



Idealism in S. Radha Krishnan: A Rhetorical Interpretation

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ABSTRACT: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is widely known for his graceful and stylistic language. His speeches and literary prose are interspersed with a plethora of rhetorical devices and *alamkāras* like, anaphora, asyndeton, epigrams, rhetorical question, *upamā*, *rūpaka*, *dīpaka*, *praṣna*, metaphor and simile, to name a few. This article focuses on Radhakrishnan's views on Idealism with special reference to the text *An Idealist View of Life*. This is an analysis of Radhakrishnan's use of the above mentioned rhetorical devices to explicate and make accessible a philosophical concept like Idealism to his listeners and readers. Philosophy is a complex subject and generally beyond the grasp of lay audience, therefore, Radhakrishnan's considerable use of the figures of speech in the promulgation of his ideas assumes significance.

Keywords: Idealism, Radhakrishnan, ideals, rhetorical devices, *dr̥ṣ*, *alamkāras*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan built his philosophical thought around an idealistic precept, a Vedāntic form of Absolute Idealism. The complete knowledge of Indian philosophy and religion, together with the astute grasp of Western philosophies and religions, resulted in the development of his own metaphysical thought system in the "Hibbert Lectures," published as *An Idealist View of Life* in 1932. He locates his theory of idealism in the "ideal values" of life which interpreted or translated into a higher form of consciousness (*satcitānanda*) and, thereby, resulted in a better understanding of the world. He viewed the contemporary substitutes of naturalism, humanism, materialism, pragmatism, and authoritarianism, as insufficient and inadequate philosophies as opposed to the spiritual ideal of man. The important quotient needed to achieve the state of idealism, according to Radhakrishnan, is the faculty of intuition, the creative ability inherent in an individual that unites the "self" with the "Absolute." This intuitive ability enables man to perceive the value, meaning and rationale immanent in the universe. In this seminal text he, therefore, stressed the need for a wholesome religion which helped create enlightened beings that alone could save the world from its sorrow and misery.

His writings drew considerable attention to the literary and graceful use of language, epigrammatic sentences, stylistic prose and clarity of thought in presenting his views. Sarvepalli Gopal narrates the reaction of one of the listeners, J. Tyssul Davis, after Radhakrishnan delivered the last lecture: "In you a great dream is realized—the East bringing its own message in our own language thro' one who knows all about Western thought" (101). Almost everyone who heard him during the lectures made a special mention of his command of the English language. Charles A. Moore observes with respect to Radhakrishnan's philosophy: "His specific method in part consists of interpretation and clarification of concepts" (283). This "clarification" in presentation of his views may be attributed to the clear and forceful language used by Radhakrishnan. The above remark also suggests that the felicity of expression made it easier for his listeners and readers to understand or, at the least, appreciate his philosophical discourses. The large gatherings of a very diverse group of listeners in almost all his lectures and his subsequent popularity as an orator and writer necessitate a study of Radhakrishnan's rhetorical acumen.

II. RADHAKRISHNAN'S CONCEPT OF IDEALISM

Radhakrishnan is regarded as the exponent of Indian idealism which is shaped by ideals and values. These ideals and values, according to him, give shape and meaning to the universe and operate as dynamic forces. This is in conformity with the first basic doctrine of idealism, which is the union of the common nature of things, such as "humankind" or "literature" understood collectively as one specific thing, which makes it a "concrete universal entity." This "concrete universal" as opposed to the "abstract universal" is dynamic, organic and developing (Robinson n. pag.). The doctrines of Western idealism are combined with his understanding of it

and the Vedānta; these form the bases of Radhakrishnan's philosophical grounding. His moral and spiritual values comprise of the Absolute Idealism which is a Vedāntic interpretation of the 'self' merging with the 'Absolute.' This constitutes a wholesome thought system for him, one which has no substitute.

