

The Concept of Subject and Person in J. N. Mohanty: An Eastern and Western Philosophical Analysis

K. Santiagu mary

St. Joseph's College (Arts & Science) Department of Philosophy

Abstract—The philosophical understanding of man has remained one of the central concerns of both Indian and Western traditions. Jitendra Nath Mohanty, one of the most distinguished contemporary Indian philosophers, offers a profound comparative interpretation of the concepts of self, subject, and person through the lenses of phenomenology, Indian philosophy, and existential thought. This paper examines Mohanty's understanding of the human person by analysing his interpretation of Atman, subjectivity, personhood, consciousness, and human existence. Mohanty attempts to bridge Eastern and Western philosophical traditions by demonstrating that Indian philosophy gives primacy to the concept of the pure subject or witness-consciousness, while Western philosophy emphasizes the person as an active historical and social being. The paper explores Mohanty's reflections on the Upanishads, existentialism, phenomenology, and the distinction between subject and person. It further investigates the philosophical implications of Mohanty's comparative methodology and his contribution to phenomenological anthropology. Through this analysis, the paper argues that Mohanty presents a holistic understanding of man as a psychobodily, intellectual, moral, and transcendental being. The study also highlights Mohanty's humanistic vision, which emphasizes freedom, responsibility, knowledge, spirituality, and moral concern for others.

Index Terms—J. N. Mohanty, Atman, Subject, Person, Self, Consciousness, Phenomenology, Indian Philosophy, Existentialism, Humanism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of man has occupied a central position in both Indian and Western philosophical traditions. Philosophers have continuously attempted to understand the meaning of human existence, consciousness, selfhood, freedom, and the relation between the individual and the world. In contemporary Indian philosophy, Jitendra Nath Mohanty occupies a

unique place because of his ability to interpret Indian thought through phenomenological and comparative methods. His philosophical reflections on subjectivity, selfhood, and personhood provide a significant contribution to philosophical anthropology.

Mohanty's philosophical inquiry does not merely compare Eastern and Western thought superficially. Rather, he attempts to identify the methodological foundations and ontological assumptions underlying these traditions. His works reveal that Indian philosophy primarily emphasizes the notion of the witness-consciousness or pure subject, whereas Western philosophy gives greater importance to the concrete historical person living within a social and moral world.

To understand Mohanty's philosophy of man, it is essential to recognize that he does not consider man merely as a biological organism or a rational thinker. According to him, man is an existent whose essence lies in existence itself. Human existence includes bodily, psychological, intellectual, moral, social, and transcendental dimensions. Thus, the understanding of man requires an integration of empirical and transcendental perspectives.

Mohanty's comparative philosophical project gains importance in the context of contemporary philosophical discourse because it opens a dialogue between phenomenology, existentialism, Vedanta, Nyaya, and other systems of thought. His analysis of the concepts of subject and person especially provides a new way of understanding the relation between consciousness and action, knowledge and morality, individuality and universality.

This paper aims to study Mohanty's understanding of subject and person in Indian and Western philosophy. It also seeks to examine his interpretation of Atman, his critique of Heidegger's characterization of

Western metaphysics, and his comparative analysis of Indian and Western views of human existence.

II. J. N. MOHANTY: LIFE AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Jitendra Nath Mohanty was one of the foremost philosophers of modern India. Born in Cuttack, Odisha, Mohanty emerged as an important thinker whose works contributed significantly to phenomenology, comparative philosophy, and Indian philosophical studies. His philosophical career developed through his deep engagement with both Indian traditions and Western philosophical movements, particularly phenomenology.

Mohanty's intellectual formation was influenced by his early interest in mathematics and Sanskrit. These disciplines helped him cultivate logical precision and sensitivity to linguistic and conceptual analysis. During his student life at Presidency College, Calcutta, he was influenced by the Indian national movement and was deeply affected by communal violence during the British period. These experiences shaped his concern for humanity, ethical responsibility, and the philosophical understanding of man.

Among the philosophers who influenced Mohanty were Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, and Indian thinkers such as Kalidas Bhattacharyya and Rasvihari Das. Mohanty admired phenomenology because it provided a method for examining lived experience without reducing human consciousness to mere objectivity. At the same time, he remained rooted in Indian philosophical traditions, especially Vedanta and Navya Nyaya.

