Two Marxist Perspectives on the Buddha:
Rahul Sankrityayan and Debiprasad Chattopadhyay

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Following the revival of classical Indian philosophy in colonial times, Indian Marxism zoned in on Buddha and his philosophy and celebrated it as a breakthrough when seen through the classical Marxist perspective. This perspective towards Buddhist philosophy was split into two modes – the first driven by a materialist conception of history, and the second by dialectical materialism. Even as there is no opposition between these two perspectives, the distinction between them separates the two approaches to Buddhism. This paper explores two major Marxist philosophers, Rahul Sankrityayan and Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, and their Marxist analysis of Buddhist philosophy. It will be argued that they represent the two approaches of Marxism towards Buddhism.

Two Marxist Perspectives on Buddha

Human activity is driven by human interest – be it personal, political, social or ideological. The revival of Indian philosophy in the 19th and 20th centuries in general and Buddhism in particular is not an exception to this rule. A close reading reveals the common elements in this revival, and that every modern philosopher, school and thinker had appropriated classical Indian philosophy according to their modern political, social or ideological interest. For instance, Gandhi's appropriation of Vedanta, Tilak's celebration of Gita, and Ambedkar's revival of

Buddhism were all driven by modern political interests. Even the Indian Marxist philosophy is not different; it was influenced by official Marxist philosophy of the Soviet Union, which perceived philosophy as contained within the dichotomy of idealism and materialism and explained the entire philosophical corpus created by humanity in the dogma of either historical or dialectical materialism. The result of the latter understanding was a search for a local ideological or political ally for Marxist philosophy, while the former tended to explain the field of philosophy with reference to a 'master field' of either Economy or History. For instance, from the Greek philosophical tradition, it was the philosophy of Heraclitus and Democritus that was celebrated by the Marxist philosophical school as a revolutionary philosophy. In the same manner, Indian Marxism celebrated the philosophy of Lokayata and Buddha because of their materialist and dialectical outlook respectively and because of their anti-idealist philosophy as compared to the Veda and the Upanishads. Indeed, it is a fact that the Lokayata and Buddhist philosophy emerged as heterodox schools of thought in the 6th century BCE, but despite their common anti-Vedic stance, the two schools were critical of each other. The historical materialist interpretation, as a tendency within Marxism itself, may be understood separately from such formulations. It looks at the totality of a social formation – the peaks of its civilizational achievements as well as its crimes against its own members and outsiders – to understand how life was reproduced and reorganized within it, and places products of that society in relation to this totality.

This paper tries to explore this opposition via the philosophy of two proponents of Indian Marxist philosophy that is, Rahul Sankrityayan and Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, and their analyses of Buddhism and Lokayata philosophies.

Method:

Indian philosophy has its own methods and distinctions of writing history and conducting debate with the other schools. The first philosophical distinction is between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. In Sanskrit and vernacular languages, it is nastika darshan and astika darshan respectively. In the Indian philosophical

tradition, nastika - often misunderstood as meaning atheism - denotes a rejection of the authority of the *Veda*. This includes schools such as *Carvaka*, Jain and Buddhist. Similarly, *astika* does not mean theist, rather it denotes philosophies that accept the authority of the *Veda*, like the *Upanishads, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya-Vaisheshika, Purava Mimamsa, Uttara Mimamsa.*

Besides this rigid distinction, there is a fluid methodical distinction that is made between philosophical schools and their views, expressed as a rhetorical dichotomy of *purvapaksha* and uttarapaksha. In this method, the philosopher first puts forth the views of the opponent school(s) in a section that is referred to as *purvapaksha*; and then the philosopher presents his refutation of the opponent's view in a section called *uttarapaksha*. For example, if I am a Buddhist philosopher, then to assert my own philosophical position, first I will put forth the views of my opponent's philosophical school (ideally) without distorting or diluting them. After that, I will refute their school of thought logically, bring out their shortcomings and put forth my philosophical argument as a more comprehensive alternative to the opponent's thought. This method is not just used against one opponent but rather against many opponents at the same time. For instance, in Chattopadhyay's *Indian Philosophy: General Introduction*, he is defending the materialist philosophy of Lokayata; but to defend or assert the Lokayata philosophy – the *uttarapaksha* – Chattopadhyay forms his purvapaksha by describing the Vedas, Upanishads, Mimanska, Vedanta, Samkhya-Yoga, Buddha and early Buddhism, Jain, Later Buddhism, Nyaya-Vaisheshika, and only then places Lokayata as *uttarapaksha*. According to Chattopadhyay, the Vedas are the prime opponent of Indian materialism and philosophies like Nyaya-Vaisheshka are allies to Vedic philosophy, while Buddhist philosophy is neither the most extreme opponent nor an ally of Indian materialism (Chattopadhyay 2010).