III. ANALYSIS

Radhakrishnan begins *An Idealist View of Life* with an epithet to define and describe idealism as, "an ambiguous word" and says that it is "used to signify a variety of views" (9). The epithet at the very beginning of the chapter prepares the reader and listener for the indefinite nature of the concept being discussed. The repetition of the consonant /v/ adds rhythm and multiple dimensions to the concept of idealism. The ambiguity and variety of the concept are, thus, both brought forth here. He makes use of an aphorism, following the sūtra (nyāya) epigrammatic style, to elaborate the idea and move forward, "Whatever is real in the universe is such stuff as ideas are made of" (9). The aphoristic statement reveals the nature of the idea and Radhakrishnan is able to describe it in terms that can be apprehended by the average person without ambiguity. He conveys that the reality which is immanent in the universe is the source of all ideas. In the Western philosophical thought, however, "Idealism denies the reality of external objects independent of the knowing minds. The mind is the primary reality" (Sinha 81). In his exposition, then, Radhakrishnan alludes to Western philosophers like Berkeley, Kant, Hegel and Croce and discusses their views on idealism.

In order to explain his perception of the term 'idea' Radhakrishnan employs a hypophora (uttara): "When we ask with reference to any thing or action, 'what is the idea?' we mean, what is the principle involved in it, what is the meaning or the purpose of its being, what is the aim or the value of action? What is it driving at?" (Idealist 10). The application of a hypophora here is in the form of a series of questions, which Radhakrishnan proceeds to answer, logically, later in the passage. He enquires into the nature of 'idea' and the purpose of its being. He questions the aim and the value attached to this action. The repetition of the pronoun 'what' also makes use of an anaphora and adds emphasis to the query. Radhakrishnan then proceeds to respond to the questions he first posed: "This idea or value is the operative creative force. An idealist view finds that the universe has meaning, has value" (10). Radhakrishnan reiterates that the whole concept of 'idea' is the progenitor of the dynamic forces which operate the universe. The repetition of the consonant sounds in 'operative' and 'creative' produces a lyrical effect that helps to underline the timelessness of the concept. Alliteration (anuprāsa) is generally used in poetry but is sometimes used strategically in prose as well, especially when the speaker is engaged with the audience. It often arises when the orator is passionate about conveying a particular thought or message to the audience. The "Hibbert Lectures" were meant for audiences, therefore, the style in them is somewhat informal and conversational in tone and the rhetorical devices used vary from the ones involved in his writings. The answers to the questions thus naturally glide to further discussion and clarification of the subject. Radhakrishnan uses a prozeugma (ādi/kāraka dīpaka) here, when he writes that the 'universe has meaning, has value'; the yoking word 'universe' precedes the rest of the sentence which it has yoked thus bringing focus to reality. The idealist point of view conforms to the ultimate nature of reality and strives to find the meaning and the purpose behind the idea. This eventually reveals the true meaning and value inherent in the universe which, in turn, makes life purposeful and significant.

Radhakrishnan describes idealism as an 'idealistic' state of mind. He alludes to Touchstone's question to Corin in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and makes use of the allusion hypophorically, "'Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?'" (Idealist 10). He proceeds to answer the question to make the ground and develop an argument for a detailed explanation of the 'idealistic' philosophy: "Shakespeare means by philosophy not a system of abstract thought or a technical discipline of the schools but an attitude of mind which can best be described as 'idealistic'" (10). The reference to philosophy is not to the intangible abstractions of the subject or the thought systems but to an 'idealist' state of mind of a person, one with a desire to reflect on the higher things in life. The emphasis is on the 'attitude of mind' which enables man to seek a higher ideal. The allusion and hypophora, thus, serve a dual purpose and assist in the arrangement and presentation of the dense philosophical thought.