Mohanty criticized simplistic oppositions between Indian and Western philosophy. He argued that Indian philosophy should not merely be interpreted as mystical and non-rational while Western philosophy should not be reduced to objectifying rationalism. Instead, he insisted that both traditions possess rich and diverse approaches to reality, consciousness, and existence.

His philosophical writings reveal a continuous attempt to create a dialogue between Eastern and Western traditions without subordinating one to the other. This comparative approach is especially visible in his analysis of subjectivity, personhood, and the nature of self.

The Concept of Man in Mohanty's Philosophy

According to Mohanty, man is not merely a biological organism or a rational entity. Human existence includes multiple dimensions such as body, mind, intellect, morality, consciousness, and spirituality. Man is both empirical and transcendental. This means that human existence cannot be reduced either to material existence alone or to pure consciousness detached from the world.

Mohanty emphasizes that every layer of human existence reveals a deeper dimension of reality. The material, biological, psychological, and intellectual aspects of man ultimately point toward the deeper reality of Atman. This understanding is rooted in the Upanishadic tradition, where the search for Brahman becomes simultaneously a search for the innermost self.

The Upanishads identify Atman and Brahman as ultimately one reality. Human beings realize this unity not merely through intellectual reasoning but through spiritual realization. Mohanty interprets this philosophical insight phenomenologically by emphasizing lived experience and self-awareness.

In contrast to reductionist approaches, Mohanty presents man as a self-conscious and self-transcending being. Human beings are capable of reflecting upon themselves, understanding others, and moving beyond immediate empirical conditions. Therefore, human existence possesses freedom, intentionality, and transcendence.

Mohanty also engages with existentialist philosophy in order to understand human existence. Existentialist thinkers such as Sartre, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard focus on man as a free and self-creating being. Heidegger describes man as Dasein or being-in-the-world, while Sartre distinguishes between being-for-itself and being-in-itself. Mohanty recognizes the importance of these analyses but also points out that Indian philosophy had already explored questions concerning consciousness, selfhood, and existence long before modern existentialism.

The Concept of Atman

The concept of Atman occupies a central place in Indian philosophy. Mohanty explains that the term Atman should not simply be translated as "soul." Rather, a more appropriate translation would be "self." The Upanishads use the concept of Atman to explore the deepest dimension of human existence.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, several definitions of Atman are presented through references to speech, breath, eye, ear, mind, and heart. Yajnavalkya rejects these limited identifications and explains that these faculties are only supports for the manifestation of Atman. The self is deeper than these empirical functions.

Similarly, the Chandogya Upanishad presents the famous dialogue involving Indra and Virocana seeking knowledge of the self from Prajapati. The self is initially identified with the reflected image seen in water or a mirror, but the inquiry gradually leads toward a deeper understanding of consciousness.

Mohanty argues that the Upanishadic notion of Atman is closely connected with human experience. Human beings encounter themselves as conscious experiencing entities. Although the metaphysical realization of universal Atman may require spiritual insight, ordinary human experience already points toward self-awareness and subjectivity.

Indian philosophical systems developed different interpretations of Atman. Nyaya philosophy considered the self as the knower, enjoyer, and experiencer. The self-possesses cognition, memory, desire, pleasure, and pain. The body and sense organs function as instruments for experience, while the self remains the enduring subject.

Mohanty's interpretation of Atman emphasizes its experiential and phenomenological significance. He rejects purely abstract metaphysical interpretations and instead highlights the self as lived consciousness. The self is not merely an object of theoretical speculation but the very center of experience.

Subject and Person

One of Mohanty's most important philosophical contributions is his distinction between the concepts of subject and person. According to him, these concepts belong to two different dimensions of human existence.

The subject is primarily an epistemological concept. It refers to the "who" of knowledge. The subject is the knower, the conscious witness, and the center of cognition. In the act of knowing, the subject transcends personal interests and becomes capable of objective understanding.

The person, on the other hand, is a practical and moral concept. The person is the "who" of action. A person acts, chooses, desires, suffers, enjoys, and enters into

moral relationships with others. Personhood includes bodily existence, emotions, social relations, and ethical responsibilities.

Mohanty explains that while the subject is universal and detached, the person is concrete and historical. The subject seeks objective truth beyond personal limitations, whereas the person exists within the structures of desire, concern, temporality, and social interaction.

