OBITUARIES

Bibhuti S. Yadav-In Memoriam (July 10, 1943-October 10, 1999)

The contribution that Bibhuti Singh Yadav made to Indo-Judaic studies was largely intangible. It lay in the remarkable attitude he had toward Judaism and in the intellectual ferment that attitude inspired in his Jewish students and friends. As an Indian philosopher inclined toward Buddhism, Yadav conveyed both a critical and an empathetic stance toward Judaism. I shall discuss this stance, as befits the subject matter, in a personal way.

My awareness of Bibhuti Yadav's openness toward Judaism stems from my earliest acquaintance with him, a Proseminar in Indian Thought at Temple University in 1976. In the course of that academic experience, Prof. Yadav and I had occasion to talk about Jewish topics, including the Jewish mystical tradition, kabbalah. I loaned him one of Gershom Scholem's classics, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, for he was, at the time, interested in the idea of the Torah as the incarnate name of God. I was moved by his interest in Jewish thought and gladly loaned him the book. (This was, I might add, the first of many Jewish books that I loaned to him over these intervening twenty-three years.) Some time later, I got the book back and quickly saw to my surprise and perplexity that he had completely filled it with Sanskrit marginalia. Key kabbalistic terms and concepts, as well as Scholem's scholarly analyses, had found their parallels in classical Sanskrit thought. My guess is that my well-worn pages of Scholem were literally the only site in the world in 1976 where a profound Indian-Jewish philosophical dialogue was in progress.

Those marginal notes captured what I took over the years to be Yadav's ambivalence toward Judaism. On the one hand, Bibhuti Yadav was genuinely interested in Jewish thought. He wanted to inform himself of trends in Jewish intellectual history and could often become quite excited by an idea that seemed to him original and powerful. On the other hand, he often conveyed the sense that all Jewish ideas had been thought beforeæby Hindus and Buddhists. He seemed to deny Judaism any uniqueness, any right to the integrity of its own expression. It was an oddly disconcerting experience for me to learn that a medieval Jewish theology of ritual that I was studying, to take an example, had, so to speak, been developed centuries before by Mimamsa thinkers. This attitude of "I've seen this all before" put a Jewish thinker in his place, for it is precisely the attitude of superiority and implicit condescension that Jews often display toward Christianity or Islam. It was

a sobering corrective and a tonic for intellectual humility. It also made me aware, as I'm sure it did for others committed to the cross-civilizational conversation aware, of how vast Indian thought is and of how pathetic and inadequate our semi-educated stereotypes of it are. I bristle with anger and shame when I hear Jewish theologians dismiss Hinduism as either a flagrant paganism or a cold metaphysical monism. I think that many of us who have "the marginal notes" have learned a crucial lesson and feel a strong obligation to teach it to our students and peers.

Bibhuti Yadav's knowledge of Judaism was never vast, but he did probe the essentials. I recall that once I was commiserating with him about a close relative who had abandoned her Judaism and had become involved in a cult-like, new religious movement. He started to speak about the Exodus as the basic trope of Jewish historical experience. The Jew must leave his or her place and wander into history, eventually to return to a place both new and old. This seemed to me a basic truth and a sterling insight about Judaism, if not about the human situation as such. And, at the end of the day, he was right. My relative "returned" to a richer Judaism than she had originally known. Her wandering in the wilderness of historical experience followed the archetypal pattern that he discerned for Judaism as a whole.

Bibhuti Yadav was inclined to view complex historical matters in a patterned way. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the German idealists, whom he came to loathe, and their Jewish imitators, Bibhuti Yadav treated Judaism as a symbol, as an essential idea on the stage of history. He submerged its particularities into a pattern. The pattern that he found characteristic and of world historical significance was in Judaism's opposition to Christianity, that is, in Judaism's vigorous insistence on its own identity in the face of what he took to be a totalizing metaphysical ideology committed to the silencing of difference. He used to say that between Morocco on the Atlantic and Malaysia in the Pacific, only Israel and India expressed real difference. The threatening Other here is Islam, not Christianity, but the point is the same. He found a kinship between Hinduism and Judaism based on their historical stance of defiance. He also saw a deeper root to this kinship: both Judaism and Hinduism were exilic religions. (The Hindus were exiles in their own repeatedly colonialized land, in his view.) Both of these exilic religions held their people together by a divine law. The divine law imparted not only a social-political identity, but a cosmological one as well. Yadav's appreciation of the parallels between Torah and its rabbinic jurisprudence, politics, and theology, and Dharmashastra ought to command further scholarly attention.