Chattopadhyay also uses this method of *purvapaksha* and *uttarapaksha* in his *What is Living and What is Dead in Indian Philosophy* (2010). But in addition to this, he makes use of the Marxist dichotomy of idealism versus materialism. So, the *purvapaksha* is Indian idealism that includes Veda, Upanishads, Buddhism and Vedanta. The uttarapaksha are Nyaya-Vaisheshka, Samkhya and Lokayata. The early Buddhist philosophy is conceived neither as idealism nor as materialism, but it is discussed as dialectics (Chattopadhyay 2010).

This distinction of Indian philosophy as being an opposition of idealism and materialism is an attempt to search for a materialist ally in Indian philosophy, making use of the correspondence theory of base and superstructure in order to discern revolutionary agencies in the base. This distinction is problematic for many reasons, among which I am just pointing out one important aspect. Every one of these philosophical schools is known for a particular philosophical aspect, a specific advancement in one of the subfields of philosophy – for example, the Samkhya philosophy is known for its dualist metaphysics, Nyaya for logic, and Vaisheshika for its metaphysics of seven categories – and the defence of the primacy of matter against immaterial perversions, as vulgar materialism may be described, is not especially a concern of these schools. Calling them materialist is something like calling Plato a Communist philosopher simply because he rejected private property in the Republic! Secondly, every school has its own historical role in the sense that every philosophy tries to defend some contemporary movement, and this distinction inverts the relationship between the movement and its philosophical expression by first searching for an acceptable philosophy and then allying with the movement it represents. This creates some serious issues to which we will return. Lastly, even if we accept this double-basket of idealism and materialism, the question remains to what extent is the so-called Indian materialism close to the materialism of Marx and Marxism? Since this question is not the central issue of this paper, we can for the time being let it remain as an important question that needs addressal.

In Sankrityayan's analysis of Indian Marxism, we do not come across such a distinction of idealism and materialism, nor is there a desire to search for an ally in Indian philosophy. In his दर्शन दिग्दर्शन (Sankrityayan 2010), he does not use the dichotomy of *purvapaksha* and *uttarapaksha* or that of idealism and materialism. Instead, he provides a combination of a history of Indian Philosophy in a linear chronological exposition and a discussion on the formation of the schools of thought – from the Vedas till Buddha he gives the account of the history of Indian philosophy in a linear way, and then he divides the remaining schools as theist and atheist. For Sankrityayan, the atheist schools and philosophies are Lokayata and their materialism, schools of Buddhism and their non-materialism, Vaisheshika and their defence of atom, Jainism and their *anekantvad*, and lastly Mimamska and their defence of testimony or text; and the theist schools are Nyaya, Yoga,

and Vedanta of Badrayana. Besides this distinction, he employs the category of 'developed' or 'advanced' schools of Indian philosophy, in which he includes the Later Buddhism and the Vedanta of Gaudapada and Sankara.
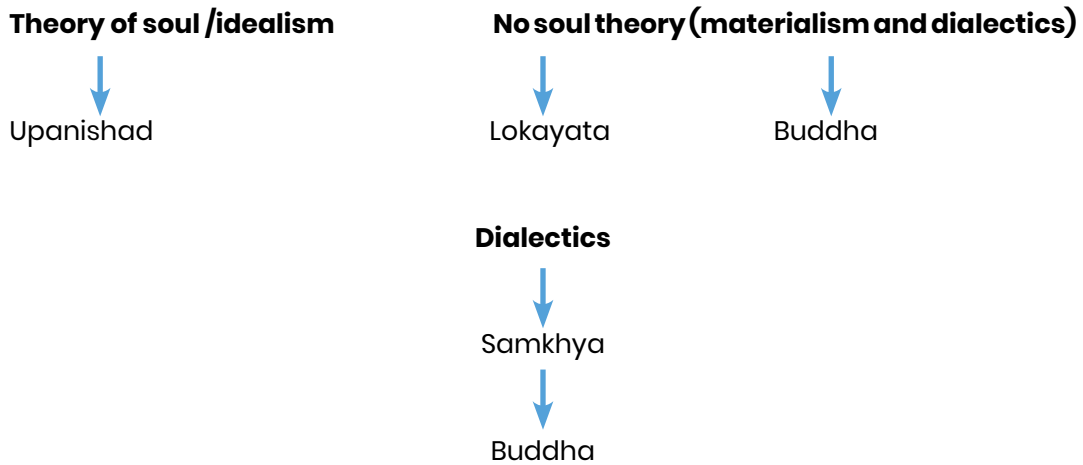
We can see here that Sankrityayan does not use the Orthodox Marxist distinction of philosophy into idealism and materialism, nor does he use the classical Indian debate of *purvapaksha* and *uttarapaksha*. Lastly, both the Marxist philosophers reject the classical distinction of Indian philosophy into heterodoxy and orthodoxy.