Orators and writers often employ a rhetorical question (praśna) in persuasive speech to lend emphasis to a discussion. Radhakrishnan has also made ample use of this device in this section of the text to put across his views. In continuance with the above mentioned point Radhakrishnan explicates his point further by the use of two rhetorical questions in succession:

Have you that spiritual dimension to your being, that mood of reflective inquiry and self-contemplation, that anxiety of mind to know the things spiritual in which is the true dwelling-place of man? Or do you belong to the race of unreflective people who are satisfied with business or politics or sport, whose life is dull prose without any ideal meaning? (Idealist 10)

Radhakrishnan has here placed logical statements in the form of questions and developed them into a paragraph and in doing so he provokes the listeners and readers to think along. The first rhetorical question (erotesis) or praśna, as it is known in the *Alaṃkāraśāstra*, used by Radhakrishnan lays down the prerequisites for a philosophical bent of mind. The query is the answer to what an 'idealist view' enshrines. It is a blend of the

spiritual, contemplative and inquiring disposition which creates an 'idealistic' temper. The second rhetorical question is in the form of an antithesis (virodha) as it comes in opposition to the first one. Radhakrishnan juxtaposes the previous fundamentals of an inquiring mind with that of the opposite bent with epithets like 'unreflective,' 'satisfied' and 'dull' to show the antithetical relationship. Through the rhetorical question he is able to demonstrate that people who are content, complacent in life and caught in the mundane are incapable of gaining idealist insight. He also uses a metaphor, "whose life is dull prose" to give a striking image to their lives. The lives of such individuals are insignificant and prosaic much like a piece of monotonous writing. Radhakrishnan sums up this paragraph with the rhetorical device of climax (sāra/ gradatio) and presents a balanced argument in favour of philosophical reflection: "Philosophy is understanding, contemplation, insight, and a philosopher can find no rest until he gains a view or vision of the world of things and persons which will enable him to interpret the manifold experiences as expressive, in some sort, of a purpose" (10). The aim of philosophy is to facilitate better comprehension of the world which is manifest around an individual and to discover the ultimate purpose which is the final end. Radhakrishnan also makes use of an asyndeton while presenting a string of synonyms to define philosophy. The words 'understanding,' 'contemplation,' and 'insight' illuminate it from various aspects.

In *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, a collection of essays of the Muirhead Library of Philosophy, Hiralal Halder while discussing the difference between the universal and the particular writes: "It was Plato who first realised the importance of the universals, ideas as he called them, and saw that without them neither knowing nor being is possible" (324). Radhakrishnan also realises the importance of ideas with respect to human discourse. He propounds an idealism which is in keeping with the needs of modern society, an idealism which is shaped to handle contemporary dilemma. He engages the *alamkāra* *hetu* to explain the function of idealistic philosophy in facing the modern challenge: "Ideas are always with us since they are an essential part of the real, and if we interpret them as ideals or values, an idealist view of the universe results" (Idealist 11). He proposes through the two premises, that ideas are important components of the real in the world, and, they need to be interpreted as ideals and values. The effect of this cause becomes manifest in the universe in the form of an idealistic point of view. These ideals are present in the universe in the shape of symbols and images. L. C. Knights has tried to explain the concept of ideas and symbols and he quotes from *Biographia Literaria*: "they are the living educts of the imagination'. . . and it is plain that for Coleridge the function of symbols is to handle the meanings that cannot be conceptually grasped. 'An IDEA, in the highest sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by a symbol'" (Knights 135). In order to provide relief to modern society Radhakrishnan personifies idealism as a succouring force, "Idealism today has to reckon with our problems and help us to face them" (Hindu 11). He sums up the first part of his argument with alliteration and an epigram, "The stage seems to be set for a fresh statement" (11). The personification concretises the abstract phenomenon of idealism and presents its practical viability to society. By clearly presenting the practical side of Indian philosophy to the Western audience for whom these lectures were originally drafted, he attempts to refute the common accusation made by the West that Indian philosophy is mystical and other worldly. Idealism, Radhakrishnan explains, may be viewed as a practical tool for handling the problems in society and not just as an isolated abstraction limited to the realm of philosophy. The use of alliteration in the concluding line of the passage displays the spontaneity and informal style characteristic of Radhakrishnan's lectures as well as his familiarity with the concept at an everyday level. The syntax used in the sentence is in the form of a proclamation, an assertion of positive hope that the future of religion and philosophy will have a new beginning from its ancient but living past tradition.