This distinction reflects two attitudes toward reality. In the theoretical attitude, one seeks knowledge objectively and disinterestedly. In the practical attitude, one encounters others as persons within relationships of love, morality, and responsibility.

Mohanty argues that Western philosophy often models the understanding of subjectivity after the concept of person. In contrast, Indian philosophy gives primacy to the pure subject or witness-consciousness. Thus, Western philosophy emphasizes the historical and social dimensions of personhood, whereas Indian thought emphasizes contemplative consciousness.

Mohanty and Existentialism

Mohanty's engagement with existentialism forms an important aspect of his philosophical work. Existentialist philosophers such as Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Kierkegaard attempted to understand human existence as freedom, responsibility, and self-transcendence.

Sartre emphasizes subjectivity and freedom. According to him, man is condemned to be free and must create his own essence through action. Heidegger interprets man as Dasein, a being whose existence is characterized by care, temporality, and being-in-the-world.

Mohanty appreciates existentialism for its concern with human existence and lived experience. However, he also points out that existentialism remains largely centered upon the human individual within historical existence, whereas Indian philosophy often seeks transcendence beyond empirical individuality.

He critiques Heidegger's claim that Western philosophy is fundamentally a metaphysics of subjectivity beginning with Plato and culminating in Nietzsche. Mohanty argues that such a characterization oversimplifies the diversity of Western philosophical traditions.

Furthermore, Mohanty rejects the claim that Indian philosophy is entirely non-objectifying and non-

representational. Indian philosophical traditions include rigorous epistemological and logical systems that engage deeply with questions of knowledge, reality, and consciousness.

Through this comparative analysis, Mohanty demonstrates that neither Indian nor Western philosophy can be reduced to simplistic stereotypes. Both traditions contain multiple approaches to subjectivity, existence, and reality.

Distinction Between Subject and Person

Mohanty's distinction between subject and person becomes clearer when analysed phenomenologically. The epistemological subject is universal and disinterested. Knowledge becomes objective only when the knower transcends personal prejudices and limitations. Thus, the subject is not merely an individual ego but the condition for universal knowledge.

The person, however, exists within concrete historical life. The person acts within social relationships, experiences emotions, makes moral decisions, and pursues goals. The person is characterized by agency and enjoyment.

Mohanty explains that Indian philosophy primarily emphasizes the subject. Knowledge is understood as manifestation or illumination of the object. Even where bodily and mental faculties are involved in cognition, the final purpose of knowledge remains revelation of the object.

Western philosophy, particularly after Descartes, emphasizes personhood and historical existence. Human beings are understood as active participants within social and historical worlds.

According to Mohanty, Indian thought developed a "weak" concept of person because the person was often analysed as a compound of pure consciousness and psycho-physical elements. Western philosophy, by contrast, developed a "strong" concept of person through ideas such as Kant's notion of the end-in-itself, Scheler's concept of the act-center, and Strawson's concept of the subject of predicates.

The distinction between subject and person therefore reflects two fundamentally different philosophical orientations. Indian philosophy seeks transcendental consciousness, whereas Western philosophy seeks historical and social individuality.

Mohanty's Humanism And Philosophical Anthropology

Mohanty's philosophy ultimately leads toward a humanistic understanding of man. His philosophical anthropology integrates intellectual, moral, aesthetic, social, and spiritual dimensions.

For Mohanty, human beings are not isolated individuals. They exist within communities, traditions, and relationships. Human freedom must therefore be connected with responsibility, ethical concern, and social justice.

His phenomenological approach emphasizes lived experience while avoiding reductionism. Human beings are embodied consciousnesses who exist historically and socially while also possessing transcendental dimensions.

Mohanty's humanism values freedom, knowledge, creativity, and moral responsibility. He believes that political freedom and social openness are essential for the development of human personality.

At the same time, he insists that human existence cannot be reduced to materialism or technological rationality. Spirituality, wisdom, beauty, and altruistic concern remain essential dimensions of authentic human life. Thus, Mohanty presents a balanced philosophical anthropology that integrates Eastern spirituality and Western humanism.

Critical Evaluation

Mohanty's philosophical contribution is highly significant for contemporary comparative philosophy. His writings demonstrate extraordinary scholarship in both Indian and Western traditions.

One of his major strengths lies in avoiding simplistic contrasts between East and West. Instead of presenting Indian philosophy as mystical and Western philosophy as rationalistic, he shows the internal diversity and complexity of both traditions.