Situating Buddha, Philosophically & Historically:

Buddha remains the most important radical philosopher in the history of Indian philosophy. Historically speaking, Buddha was the culmination of an independent heretical and philosophical movement which emerged in the 5th and 6th century BCE against the Vedas and the Upanishads. Philosophically speaking, he provided the highest expression of the ontological question raised by the Upanishads, particularly the question of self and the status of things. Every philosopher and philosophical school is a continuation and at the same time a negation of their predecessors; their philosophical question is an answer to their historical period, and Buddha is not an exception to this.

According to Chattopadhyay, the Upanishads' theory of soul or *atman* is the thesis or *purvapaksha*, and there are two rejections of this theory of the soul provided by Lokayata (representing the materialist outlook) and Buddha (the dialectical outlook). Ajita Keshkambal, the founding figure of Lokayata philosophy, rejected the theory of soul from Upanishads and propagated his materialist theory that is, *bhutchaitanyavada* (the theory that consciousness arises from matter) before Buddha. But though Buddha is an ally of Ajita against Upanishads, what is the relation between Ajita's materialism and Buddha's philosophy? But before exploring this question, we must discern the philosophical roots of Buddha's dialectics. Following Stcherbastky, Chattopadhyay argues that the theory of universal flux is pre-Buddhist in origin and can be found in Samkhya philosophy. One of Buddha's teachers was a Samkhya scholar as well. On this

basis, Chattopadhyay argues that Buddha's theory is a reaction against the dialectics of the Samkhya School (Chattopadhyay 2010, 500)

Theory of soul /idealism   **No soul theory (materialism and dialectics)**

Upanishad   Lokayata   Buddha

Dialectics

Samkhya

Buddha

According to Chattopadhyay, against the idealism of Upanishads, we have two parallel opponents in the forms of materialism and dialectics, among which the dialectical outlook is the continuation and negation of Samkhya philosophy (Chattopadhyay 2010, 500). In this formulation, Chattopadhyay presumes that there is no philosophical conflict between materialism and dialectics, and that they are allies by virtue of opposing idealism – he uncritically uses a pre-dialectical logical formula pertaining to identity, as if to say the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Against such mechanical understanding, we can place Sankrityayan's view on Buddha and his relation with his predecessors. Sankrityayan acknowledges the fact that, after the renunciation, Siddharth learned some yoga from Alara Kalama and later from Uddaka Ramaputta (Sankrityayan 2012, 18). So, there is no trace of dialectical continuation through rejection of Samkhya philosophy in Sankrityayan's Buddha. Instead of searching for the philosophical roots of Buddha in Samkhya philosophy, Sankrityayan places Buddha in a different dialectical schema:

 "Thesis: theory of self - Upanishads

Antithesis: no-self - Lokayata materialism

Synthesis: no-self theory - non-materialism of Buddha" (Sankrityayan 2012, 49).

Thus, for Sankrityayan, Buddha's non-materialist no-self theory is a negation of negation; the first negation being that of the theory of self, and the second negation that of the materialist theory of no-self.

