly university professors. Most of them quite often and in a quite complex way reflected the present situation and the future possibilities and perspectives of philosophical thinking in the world. This approach was, in most cases, characterized by a systematic effort to achieve scientific objectivity, correct methodology and the precise naming of the problems. Some of them did not regard Søren Kierkegaard, and existentialist philosophy in general, completely critically. They were able to see some interesting thoughts, inspiring aspects and theoretical strengths of existentialism, opening the possibility of understanding the human situation in a more profound way. They regarded in a very positive way the outcomes of the philosophical efforts of existentialism in the area of ontology and the theory of knowledge.

The attempt to seek the connections and possible "identification" between western philosophical theory and Indian philosophy from the past and also from the present times, was made by Dhirendra Mohan Datta. He was especially interested

in Kierkegaard. Contemporary Indian philosophers determine the general trend in current Indian understanding of the relationship of individual and society as the “*spiritual individualism mediated through social organisms*” (Datta, 1962, pg. 572). According to this opinion, in the course of the history of mankind, there never was a division of the generally valid laws which rule the world as a unit, to laws that offer the framework for the society – “*nomos*”, and to the laws of nature – “*logos*”. In the intentions of traditional Indian understanding of the relationship of the wide cosmos and the world of man, society is the central part of the whole cosmic organism; it is the phenomenal manifestation of God. This is also true of ethics. Man is a part of a social organism, too. The world is revealed in a person.

Classical Indian understanding of the relationship of an individual and society flows from the relationship of between *brahma* and *atman*. A person should not prefer, according to traditional Indian concepts, a one-sided emphasis on the visible, physical world. On the other hand, man should not put an emphasis on escaping from the world through specific psychosomatic practices, offered through yoga-theory-and-practice-schools in various stages. A man should seek balance and harmony, says Datta. “*Brahma is the balance of transcendent and immanent aspects*” – the state of harmony (Datta, 1962, s. 574) which is manifested in a specific individual as the *atman* principle.

D. M. Datta, like B. K. Lal, found “his own” philosopher, an existentialist, among the philosophers of India. He gave the title “existentialist” or “existential thinker” to Shri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872 – 1950), a well-known and great Bengali writer, poet, philosopher, “guru”, and “integral yoga master”, who composed his original “cosmic philosophy” of spiritual evolution (Datta, 1961, s. 509). Shri Aurobindo’s scope of knowledge and the communication with important thinkers of his time, created the base and the starting point for spiritual contacts between great cultures (see Sanyal – Roy, 2007). Datta uses Kierkegaard’s thoughts, which he

regarded as being very close to those of Shri Aurobindo Ghosh, in his historical-philosophical work about political, legal and economical thinking from an Indian perspective. He saw this closeness in the inquiry for concentrated fervency and active sincerity, which characterizes the personal faith of a person and is perceived as a possible way to God. He connected it with the fight against shallow conventions, religious formalism, superficiality and autotelic ceremoniousness, but also against the backward mediocrity of the age, since these phenomena are usually connected with it. With a similarly negative attitude he turned against the spiritual egalitarianism and petit bourgeois ideological sterility.

Kierkegaard – just like Shri Aurobindo Ghosh, but in different era and at a different location, felt the need of the radical “jump”, which helped the person to disengage from the trivial, spiritually sterile environment of shallow, narrow-minded and morally poor people into awakened consciousness, which allowed them to realize the higher form of life. Just as Kierkegaard made fun of “associate professors”, saying there were typical example of small-mindedness and narrow-mindedness, commenting ironically on the philistine Danish society of his time in the name of greater spiritual qualities, Ghosh in his lectures and writings introduced the requirements of the new qualities of a person. He pointed out the acute need of the newly developmental stage of mankind as a whole, which can be achieved only if a great number of people get ready for the step or “jump” through a special type of yoga (developed by himself), used as a psychosomatic method for working with one’s own “self”. The preparation is achieved through intense spiritual way of life. Systematically prepared individuals will be able to experience the awakening of the cosmic consciousness in themselves; they will be able to experience their part in the absolute. Kierkegaard anticipated this ideal stage of mankind in his philosophical visions.

Kierkegaard, just like Shri Aurodobindo Ghosh, fought for the spiritualization of the individual, in the first place. Then comes the spiritualization of human society and finally the whole planet, and, in Aurodobindo's case, the whole cosmos. Kierkegaard was considered by D. M. Datta to be very close to his own aspect of the work, because of Kierkegaard's similarity to Ghosh. Datta accepted the kierkegaardian beginnings of existentialism with deep understanding and with sympathy. Later on, though, in connection with Jaspers' and Martin's existential philosophy, he is quite reserved and reproaches existentialism for uncontrollable voluntarism and anti-intellectualism, impossible scepticism and, first of all, the one-sided view of the world of a person, by hiding autotelic individualism behind it. This type of individualism misses any kind of noble goals, it is lost in itself and dies with itself. Kierkegaard himself was the symbol of the peak of the thinker's endeavour and a grand personification of a respectable surge of the human spirit for D. M. Datta. Kierkegaard's later followers and philosophical disciples did not awake such a great respect in D. M. Datta. For him, they represented the decline of intellect, of a healthy sense of moral sensitivity and perception. He perceived them as the theories of the end of civilization or he found in their works the beginnings of coming spiritual disintegration and cultural decadence.

