

HINDU DEVOTIONAL MYSTICISM

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It is no new thing to realize the essentially mystical character of very much that is best in Hinduism. But the fact has been presented afresh with peculiar persuasiveness in several books recently published. Of these the most notable have been, of course, the works of Rabindranath Tagore, so pervaded by the delicate charm of the mystic thought of India, so suggestive of its subtlety and tenderness. But lest we should think that we have here only an ornament of life, and not also a source of strength and sanctity, there has come the autobiography of the poet's father, the Maharshi, disclosing the mystical character of his piety. The republication of this book with an introduction by Miss Underhill, the leading interpreter of western mysticism, and, more recently, the appearance of a translation under the joint auspices of Rabindranath Tagore and Miss Underhill of a selection from the poems of Kabīr, have emphasized the kinship of this type of thought in East and West and the preciousness of much that is the common experience and confession of all devout men for whom, whatever the religion they profess, there have been unsealed the hidden fountains. Nothing but great gain can come to the cause of religion and of the coming kingdom of God by these disclosures, showing as they do, often with a wonderful poignancy and beauty, that, if we dig deep enough, 'the root in every man is Christ.' As we see the winds of His Spirit lifting into storm or calming into peace the hearts alike of ancient Indian seekers and of their sons and successors to-day, we receive a new assurance that God can find Himself abundantly in such hearts when once they awake to the great discovery of Him in Christ Jesus.

At the same time we see in Indian mysticism the perils that beset the Indian soul in this high quest, the temptations before which it is too apt to fall. The mystic way is a path, as the Indian sage might say, 'narrow as a razor's edge,' beset with pitfalls, and the mystic vices of the West are not always the same as those which have in the past betrayed the Indian seeker. While Indian mysticism, then, may still form a bridge to bear men's souls to God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, there is that also in it, we shall find, that forms a barrier between Him and them, and of which, if it is He to whose feet they would come, the Indian mystic must beware.

Mysticism in its simplest definition is the endeavour which sets before itself as its goal direct, unmediated union of the soul with God. It is thus religion in its most intense and vital form. It is found everywhere and may break through the crust of the most formal and superstitious worship if only the soul awakes and stirs. But while that is so, there are certain psychological climates in which more than in others it appears to be present and to flourish, growing often with a morbid growth. Such a climate India certainly seems to provide for this mood of mind. Its prevailing monism, on the one hand, and the superstitious belief, on the other, in the power of magic spells have helped to encourage in India, as nowhere else, the quietism and self-hypnotization that are peculiar perils of the mystic. But apart from these exaggerations, against which the theist scarcely need be warned, the fact that for India always God has been recognized far more fully as immanent than as transcendent at once betrays the secret of this widespread mysticism and of much of its peculiar beauty, while at the same time it suggests a lack that we may find in it. For the Indian sages God so fills the universe—they are so vividly aware of Him in all things, near or far ('thou art the dark-blue bee, thou art the green parrot with red eyes, thou art the thunder-cloud, the seasons, the seas')—that union with Him becomes easy, and the

danger may be that it appears to them too easy. One is not conscious in their books of the obstacles in the way, or at least of some very formidable ones, as one is in the Old Testament. It is wholly untrue, of course, to hold, as has been held, that there was no mysticism in the religion of Israel. The Hebrew prophets certainly saw God face to face and knew Him by an immediate intuition. But union with a God realized primarily as transcendent is not easily attained. When God's immanence is the chief thought before the seeker it is in nature rather than in the moral world, or, if in the moral world, then rather in the relationships of natural piety that He is sought and discerned, and there is a grace, a beauty in the vision, such as shines from every page of Rabindranath Tagore's poems, as of those of many an earlier poet-saint. The transcendent God, discovered in the earthquake and the storm and in the tempests of the soul, is One with whom fellowship is far more difficult to compass. In the experience of the saints to whom He is chiefly presented in this aspect there is, more than in the case of others, strain, effort, spiritual agony. There is less mysticism, but it is deeper. The attainment of his goal by the Indian saint is easier, his experience, it may be, shallower, but it is often more gracious, more beautiful.