While explaining Buddha's view on *anatmavada* (no-self theory), Sankrityayan elaborates upon the two types of negation. Buddha says there are two kinds of *atmavadin* (आत्मवादी) – those who identify *atman* with the body and those who recognize *atman* as a non-material entity. Buddha also argues that those who propagate the theory of self (*atmavad*) also believe that the *atman* is either finite or infinite; those who identify the soul with the body consider the self to be continual (नित्य) and those who believe atman is a non-body entity consider it to be momentary (अनित्य) (Sankrityayan 2012, 33). For Buddha, those who believe that this soul is the subject which experiences everything, the one who experiences the good and bad deeds and is static, stable, unchangeable – such people are silly (Sankrityayan 2012, 34).

Like Carvaka, Buddha is an opponent of theory of self, but he does not accept the materialist view that body is soul or that consciousness arises from matter, and therefore the Buddhist theory of no self (अनात्मवाद) is a negation of negation. Chattopadhyay argues that Buddha's negation of the theory of self (आत्मवाद) is dialectical in nature because Buddha's ontology stands for momentariness (Chattopadhyay 2010, 495), but Sankrityayan points out that Buddha used his ontological position against the materialist conception of self as well. Sankrityayan provides a more rigorous Marxist outlook towards Buddha compared to Chattopadhyaya's theory of two opponents of Upanishads.

Buddha developed his non-materialism as against the mythical Lokayta king Payasi. This king was known for his proto-materialism and empiricism. He developed his proto empiricism against rebirth, life after death and Vedic rituals. In support of his philosophy, Payasi asks three different questions to one of the disciples of Buddha: 1. Those who are dead never come back and tell us that there is another world, then how do we know there is another world? 2. Why are those who perform good deeds and live a life of goodness for the sake of heaven afraid of death, or why are they not desiring death? 3. If there is a soul in the body, then

after death the body weight should get reduced; if we closely examine the body post-mortem, we do not find the soul (Sankrityayan 2012, 36).

Against this empiricist materialism, Buddha argues that if one believes that the body and soul is one and the same, then that person will not lead a life of monkhood, or even if someone believes that the self is different from the body, then too one cannot lead the path monkhood (Sankrityayan 2012, 36). This is how Buddha justifies himself as अनात्म अभौतिकवादी (no-self non-materialist).

What happens when you use dialectics in society?

Chattopadhyay in his *Indian Philosophy* (2010) argued that Buddha came up with his theory of suffering mainly against the new historical and political changes which were taking place before his eyes – that is the fall of जनपद (proto-democratic state) and the rise of महाजनपद (centralise state) (2010, 128). This transformation of political power had created unrest and suffering in the life of people, and they lost the equality and freedom which they enjoyed in their previous lifestyle. Chattopadhyay argued that Buddha remained an admirer of the old political system throughout his life and had experienced the persecution of his own Shakya clan by the hands of the Kosal prince. Besides, Buddha had witnessed Ajatashatru's attack on the Vajji clan (Ibid.) These socio-political events and a resultant desire for the political and economic power which was prevalent in society had provoked Buddha to come up with his theory of suffering, with which he tried to provide a palliative remedy to the troubles which existed in society (Chattopadhyay 2010, 519). Chattopadhyay argues that Buddha used his philosophy and *sangha* to reestablish the lost political system of the proto-republic state (2010, 30). For Chattopadhyay, this revival of democratic life in the form of *sangha* was the embryo of a classless society in a class-based society; in this regard, Chattopadhyay also argued that the Buddhist *sangha* was the opium of the people (2010, 131).

With this argument, Chattopadhyay projects Buddha as a revivalist or a defender of primitive communism. He accepted the historical limitations of Buddha, but

he argued that Buddha stood against private property and caste (2010, 519). The rejection of private property is double-pronged. First, there is a moral rejection as private property creates the mental state of longing – clinging and attachment leads to suffering, and we should reject private property. Since everything is in a state of flux, there is no static self on one hand and on the other, there are no stable objects as well; this eternal instability laid bare the foolishness of running behind private property (Ibid.) In accordance with the theory of dependent origination, the rejection of private property is similar to the rejection of soul and personality (Chattopadhyay 2010, 523). In a similar manner, Buddha used his theory of dependent origination on the question of caste and argued that like everything else in the universe, the caste-oriented society comes into being only under specific conditions and hence it is destined to pass away (Chattopadhyay 2010, 225). By focussing on these two points, Chattopadhyay argues that Buddha's project was to eradicate the social evils with the help of his ontological theory and provided the *sangha* system where people can live equally without any attachment towards personality, soul, private property, and caste (2010, 532).

