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MATILAL, Bimal Krishna (1935–91)

Bimal Matilal was born in Joynagar, West Bengal, India and died in Oxford in June 1991. He was educated at Islamia College and Sanskrit College, and then at the University of
Calcutta, where he gained the traditional Tarkatirtha, 'Master of Dialectic', degree. He was appointed lecturer in Sanskrit at Presidency College, Calcutta in 1957. From 1962 to 1965 he was at Harvard University, where he was awarded his PhD. He was Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Toronto from 1965 to 1976. During this professorship he held visiting appointments at the University of Pennsylvania, and the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. He became founder editor of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* in 1970. In 1976 he was appointed Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics in the University of Oxford, and fellow of All Souls.

Matilal was a leading exponent of Indian logic and epistemology, and of the role of philosophy in classical Indian society. Other concerns of his were the deconstruction of Western perceptions of Indian philosophy and an examination of the thinking that had informed Indian intellectuals such as Radhakrishnan. His philosophy drew on grammatical literature, the epics, dharmastras, medical literature, poetics and literary criticism. His *Ethics and Epics* (2000) sought to uncover the moral theorizing implicit in the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Matilal's eclecticism had methodological motivations. He held that only through a comprehensive study of literature can one discover the mechanisms of the internal criticism to which a dynamic culture necessarily subjects itself. Indian philosophy had been misconstrued as predominantly spiritual, mystical and intuitive, and Matilal's method, in counteraction to the Orientalists, was to examine the relationship between contemporary and classical philosophy. Subsequently, he was criticized for over-dependence on contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. However, he saw his work as a necessary corrective to the view of Indian philosophers as irrational mystics (*Perception*, pp. 4, 5). More importantly, he believed that by relating current thinking to tradition, new insights could be developed from the epistemes of the indigenous systems. An example of this is the epistemology of testimony, where the Indian discussions have a real prospect of informing contemporary debates. A co-edited book, *Knowing from Words*, and writings of his students on *Sabda-Pramana* are impressive illustrations of the sort of philosophical 'interconnecting' Matilal sought.

Another example is his defence of a form of direct realism in his *Perception* (1986). The common sense realism of the Nyāya philosophers asserts that we do indeed see the objects we take ourselves to see, that those objects exist by having parts without being merely the sum of their parts, and that they fall into objective, natural categories, by dint of the disclosure of real universals inherent in their constitution. Thus, we see a 'red patch' (substantial ground) and thence relate *qualities* of 'hotness', 'roundness', 'pepperness' to it. The resultant percept is non-partite, meaning the whole is greater than the all the parts. Matilal's defence of this theory is anchored on the unique formulation of objectivity. To be objective is to be independent of minds. Being 'mind-dependent', however, need not mean being a private, intentional object in the way that sense-data and other purely phenomenal entities are. It can mean simply having a mental event as a causal condition, an event on whose continuing existence the object depends. Although illusory, for instance, the blueness of the sky and the ellipticality of the disc are objective in the sense that they are not purely private objects of sensation, but are produced and shared by the perception of any observer located in the appropriate position. This is a softer realism than that to which sceptics are committed, according to which objects can exist independently of anyone's capacity to know they exist.

Matilal was a rare kind of thinker, a philosopher of sensibility who embodied East and West in balanced proportions and who demonstrated that Indian thought, even in its most metaphysical and soteriological concerns, was rigorously analytical and logical as well as discursive. His work has found broad endorsement.
and inspired lively debate not only among many contemporary Indian philosophers and Indologists, but also in international philosophical circles.

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Purushottama Bilimoria, with Jonardon Ganeri and J.N. Mohanty