Bibhuti Yadav was stimulated by the presence of his Jewish students and friends. He treated them, so to speak, as allies, as fellow Asians who were doubly exiled in the Christian West. He constantly berated me when he thought that I was being too imitative of Christian theology or of trends in

philosophy that he thought owed too much to Christianity. He was prone to impose his near categorical opposition to Christianity onto me or onto Judaism in general. He did not recognize that Judaism's opposition to Christianity, while deep and pervasive, cannot be global and categorical due to the filiation of the latter from the former, as well as their long historical juxtaposition. These have created a complex bond between them.

Bibhuti Yadav's contribution to Indian-Jewish philosophical dialogue was not entirely intangible. He did leave behind one published article, "Buddhism on Rosenzweig" (*Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, Vol. 1:1). This article developed from a scholarly dialogue he had with his esteemed colleague, Prof. Norbert M. Samuelson, in Philadelphia in 1995. This article represents his most subtle attempt to examine his own ambivalence, to balance both his empathy and his critique. Yadav's thought became ever more concerned with issues of identity and difference as he filtered his textual mastery of Sanskrit sources through an expanding reading of postmodernist philosophers. Accordingly, he tried his best, and largely succeeded in my view, to let Judaism be Judaism, Rosenzweig be Rosenzweig. He came to an exquisitely crafted examination of Rosenzweig's thought on Hinduism and Buddhism in *The Star of Redemption*. While he characterizes this thought as mistaken, it is mistaken in a profound sense. Rosenzweig is an "admirable" and "world-class" thinker. Yadav was particularly taken by Rosenzweig's advocacy of a "new thinking," a concrete, situational personalism liberated from the coercions of metaphysical systematizing. He praises Rosenzweig for the power and vision of his full-fledged critique of Hegel, but faults him for falling back on Hegelian tropes. Rosenzweig misses the particularity of Asia. "The biblical closure keeps him from discerning the textual bodiliness, the thickness of claims and counter-claims, and concrete particularities of Asian civilizations." Rosenzweig's critique of Hinduism is indeed profoundæas a critique of Sankara's Vedanta. But it mistakes a part for the whole. Many Indian critics of elitist Vedanta would have been thrilled by Rosenzweig's criticism of it. But Rosenzweig, against his better methodological instincts, silences their difference. Yadav goes on to essay how an Indian Buddhist text, the *Tevijja Sutta*, exemplifies precisely the critical "speech thinking" Rosenzweig himself advocates. Yadav wants to persuade Rosenzweig of how particular, how heterogeneous India is. The article culminates with an imagined dialogue between Sakayamuni and Franz Rosenzweig, as they walk together "out of the gate to a life on the road to freedom." The theist Rosenzweig and the atheist Buddhist differ on who unlocked the gate that leads to their liberative road. They find substantial agreement, however, on the task that lies ahead. "They would have smiled at each other in enlightened difference, happy to discover the way that leads towards life beyond in the middle of life as the theme of actual conversation. Addressing each other as 'Thou,' they both would have looked at the shifting

horizons in awe and optimism, knowing that to keep walking together is the way of being in the middle of the world."

This article represents not only an extraordinarily valuable addition to Rosenzweig scholarship, but a turn of mind that is comfortingly Judaic as well. As my work turned increasingly away from philosophy of religion toward ethics and then political theory, I often sensed a mocking or disparaging attitude on Bibhuti Yadav's part. His implication seemed to be that ethics and political theory, as intellectual projects, lack the full dignity of epistemology, metaphysic, and philosophy of language properly conceived. He seemed impatient at times with the fundamentally moral cast of Jewish thought. He wanted a discourse closer to the theoretical projects of Indian thought. Yet in the above essay, Bibhuti Yadav puts the ethical response of the human person to the concrete particularity of the other in the center of the human task. He sees Buddhism as a practiced deconstruction of metaphysics and a constructive way of humane living in the middle of the world. This may be termed, at the risk of imposing my own categorization, a "Judaic turn."

With another vignette, taken from the midst of life, I close. As his remains were borne from his village to the Ganges for cremation, the route was lined with thousands of people, among them hundreds of wailing young women. I asked Prof. William Allen, who accompanied his remains to India, why this was. He informed me of his recent discovery. Bibhuti Yadav had spent part of his salary, much of it returned to India every month, on the dowering of indigent brides. Without his assistance, many poor women would have been unable to marry. The wailing women along the route, who had expected money from him, were mourning not only his quiet beneficence, but their own uncertain futures. The Jewish reader has undoubtedly already recognized that the dowering of indigent brides is an important and central mitzvah. Although Bibhuti Yadav often spoke as a philosophical amoralist, his actions belied his words. Perhaps continued dialogue with Judaism, as exemplified in his Rosenzweig article, might have furthered his development of a discourse to link the moral with the metaphysical. It would have been wonderful to watch where the "Judaic turn" might have taken him.

Our pain at his passing is matched only by our gratitude for his life. I hope that it is no insult to his Buddhist proclivities to pray that he "be bound up forever in the bonds of life."

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