In short, one can say that for Chattopadhyay, Buddha's was a revisionist project towards a proto-egalitarian state which was based on freedom and equality and Buddha formalizes this project in the form of *sangha*. For Sankrityayan, the Buddha was not a revivalist. He occupied a double and contradictory position – he was at once a progressive as his philosophy and ontology was radical, but in his political practice, he was regressive.

Sankrityayan says that the social conditions before the rise of Buddha were based on the dual exploitation of the people; the Vedic philosophy and its religious rituals, and the kings and their political and economic power (2012, 49). Before the rise of Buddha, the exploited had people forgotten about their classless past, and were under the yoke of religion. In this situation, Sankrityayan argued that the Indian materialist thinkers had tried to liberate the people from their religious consciousness by attacking the theories of rebirth, soul, life after death, and God (2012, 49). But the state and kings were happy with Lokayata philosophy as it tried to retain the general class-based social order, but simultaneously demanded a change in socio-religious conditions (Sankrityayan 2012, 50). Indian materialism therefore had its limitations and was used by the state power for its benefit

(Sankrityayan 2012, 50). According to Sankrityayan, Buddha emerged in a society where the Vedic religion was an ally of state power, and materialism was partly against religious ritualism but was also used by the state power for its own benefit. We can put it as follows:

Thesis: Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy - Brahman (religious power) + Kshatriya (state power)

Antithesis: materialism - critique of ritualistic practice and religion but use by state

Synthesis: Buddha as an emerging radical philosopher

Buddha's philosophy is affirmative in three senses. First, his ontology was itself radically new. Secondly, with the help of this ontology, Buddha preaches the path of progress and overcomes the cry for a lost paradise. Lastly, Buddha treated his philosophy as a means to overcome a certain stage, like a vanishing mediator, and argued for its death after its necessary use (Sankrityayan 2012, 50). Despite this progressive element, there remains the regressive residue in Buddha's philosophy and that is his theory of rebirth (Sankrityayan 2012, 50). The Buddhist ontology, which Sankrityayan defines as discontinuous continuity, continues after the death into the next life. Buddha thus incorporated the theory of rebirth within his own philosophical framework, and he defended the idea of rebirth in the form of a counter-alliance of discontinuous continuity in the next life as well (Sankrityayan 2012, 51). The ontology based on momentariness is useful for explaining the nature of the world, but the deployment of this theory to defend rebirth meant that Buddha retains an approval for the social system (Ibid.)

Thanks to the theory of rebirth, Buddha got support from the state and the contemporary ruling class. Buddha used his philosophy for retaining the social order as it is and did not weaponize it for social change. Buddha's theory was useful for the expansion of the state as well, as he stood against the Varna and caste system but without disturbing the hegemonic economic condition; due to this he was not able to eradicate inequality but still managed to get tremendous support from the lower class as well (Sankrityayan 2012, 52).

Sankrityayan holds that the personal life of Siddhartha coupled with some other social factors were the determining factors in the formation of his theory of suffering, but despite that, the eradication of poverty and inequality was not the program of Buddha's philosophy (Sankrityayan 2012, 53). In this regard, Sankrityayan notes that in the early days, the *sangha* was open to downtrodden people. But after the objection of Mahajanas, Buddha barred the debaters in the *sangha*. After the objection of slave-masters, Buddha denied entry to the slaves; and lastly after the objection of king Bimbisara, Buddha closed the door for foot soldiers (Sankrityayan 2012, 54). So unlike Chattopadhyay's Buddha who was a revivalist, egalitarian and progressive, Sankrityayan's Buddha was progressive in his philosophy but at the same he was also a regressive defender of the existing class formation.

These two Marxist approaches to the question of method and socio-political issues are for us a starting point to see the differences in the Marxist approach over the question of philosophy itself.

Is it even dialectical?