The modern challenge to religion comes from various quarters, important amongst these being natural science, comparative religion and politics. These "new forces" operate in the world and have made it a different place. Radhakrishnan uses the adjective 'strict' to define the empirical nature of scientific study which is based on observation and verification and seeks to accept only proven information, "The strict method of science requires us to believe a proposition only when we are in a position to prove it" (12). Modern science also proposes that individuals should believe only scientifically established facts and Radhakrishnan harnesses the rhetorical device allusion to substantiate this viewpoint: "Religion, on the other hand, consists according to Freud, "of certain dogmas, assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell us something that one has not oneself discovered and which claim that one should give them credence" (12). This proposition comes in direct conflict with Radhakrishnan's belief and he challenges it by delineating the nature of religion which is a dogmatic entity where the belief system is not discovered by the self but has been handed down through antiquity and needs acceptability. He argues that just like the antiquated nature of religion the theories of science have also been handed down by the earlier ones. The present condition of the free spirit of enquiry is responsible for the creation of unrest with its insistence on new knowledge as opposed to traditional knowledge. He advocates the need of prophetic insight, an intuitive vision, as a way out of this state of crisis. It is a creative energy which can help focus the confusion prevalent in society and set it on the proper path. This is possible through the prophetic insight of the seers who have clarity of vision and sense of order as a result of their intuitive insight which is *dr̥ṣṭi* or vision. Radhakrishnan tries to draw a comparison here between the

scientific temper and the unquestioned acceptance of religious belief. He, thus, prepares the ground to present the dichotomy between the inductive methods of scientific reasoning as opposed to the deductive nature of intuitive beliefs.

Radhakrishnan does not conform to the ideas promoted by new knowledge on “traditional beliefs” which he labels as intellectual snobbery aimed at ridiculing religion and uses an antithesis to show its apparent absurdity to him, “To care for religion is to be old-fashioned; to be critical of it is to be in the movement” (Idealist 38). In dealing with the modern challenge to religion, Radhakrishnan traces the development of the scientific temper over the centuries and concludes that the new knowledge makes people sceptical and critical of old values. He is of the opinion that this occurs due to the imperfect nature of people’s education as a result of which they reject everything which they cannot comprehend or understand and enter into the realm of “scepticism.” He appeals to the right thinking “original men of understanding” to show the correct path to the wandering masses. The informal tone of the orator to connect with the audience is clearly discernible here and, although, Radhakrishnan consciously maintains a formal tone while writing prose but on certain occasions, like at this point, his speech reveals a poetic tendency. He thus concludes the first chapter with the use of the rhetorical devices of anaphora, parataxis, alliteration and climax (sāra): “Prophecy is insight. It is vision. It is anticipating experience. It is seeing the present so fully as to foresee the future” (39). The tendency to define prophecy as ‘insight’ and ‘vision’ comes from the Indian philosophical terminology which identifies philosophy as darśana from the root dṛś, which means to see. Radhakrishnan, thus, maintains that philosophical insight is an enabling process which is an aid for humanity to live in the present in an idealistic manner so that the future may be taken care of and secured. The repetition of the pronoun “it” lays stress on the importance of this faculty which is essentially intuitive in nature. The repetition of the consonant sound /f/ introduces alliteration and emphasises on the element of hope for a better future which Radhakrishnan wishes to ensure in society through better understanding of the present. The parataxis slowly evolves into a climax as may be seen in the gradual increase in each sentence which shows the nature of the intuitive faculty. It also reveals an unusual display of excitement in Radhakrishnan’s attempt to persuade the audience.