His distinction between subject and person provides a valuable framework for understanding differences between Indian and Western philosophical methodologies. The emphasis on witness-consciousness in Indian thought and historical personhood in Western thought offers important insights into comparative philosophy.

However, some critics may argue that Mohanty occasionally overgeneralizes Indian and Western traditions. Both traditions contain multiple schools that resist neat categorization.

Nevertheless, his comparative methodology remains extremely valuable because it encourages dialogue rather than opposition between traditions.

Mohanty's phenomenological interpretation of Indian philosophy also opens new possibilities for contemporary philosophical research. By emphasizing lived experience, consciousness, and intentionality, he demonstrates the continuing relevance of Indian philosophical concepts for global philosophical discourse.

III. CONCLUSION

Jitendra Nath Mohanty's philosophy offers a profound comparative understanding of man, selfhood, subjectivity, and personhood. His analysis of Indian and Western philosophical traditions reveals that Indian thought primarily emphasizes the pure subject or witness-consciousness, whereas Western philosophy focuses more upon the concrete historical person.

Through his interpretation of Atman, phenomenology, existentialism, and humanism, Mohanty presents a holistic understanding of human existence. Human beings are not merely biological organisms or rational thinkers. They are conscious, moral, social, and transcendental beings capable of knowledge, freedom, responsibility, and spiritual realization.

Mohanty's distinction between subject and person remains one of his most important contributions to philosophical anthropology. The subject belongs to the sphere of knowledge and universality, while the person belongs to the sphere of action, morality, and historical existence.

His comparative philosophy demonstrates that Eastern and Western traditions should not be viewed as mutually opposed systems but as complementary modes of understanding human existence.

In contemporary times, where questions concerning identity, consciousness, freedom, and human dignity continue to shape philosophical discourse, Mohanty's philosophy remains deeply relevant. His humanistic and phenomenological approach encourages an integrated understanding of man that respects both rational inquiry and spiritual depth.

REFERENCES

- [1] J. N. Mohanty, Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 192.
- [2] J. N. Mohanty, Between Two Worlds: East and West (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 59.
- [3] Bina Gupta, The Empirical and the Transcendental (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 45.
- [4] T. M. P. Mahadevan, Contemporary Indian Philosophy (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1936), 165.
- [5] J. N. Mohanty, The Self and Its Other (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 319.
- [6] M. Hiriyanna, The Essentials of Indian Philosophy (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), 132.
- [7] Wolfhart Pannenberg, What is Man? (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 228.
- [8] J. N. Mohanty, "The Concept of Person in Indian Philosophy," Philosophy East and West 20, no. 4 (1970): 18.
- [9] R. Luther, The Concept of Person in Contemporary Philosophy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 127.
- [10] T. S. Rukmani, A Critical Study of the Bhagavadgita (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1981), 481.
- [11] K. Santiago Mary, "A Comparative Study of Consciousness in Gabriel Marcel and Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat," International Journal of Novel Research and Development 9, no. 3 (2024): b157–b165. (ijnrd.org)
- [12] K. Santiago Mary, "Understanding Alienation: A Marxian Perspective," Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research 11, no. 3 (2024). (jetir.org)
- [13] Gupta, Bina. The Empirical and the Transcendental: A Fusion of Horizons. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001.
- [14] Hiriyanna, M. The Essentials of Indian Philosophy. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956.
- [15] Luther, R. The Concept of Person in Contemporary Philosophy. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977.

- [16] Mahadevan, T. M. P. Contemporary Indian Philosophy. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1936.
- [17] Mohanty, J. N. Between Two Worlds: East and West. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- [18] Mohanty, J. N. Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
- [19] Mohanty, J. N. The Self and Its Other. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- [20] Mohanty, J. N. "The Concept of Person in Indian Philosophy." *Philosophy East and West* 20, no. 4 (1970): 421–432.
- [21] Pannenberg, Wolfhart. What is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.
- [22] Rukmani, T. S. A Critical Study of the Bhagavadgita. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1981.
- [23] Santiagu Mary, K. "A Comparative Study of Consciousness in Gabriel Marcel and Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat." *International Journal of Novel Research and Development* 9, no. 3 (2024): b157–b165. IJNRD Paper
- [24] Santiagu Mary, K. "Understanding Alienation: A Marxian Perspective." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research* 11, no. 3 (2024).