Ramakant A. Sinari, another philosopher of India, professor of philosophy at the university in Mumbai, the author of "atmatology", the modern teaching about *atman* being the essence of existence and person, started with comparison of existential philosophy and early, "non-religious" Buddhism, which is relatively authentic in Buddha's attitudes and statements and which refuses the institutionalism and stresses the inner side of the individual and his/her ability and willingness to improve. Kierkegaard and Buddha were for Ramakant A. Sinari the supreme representatives of spiritual movements, each in his own time "*Just as Søren Kierkegaard, the greatest religious thinker of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the mastermind of*

existentialism, Buddha as well underwent an overpowering experience of "sickness unto death", said Sinari in *Structure of Indian Thought* (Sinari, 1970, pg. 22). Gautama Buddha, according to Sinari, was the first one who understood, long before the rise of existentialism and clearly declared the thought, that human life is an existence unto death. That is the reason he was very close to existentialism, and the existentialists should carefully seek the relational connotations between their philosophy and Buddha's teaching. This authentic experience of the "sickness unto death" gave Buddha the right to teach the students about the heart of suffering and about the "eight-part-noble-quest" for liberation. It gave him the right to express the idea that disintegration and the end is an organic part of everything. "The relationship to himself, to his past deeds, to the world around him and to his own fate was the thing that he discovered, just as Kierkegaard, behind this very feeling" says Sinari. He stresses some other similarities: "Both of them were flooded with the feeling of vanity and uselessness while thinking about the specific situation of a person in the world. Both of them experienced pain from being torn from the eternal and lasting – this is the feeling that is animatedly reflected in Kierkegaard's statements which are full of pathos; or the feeling of hopelessness, when he realized that there is no possibility of recovering from despair." (Sinari, 1970, pg. 22) The term "despair" seems to be the key term here. While thinking about Kierkegaard's confession regarding the relationship to death as the important part of human existence and as a phenomenon, having paradoxical relationship with human existence, R. A. Sinari compares Kierkegaard's position to that of Buddha. The Indian scientist reminds us that Kierkegaard, just like Gautama Buddha, gives up almost all hope for the elimination of anxiety being the constitutive element of human understanding of the world and for the recovery of the consciousness of desperation

The image of the consciousness of desperation does not only accompany the historical approach, but it is really actualized in the contemporary image of the Indian view of a man. In connection with this fact, Sinari points out the important reality that *"the feelings of tiredness, absurdity, weakness or enchainment (duhkha, bandha, samsara), considered by Buddha, Vardhamana Mahavira (historical founder of Jainism) and other thinkers of the Vedantic Upanishads considered unbearable, remained the main characteristics of Indian consciousness right up to the present time. The history of Indian thought contains a more or less unified calculation of these feelings and ways, which are according to Indian philosophers considered to be the core values"*. (Sinari, 1970, pg. 22 – 23) From the viewpoint of the historiography of philosophy, these features of thinking penetrate the whole philosophical development and we discover them in every era. The Indian author considers their articulation in ancient Indian wisdom and ways in which to recognize them and use them as a "cure" in common with Søren Kierkegaard.

Ramakant A. Sinari rightfully considered Søren Kierkegaard to be the most important analyser of the melancholic depression of a religious person and pointed out that many of the Buddha's statements are the expression of the typically existential moods, just as we find them in Kierkegaard. Gautama Buddha and Søren Kierkegaard have a lot in common, according to him. The great historical personality of religious initiator and the founder of one of the biggest and the most influential world religions according to this thinking, was initially formed in India, especially the ways leading to the common goals and similar results of the pioneer of existential thinking in Europe. In Sinari's monograph about the structure of Indian thinking, we can find more parallels between Kierkegaard's and Buddha's tragical perception of their own existence as suffering and sorrow. A current Indian philosopher concludes with the suggestion that the inner sense of the existentialist

term "estrangement" is in perfect harmony with Buddha's understanding of an existence of suffering in the world.

Margaret Chatterjee, an Indian philosopher, spiritual student and admirer of Mahatma Gandhi, former dean of philosophical faculty at the university of New Delhi, leads her readers to a different set of questions concerning the coherence of Kierkegaard's philosophy. She noticed that Kierkegaard in his texts many times exchanges the word "poet" for the word "thinker" and uses both of them in a very similar or even identical sense – as synonyms. Chatterjee in *The Language of Philosophy* points out that in Kierkegaard's understanding poetic vision of reality just as the thinker's should not be influenced by any authority; both should passionately and ardently seek their own truth. "According to Kierkegaard, existential neutrality is equally impossible for the philosopher and the poet at the same time. Philosophy becomes poetry to such an extent till it gets to the subjective and passionately possessed truths, owned by poetry". (Chatterjee, 1981, pg. 103)

## Conclusion

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.

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