The substitutes for religion in the modern world, according to Radhakrishnan, are naturalistic atheism, agnosticism, scepticism, humanism, pragmatism, modernism and authoritarianism. Radhakrishnan analyses each of these substitutes through cogent use of language and, in doing so, also alludes to Western theology, saints, philosophers and litterateurs for better communication with his audience. Radhakrishnan speaks of the positive and negative characteristics of the world which at times confuse people and lead them to adopt an atheistic attitude. He uses the rhetorical device antithesis (virodha) to explain the inevitability of both features of the world, “That the world is not a pleasure garden, but is full of pain and suffering, is not a new discovery” (Idealist 44). The antithesis stresses on the triumphs and travails which have always formed a part of the cosmic world. Where there is pleasure, pain will follow or vice-versa. The misconception of man to acknowledge pleasure and happiness as synonymous leads to suffering. Radhakrishnan insists that this is a “lower level” of existence and man needs to overcome it through the pursuit of truth. He alludes to Bertrand Russell’s views on atheism, “Russell tells us that fear is the source of all religion” (45). He sees religion as a ‘disease’ which breeds fear and contempt in society and incites men to kill each other. The reason of this fear according to Radhakrishnan may be attributed to the dualistic nature of religion which crept in with the advancement of critical thinking and was not a part of the nature of primitive man. The early man lived in harmony with nature and had a good understanding of it and a correct understanding of religion is critical for the elimination of fear. Radhakrishnan makes use of a prozeugma (ādi/kāraka dīpaka) to explain and refute this charge: “Religion tries to remove fear, give us fearlessness, by restoring the lost unity between man and nature, the sense of communion with the All” (45). He uses the word ‘religion’ as the yoking word right in the beginning of the sentence to make an emphatic statement. Religion according to Radhakrishnan is a binding force which restores harmony and is also the bridge between man and nature. He interprets the statement made by Russell as a lack of understanding between man and the forces of nature prevalent around him. The critical nature of modern thinking enables man to construe a duality between the self and the universe, a faculty which was missing in man’s primitive ancestors who could, therefore, live in a “vital unself-conscious” unison with nature. The complete surrender to the world around and the absence of needless inquiry ensured a free and fearless living. The dichotomy of modern thought processes, according to Radhakrishnan, is the source of all fear.

Radhakrishnan uses a paradox to define modernism as, “an attitude of mind which is very ancient and is to be met with in all religions” (58). The paradox attempts to establish that every age is faced with the problem of reconciling or revising old precepts with new ones and their age was no different. This tendency towards modernism is also visible in all religions of the world. He makes use of parataxis to highlight the way in which this attitude is reflected in Christianity during different time periods: “The Jesus of the Gospels is different from the Jewish Messiah, the Greek Logos, or the Protestant Christ. The Jesus of the twentieth century bears the marks of Jewish piety, Greek philosophy, Roman legalism, German realism, and French logic” (58). The use of parataxis makes abundantly clear that the conception of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels is strikingly

different from other representations of him. In addition to this, the Jesus of the twentieth century is a combination of several different thought systems. The idea and the person have both evolved. The independent clauses set apart the chief features of Jesus as Messiah and the later images were superimposed through the interpretations of philosophy, realism and logic. The omission of conjunctions by Radhakrishnan also corresponds with an asyndeton to produce an extemporaneous effect and suggests the effortlessness of his thought. It also assures a smooth flow of ideas which is necessary for putting the thoughts across effectively. By this useful allusion to Jesus, Radhakrishnan is able to stress on the need for reinterpretation of what is 'permanent' in religion from whatever is 'transitory' for modern use and questions the modernist analysis of religion. Radhakrishnan once again employs parataxis to elucidate this, "Dogmas are reduced to myths, miracles to legends, sacraments to symbols and sacred books to literature" (58). The modernist interpretation of religion thus takes away its essential spirit and distinctiveness. Therefore, Radhakrishnan feels that the modern interpretation is inadequate and indifferent in itself and he describes their position with the phrase "half-way house" to describe them. The epithet 'half-way' locates them between the naturalists and the traditionalists in religious thought.

