

A Lover of Indian Wisdom

By Subhash Kak

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Although the recent success of Indians in the knowledge industries has changed perceptions quite a bit, it is common to consider Indians to be other-worldly folks, stuck in outmoded ways. Likewise, it is often said that Indian traditions offer nothing of value to our times. Indian thought is considered overly mystical, and disciplines such as yoga considered just a means of keeping the body fit.

It is because of these views, internalized by educated Indians over several generations, that Indian universities offer literally nothing on Indian science and knowledge. Just to give an example, consider IIT Delhi, my own old school. It has 14 professors in the department of humanities and social sciences. Of these professors, seven are experts in English, two in philosophy, one in economics, one in sociology, and two in psychology. There is no expert in Indian languages, art, design, history, or Indian science. There is no Sanskrit, or Tamil, or Hindi. The colonized minds of modern Indians reject things Indian much more stridently than was done by the English.

Actually the negative attitudes about Indian traditions are not justified and these ideas are not only of relevance to modern thought but they may have already shaped it to a remarkable degree. To make this point let me talk of a savant who benefited from Indian ideas and transformed the world.

I have in mind the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrodinger, who was arguably one of the two greatest scientists of the 20th century. If Albert Einstein is celebrated for his creation of the theory of relativity, Erwin Schrodinger is equally famous for his creation of quantum mechanics, the deepest theory at the basis of outer reality. Quantum mechanics went so far beyond the already radical framework of relativity that Einstein refused to accept it to his last day.

It is a fact that the great European scientists have searched for truth by first abandoning the narrow theologies of the religion into which they were born. But for Schrodinger Indic ideas provided the very foundation for his uncompromising search for meaning.

It is not generally known that before he created quantum mechanics he expressed his intention to give form to central ideas of Vedanta which, therefore, has had a role in the birth of quantum mechanics. In 1925, before his revolutionary theory was complete, Erwin Schrodinger wrote:

This life of yours which you are living is not merely a piece of this entire existence, but in a certain sense the "whole"; only this whole is not so constituted that it can be surveyed in one single glance. This, as we know, is what the Brahmins express in that sacred, mystic formula which is yet really so simple and so clear: tat tvam asi, this is you. Or, again, in such words as "I am in the east and the west, I am above and below, I am this entire world."

Schrodinger's influential *What is Life?* (1944) also used Vedic ideas. The book became instantly famous although it was criticized by some for its emphasis on Indian ideas. Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of the DNA code, credited this book for key insights that led him to his revolutionary discovery. According to his biographer Walter Moore, there is a clear continuity between Schrodinger's understanding of Vedanta and his research:

The unity and continuity of Vedanta are reflected in the unity and continuity of wave mechanics. In 1925, the world view of physics was a model of a great machine composed of separable interacting material particles. During the next few years, Schrodinger and Heisenberg and their followers created a universe based on superimposed inseparable waves of probability amplitudes. This new view would be entirely consistent with the Vedantic concept of All in One.

Schrodinger was born on August 12, 1887, so we celebrate the 113th anniversary of his birth. He became a Vedantist, a Hindu, as a result of his studies in his search for truth. Schrodinger kept a copy of the Hindu scriptures at his bedside. He read books on Vedas, yoga, and Sankhya philosophy and he reworked them into his own words, and ultimately came to believe them. The Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita were his favourite scriptures.

According to his biographer Moore, "His system -- or that of the Upanishads -- is delightful and consistent: the self and the world are one and they are all. He rejected traditional western religious beliefs (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic) not on the basis of any reasoned argument, nor even with an expression of emotional antipathy, for he loved to use religious expressions and metaphors, but simply by saying that they are naive."

Schrodinger was a professor at several universities in Europe. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1933. During the Hitler era he was dismissed from his position for his opposition to the Nazi ideas and he fled to England. For some years he was in Ireland, but after the conclusion of the World War II he returned to Vienna where he died in 1961.

Quantum mechanics goes beyond ordinary logic. According to it reality is a superposition of all possibilities which restates Vedic ideas. It is quantum mechanics which explains the mysteries of chemical reactions and of life. In recent years, it has been suggested that the secrets of consciousness have a quantum basis.

In a famous essay on determinism and free will, he expressed very clearly the sense that consciousness is a unity, arguing that this "insight is not new... From the early great Upanishads the recognition Atman = Brahman (the personal self equals the omnipresent, all-comprehending eternal self) was in Indian thought considered, far from being blasphemous, to represent the quintessence of deepest insight into the happenings of the world. The striving of all the scholars of Vedanta was, after having learnt to pronounce with their lips, really to assimilate in their minds this grandest of all thoughts."

He considered the idea of pluralization of consciousness and the notion of many souls to be naive. He considered the notion of plurality to be a result of deception (maya): "the same illusion is produced by a gallery of mirrors, and in the same way Gaurisankar and Mt. Everest turned out to be the same peak seen from different valleys."

Schrodinger's ideas continue to be fundamental in a variety of new fields. The wonders of modern science, such as electronics, biology, chemistry, wouldn't have been possible without

the insights of quantum theory. The possibilities inherent in quantum theory have not all been realized. Schrodinger remains one of the most discussed figures in modern scientific thought. His ideas will continue to inspire science.

Schrodinger was a very complex person. But he had a sense of humor and paradox. He called his dog Atman. Perhaps he did this to honour Yudhishtira whose own dog, an incarnation of cosmic justice (Dharma), accompanied him on his last march to the Himalayas. More likely, he was calling attention to the unity that pervades the web of life.

It is frustrating to note that the Indian educational system will not let students know of the centrality of Vedantic thought in the works of scientists like Schrodinger or our own Jagadish Chandra Bose. Is it possible that at some future time Indians will have to travel to the West to know about their own heritage?

sushama@atributetohinduism.com

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