There are in India, as elsewhere, both speculative and devotional mystics; that is, there are those whom the interpretation of the universe primarily occupies, and there are those whom, to the exclusion of almost all else, the needs of the heart absorb. The third category into which they have been sometimes divided, that of nature mystics, is hardly separable in India from the former two. There both the speculative and devotional mystics find spirit present and overflowing in every form of natural life. The premises of their thought ensure that this is so, for in God, in the words of Kabīr—who is echoing a verse of the Gītā—'the worlds are being told like beads.' But the danger here, a danger manifest on many a page of ancient Indian

speculation, is that the spirit so discerned in nature is not given all its sovereign rights. The higher is assimilated to the lower. India is full of pantheism, and the Indian mind is deeply infected with its consequent obliteration of distinctions that are vital to the moral life and to personal religion. A 'holy man,' sitting by the wayside in his saffron robe, when asked how many gods there are, replied, 'Two,' pointing to his two eyes. This view, so subtly expressed, is deeply characteristic of India and fatally infects its religious life, poisoning the springs of true devotion. It is not, however, with this speculative mysticism that we would here concern ourselves, but with those who by the vision of a sincere heart see God, and who hear His voice in all the world about them. These are the devotional mystics who make use of nature and of the experiences of common life with perfect freedom and naturalness as allies of their thoughts of God and of their desire to find Him. They are not like Boehme who needed a revelation before plants 'turned with loosened tongue to talk with him.' Not so much the more majestic and awful aspects of the world—which testify rather to the divine transcendence—but the flowers and birds and all the homely incidents of life speak to them of God and of the soul. Every page of the *Gītānjali* and of the translations from Kabīr testifies to this, and those who are acquainted with works of other poet-saints which have not been translated could adduce from them a hundred parallels. The cow with her calf, the ferryman bearing the traveller in his coracle across the stream, the beggar at the door, the moon-bird Chakor that is supposed to feed upon the moonbeams, the rain-bird wailing for the rain, 'the swan taking its flight to the lake beyond the mountains'—such simple emblems as these are used continually to bear testimony to the compassionate heart of God and to the hungry heart of man.

This use of nature is closely similar to that which our Lord habitually makes of it in His parables and His discourses. There is a real kinship between His outlook on

the world and theirs. In spite of their *māya* doctrine, this is for many of these simple-hearted seekers, as it was for Christ, God's world, where His heart is manifest.

Unwearied He bears up the universe ;
How light a burden I !
Does not His care the frog within the stone
With food supply ?

The bird, the creeping thing, lays up no store ;
This great One knows their need.
And if I, Tuka, cast on Him my load,
Will not His mercy heed ?

That is the cry of a Marātha poet of the seventeenth century. Some verses from an earlier Marātha poet, who lived in the thirteenth century, will illustrate their wealth in symbol and in allegory, so prodigal that it sometimes almost appears to confound the worlds of the seen and the unseen. This poet is describing those whom he calls the 'great-souled,' that is those who by devotion have attained to fellowship with God.

They bathe in Wisdom ; then their hunger stay
With Perfectness ; lo, all in green array
The leaves of Peace are they.

Buds of Attainment these ; columns they are
In Valour's hall ; of Joy fetched from afar
Each a full water-jar.

With pearls of Peace their limbs they beautify ;
Within their minds, as in a scabbard, I,
The All-indweller, lie.

Therefore their love waxes unceasingly—
These great-souled ones ; not the least rift can be
Betwixt their hearts and me.

This use of symbolism is essentially mystical and reveals the intense preoccupation of those poets with the interests of the soul. The common sights and scenes about them are elements of the spiritual world through which they touch and know it.

It is a characteristic of the mystical spirit at its best that it combines this intimacy with the life of nature, this keen apprehension of its secret with a denial of the world and a sense of being a stranger in it. To maintain an equilibrium between these two points of view has always been the difficult task of the saint. St Francis accomplished it to an unusual degree, and it would seem that in their sympathy with all the forms of life about them many of the Indian seekers were closely akin to him, though they had not his passionate spirit of self-sacrifice. As he loved his little sisters the birds, so did Tukārām, the Marātha poet, so that when set to drive them from the cornfields he had not the heart to rob them of the food they needed no less than he. One of the great mystic symbols of the West is that of life as a pilgrimage, a toilsome quest for God. This idea is not so often—as far at least as one student's acquaintance with Indian devotional writers goes—described by them under that as under other and no less impressive figures. Though the pilgrim to a distant shrine, dusty and travel-worn, is familiar in every Indian landscape, yet this conception, constantly recurrent as it is in the popular religious literature, is more frequently presented under other images. One of those that is made use of by Tukārām has in its Indian context peculiar pathos and significance. He compares himself to a child-bride leaving her mother's house for that of her mother-in-law. It is difficult to convey even through a free translation more than a very little of what the lines suggest to an Indian reader.