At the time when Radhakrishnan delivered the "Hibbert Lectures" from 1929 to 1930 the Western world, especially Europe, was still in a state of relative unease and intellectual turmoil. In conclusion, Radhakrishnan uses the rhetorical device of allusion to refer to Plato's "synoptic vision" and the Hindu thinkers "samanvaya" to affirm the function of idealistic philosophy, "which will free the spirit of religion from the disintegrations of doubt and make the warfare of creeds and sects a thing of the past" (65). Radhakrishnan uses the allusion to Plato and the Hindu thinkers to validate his opinion and clarify his stance. He is optimistic in his belief that in the coming time philosophy will liberate religion from the doubts and uncertainties of the age. In mentioning 'the warfare of creeds and sects,' he also makes an oblique reference, a vakrokti, to the First World War and to the different conflicting sects that had arisen as substitutes for religion.

In a speech delivered at the All-India Oriental Conference at Annamalai University on the 26th of December, 1955, Radhakrishnan spoke on the topic "Indian Religious Thought and Modern Civilisation." In this speech he talks about **the nature of ideas** through a detailed description of the attributes and significant characteristics associated with them. In doing so he makes use of various rhetorical devices, which are

exemplum, personification, anaphora and parataxis:

The constructive ideas on which civilization is built are conventionally traced to this or that country, Greece or Rome, China or India. There is an old Talmudic saying—The rabbis ask, why was the Law given in the wilderness, and the answer is given: In order that no one country could claim proprietary rights over it. This is true of all ideas. They are by nature universal. They may arise in individuals and may develop their power through communities. But we cannot speak of them as belonging to this person or that community. This would be to violate their character as ideas. Ideas are not dead things. They have hands and feet. They are alive and challenging. They are charged with power. Their action is unpredictable. (318)

Radhakrishnan begins the description of ideas with a positive affirmation and calls ideas "constructive." He quotes an example from the Talmud about the origin of the Law and applies it to ideas also. He says that just as the Law is universal and no one can stake a claim over them, similarly ideas also bear no mark of ownership and could belong anywhere, to anyone.

IV. CONCLUSION

The discussion above analysed Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's views on the concept of idealism and studied Radhakrishnan's use of Indian alamkāras and the English rhetorical devices. The publication of *An Idealist View of Life* later in his career also won him considerable acclaim for the clear exposition of abstract ideas through a creative use of language. As a philosopher, interpreter, and later as the President, he maintains a decorum in his prose which remains the same in the speeches and public addresses as well. He maintains overall balance and equipoise through the use of rhetorical devices in his oratory, just as is characteristic of his prose.

Radhakrishnan has made considerable use of the English rhetorical devices (schemes and tropes) of antithesis, anaphora, alliteration, allusion, aphorism, asyndeton, climax, parataxis, exemplum, asyndeton, epigram, epithet, juxtaposition, climax, prozeugma, hypophora, rhetorical question, oxymoron, metaphor, personification and paradox. The schemes are used of balance and symmetry. Tropes which suggest comparison like personification and reification are used more by Radhakrishnan as these are suitable for explaining abstract concepts and cannot be explained in the normal language. The trope epithet has also been used efficiently and abundantly by Radhakrishnan as this assists him in qualifying his ideas with appropriate adjectives. The use of suitable epithets is visible in his writings and speeches throughout and is integral to his style. From the Indian Alamkāraśāstra the rhetorical devices, alamkāras, which form close parallels with the English rhetorical devices, are hetu, vakrokti virodha, anuprāsa, upādhi, praśna, uttara, sāra, sūtra, dr̥ṣṭānta, rūpaka, virodha and are used for comparison, description and association.

Most of Radhakrishnan's writings are modified lectures and speeches delivered on formal occasions and are, therefore, adaptations of the oral mode. Radhakrishnan's medium of writing and speaking is the English language, but the choice of words and the images are in the Indian idiom and seek to represent the Indian thought. The synthesis sought and wrought is not so much of the philosophies of the East and the West, but of one's idea and the other's language.

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