

Pythagoras

by

N. A. NIKAM

556
NIKAM, N.A.
1958.

During my visit to Greece in April 1954, among many things which I learnt was my acquaintance with the research on Pythagoras that was being carried on by the Pythagoras Society. I have with me in my possession a book called *Pythagoran*, privately printed, which was sent to me as a gift by its Editor, Mr. Hobart Huson of Texas, U.S.A. In the course of his researches on the biography of Pythagoras, on which Mr. Hobart Huson is engaged since the last thirty years, Mr. Huson brought together the moral and religious teachings of Pythagoras from Greek, Latin, English, French, German and Italian sources, and has reconstructed and interpreted the teachings of Pythagoras in the *Pythagoran*.

Pythagoras was a pure-blooded Greek and was born on the island of Samos about 589 B.C. Pythagoras travelled in many lands in search of learning and wisdom. He settled at Krotona in southern Italy, where he attracted many brilliant minds of the age as his disciples. He married his pupil Theano and had by her seven children. His apostasy from the orthodox religious beliefs brought charges of impiety against him and led to his expulsion from Krotona and the suppression of his schools in 510 B.C. Pythagoras died at Metapontum in Italy 490 B.C. *circa*. His criticisms of theology were directed against the then prevailing Olympian, Orphic and other pagan religions which had many tenets in common with Christianity. Whether Pythagoras wrote anything is a matter of controversy, but Diogenes Learites declares that he did, and among them names The Sacred Discourse. Although hundreds of works regarding him and the Pythagoreans existed prior to the fourth century A.D., practically none now exist: the early Christian Church made a deliberate effort to systematically destroy all references to them. While Burnet thinks that Pythagoras believed in and taught the doctrine of rebirth and transmigration, Mr. Hobart Huson thinks that he did not. The *Pythagoran* deletes therefore all references to this doctrine.

It is not merely the doctrines of Number and Harmony, but many major categories of Greek Philosophy would appear to be Pythagorean: the doctrine, 'Know Thyself', that philosophy is a 'way of life', that there is a perennial philosophy and wisdom, that although this is an open secret yet it cannot be taught to all. "Not unto all should all be made clear". "Know God, Know Thyself". "Though it seems easy to know thyself, this is the most difficult of all things. Its message is, in any event, to discover our own power. This amounts to learning the nature of the whole extant world which, as God advises us, is impossible without philosophy". If Aristotle says that Philosophy arises out of wonder, Pythagoras says that "it is through philosophy that one comes to be surprised at nothing". Pythagoras recognises Intuition: "God endowed man with Reason that he might use it and discern the true from the false. Instinct and Intuition were before Reason".

The Limit and the Unlimited:—Pythagoras posits the Unlimited; the Unlimited is prior to the Limited. The Unlimited is the Formless; what is Formless is also ageless. Between the Unlimited and the Limit or Form is a process of energy which is a process of Evolution. Evolution is the process by which the Unlimited and the Formless acquires form.

What is the Unlimited? It is not God. The Unlimited is that which is potentially capable of Form; it is that which receives and becomes Form. Both the Unlimited and Form are therefore areas of change. Form is the actuality of the Unlimited; it is the ever-changing. The Unlimited is the ever-lasting possibility of a change which is never constant. As such, both the Unlimited and Form are comprehended by Time. Pythagoras says: "With the appearance of Form also began Time". Form is the condition of change, of multiplicity; everything takes on Form in proportion, therefore, of Number or Measure. "The various forms assumed, retained, and changed are wholly matters of degree, relativity and proportion". It is evolution and not mere change, because it involves measure and proportion. Limit and the Unlimited are in a sense opposed, as for instance solid and liquid, but are in another sense, of the same substratum. "There is but a single cosmic substance" says Pythagoran, "of which all things have been formed. So that all forms whatever they may be or have been, or whenever they have been or may be, have been, one, and will be but multiple or varied forms of one and the same single substance".

What is Form? It is the essence or the principle of essence. The Form Horse is essence or a Universal. The Universal as Form is also the "limiting" principle, as it imposes on the process of natural evolution the Form of a horse. Form is Complex: it is a conditioning which is a Universal-Particular. In one sense, Form is outside the Unlimited; in another sense, it is in the Unlimited, and the cause of Form is Form itself. (Compare *Sva-rupa Sambhanda*). Pythagoras does not restrict his philosophy to only two categories,—the Unlimited or the Substratum and the Limit or Form; there are three major categories: God, Substratum and the Limit or Form. Why? Because, as Pythagoras says, "Neither can substance alone participate in Form by itself; nor can Form by itself apply itself to Substance. There must therefore exist another cause or divine energy, which moves the substance of things and forms of them. This cause is primary and the most excellent of all".

The Universe is a process of change, "so that at no time and at no place along its turbulent course it is the same river which it was in the beginning"; and Pythagoras says, along with Heraclitus: "It is impossible even to step into the same river twice".

From this Metaphysics is deduced a sense of hope and fearlessness as a practical maxim of Life: "So why then, should man fear one death when he has already died and will die, so many".

I have expounded and interpreted the First and the Second chapters of the *Pythagoran*. In the conception of the Unlimited there are broad resemblances to the conception of *Prakriti* of the *Saṁkhya*.

In the conception of Form as the limiting and diversifying principle or energy which is the cause of creation or evolution, there may be discovered at least some distant resemblance to the conception of *Maya* in the *Vedānta*.

I shall quote one passage from the *Pythagoran* on what Pythagoras said on Cosmic Law, which, in its broad outlines, corresponds to the conception of *Karma*.

Cosmic Law has the peculiarity, that it is not dependent upon any other source of power for enforcement.

It is at once a legislator, inspector, magistrate and executioner, being omnipotent,

Divine justice is strictly compensatory and is never vindictive.

It is compensatory because it rewards adherence as well as punishes infraction.

It is non-vindictive because it is dispassionate, and the elements of wrath and vengeance are absent from it.

It is no respecter of persons or excuses: all are equal within its compass.

Every infraction of Cosmic Law is inevitably noticed and visited, irrespective of knowledge, or ignorance, motive or intent, mode or manner.

It is the eternal principle of divine justice that initiation of commensurate consequence inheres in every condition.

And that the condition is infallibly compensated, with peculiar appropriateness and in finite degree.

And that during present existence.

The eternal regimen of the Universe is Harmony, Order, Equality, Balance.

Which is perpetually maintained by Cosmic Law.

The Pythagorean also contains some Pythagorean Enigmas: e.g. "Do not cross over a broom": "That is, do not put obstacles in your own way or go not of your way to stir up troubles". "Put on your right shoe first, but wash your left foot first": i.e. "Before admonishing others, first put your own house in order. Act uprightly and honestly, washing away all impurities. Prefer an active life to one of ease and pleasure".

I left Athens with a very strong conviction that at the time when Pythagoras lived and five hundred years later, there was either a real impact of Indian thought on the philosophies of Asia Minor or there were real affinities of thought in their independent approaches to the problems of life. Also, I felt that the Philosophies of Asia Minor were very inadequately and perhaps wrongly interpreted by European Scholars due to their own prejudices. Therefore there is here a very interesting field of research and study for Indian Scholars for comparative studies in Sanskrit and Greek.