Chattopadhyay used the term 'dialectics' to characterize Buddha's theory of dependent origination. Now it is an obvious fact that one cannot use the word dialectics in its highest form to define the Buddhist philosophy. For example, in Hegel, dialectics is a logical process in one sense and in another, it is a transformation of this process (Bottomore 1999, 144). In its first sense, dialectics is reason (Zeno, Socrates, Plato, et al) and in the second sense, it is a process of the self-generation of reason. The second conception is again divided into ascending dialectics (God or some divine entity) and descending dialectics that its manifestation in the phenomenal world explained (Ibid.) Buddha's ontology lacks the critical ingredient of self-generation. While in Hegel, contradiction is the fundamental life-force which necessitates a recurring self-positing through imitation, reversal, mirroring, inversion and distortion, Buddha's ontology is better characterized by a primacy of temporality over essences. This specific conception of temporary essences is common to Hegel and Buddha, but not sufficient ground to equate

the two philosophies under the category of dialectics. Dialectics has a different aspect of Hegel's philosophy, which deals with the specificities of the paradoxes of change and opposition, and not simply a rejection of static essence, which had already been argued by empiricism before him.

We can also consider the parallel dialectics from Greek philosophy, especially the dialectics of Heraclitus, and in that light, try to analyse Chattopadhyay's argument. Rescher, in his book on dialectics, argued that Heraclitus' dialectics is dual dialectics (Rescher 2007, 8). He writes that "reciprocal accommodation between two opposing forces where the excess of one evokes and ultimately predominately opposition of the other, deserve to be characterised as dialectical" (Rescher 2007, 8). This definition presumes opposite and reciprocal relations between the pair. In the light of this definition, let us examine Chattopadhyay's interpretation of Buddha's theory of dependent origination. "That being thus, This comes to be, from the coming to be of That, arises This. That being absent, this does not happen. From the cessation of That, This ceases" (Chattopadhyay 2010, 505). Chattopadhyay further argues that the formula thus has two aspects – positive and negative. Positivity refers to the 'arising' or coming into being of each and every thing, subject to the presence of some specific condition, or, more properly, the collocation of a number of conditions (*samudaya*). Evidently, such conditions or their collocation can never be something stable or immutable, inasmuch as – according to the same view of causality – they in their turn come into being subject to the conditions of their own. The conditions of something coming into being have themselves to come into being and are thus unstable; hence that which comes into being subject to such unstable conditions is, by its very nature, itself unstable i.e., destined to (*nirodha*) pass out of existence (Chattopadhyay 2010, 505).

In Heraclitus, there are two opposite forces and there is a reciprocal relation between these two opposites, if one force loses its power or balance then automatically the other force becomes predominant. So, there is some static condition within the two opposite things and there is strife as well in these two opposites (Skirbekk and Gilje 2001) and this is how it becomes a dualist dialectic. In Chattopadhyay's interpretation of the theory of dependent origination, the thing which comes into being is by its nature unstable, which is why it passes

in existence. That means the opposite force is not being excessive on the other course and that is why there is no duality or strife here and therefore it is problematic to call it dialectics.

On the other hand, Sankrityayan in his account of the theory of dependent origination does not use the term dialectic for it. He argues that for Buddha the theory of cause is not continuous continuity (Sankrityayan 2012, 29). Instead, he argues that Buddha does not use the word cause (प्रत्यय) as other philosophers have used it i.e. to denote the cause of a known effect. For Buddha, the origination of cause means withering away of cause itself and the origination of something new; so, for Buddha, the cause (प्रत्यय) withers away before the emergence of a new object or event, and therefore for Buddha, the theory of dependent origination is a discontinuous continuity (Sankrityayan 2012, 30).

For Chattopadhyay, things come into being because of *samudaya* and by its nature, it ceases. For Sankrityayan, there isn't any cause for the effect, because the so-called cause or object absolutely ceases and new things come into existence. Therefore, for Sankrityayan, Buddha's ontology is based on discontinuous continuity and for Chattopadhayay, it is continuous continuity. Or one can say that for Chattopadhyay, dialectics is a doctrine which he tries to search for in Buddha's philosophy, and for Sankrityayan, dialectics is a method which he applies to analyse Buddha's philosophy.

Conclusion:

Based on this analysis one can argue that Sankrityayan's interpretation of Buddhism is not driven by Marxist orthodoxy, whereas Chattopadhyay's interpretation is influenced by Marxist orthodoxy. Secondly, in Sankrityayan's interpretation, the drive is not a search for allies in Indian philosophy, whereas Chattopadhyay's project is driven in that direction. Lastly, Chattopadhayay tries to search for dialectics and materialism in Indian tradition, and against that, Sankrityayan interprets Indian philosophy with the help of materialist conception of history and dialectical materialism.

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