As the bride looks back to her mother's house
And goes, but with dragging feet,—
Even so it is with my soul, O God,
That thou and I may meet.

As a child cries out and is sore distressed,
When its mother it cannot see,
As a fish that is taken from out the wave,
So 'tis, says Tuka, with me.

The figures of a child that has lost its mother and of a fish taken from the water are frequently employed and are deeply significant of the sense that this poet and others like him had of man's need and desire for God. But the poignancy of the picture that the first verse presents is something that it is impossible for anyone but an Indian fully to appreciate. There is a world of pathos in the figure it calls up of the little Indian girl leaving her 'mother's house'—a word rich with all the significance of our word 'home'—and leaving it for the strange and loveless atmosphere of the house of her mother-in-law and her husband. The homesickness of the child as she looks back is for Tukārām a symbol of the longing of his heart for 'Keshava'—for 'God who is his home.'

The longing for God and the satisfaction that is found in His fellowship are described by a rich variety of symbols. One of the most frequent, in Tukārām at least, is that of the babe at his mother's breast. Tulsī Dās, Kabīr, Nāmdev and he all compare the soul finding its true element in God to the fish that cannot live and breathe but in the sea. But perhaps the symbol that, more than any other, takes the place in Indian mysticism that is taken in the mysticism of the West by the pilgrimage of the soul is that of the crossing of a river in a boat. By the Marātha saints and by Kabīr, in the meditations of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and in the poems of his son, this picture is again and again made use of to represent man's perilous passage to what is sometimes God's bosom and sometimes a land unknown, but what is perhaps to most both of these at once. It is strange that to the West death is the dark river to be crossed, but to India it is not death but life. 'Your Friend,' says Kabīr, 'stands on the other shore.' Taking a wise *guru* for his ferryman, and embarking on the boat of a surrendered spirit, the traveller crosses the perilous waters safely to the place of union and of bliss. A simpler picture is the following :

Launch upon the sea of life,
Fear not aught that thou mayst meet.
Stout the ship of Pandurang;
Not a wave shall wet thy feet.

Many a saint awaits thee there,
Standing on the further shore.
Haste, says Tuka, haste away;
Follow those have gone before.

Certainly men before whose eyes such pictures as these were continually rising have minds deeply dyed of mysticism. They belong to the company of visionaries for whom the things unseen and afar are the most near and real of all things. It is true that it is a differentia of all their thought that the world that is denied is not so much a world of evil, though that conception is by no means absent, as a world of bondage. The deliverance that they seek is not, however, in the case of those men of devotion, absorption in an abyss of nothingness. They recognize that that is, perhaps, the supreme goal, and they pay respectful tribute to the high intellectual path of knowledge which leads there and to those who travel by that path. But it is not for them. They deliberately turn away from it to find in fellowship with God what their hearts desire. Their conclusion may not be logical, but mysticism is not logical. 'So dear to them is the path of *bhakti*,' says one of them, 'that they reckon as of no account the final liberation.' *Bhakti* is the method of approach to God by love and trust, and compared with it knowledge, Tukārām declares, is 'a stringless lute.' It is ever the argument of love that they pursue, and they pursue it with a boldness that is characteristic of all mystics. They are sure not only of their own hunger for God but of God's for them, and sometimes echo even the claim of Eckhart that 'God can as little do without us as we without Him.' 'He calls himself his worshippers' debtor,' says Tukārām; 'he is ever grateful to them.' Krishna is represented by another poet as thinking thus

of his devotee : ' If all sense of separation and of self-hood were to vanish from him and he were to realize " I am He," then what would I do, left all alone ? '

There are few of the characteristic marks of the mysticism of the West that are not reproduced in greater or less measure in the devout experience of these Indian saints. ' Self-naughting ' is recognized by them to be necessary for approach to God just as it was by the author of the *Theologia Germanica* or by St Catherine of Siena. ' When all love of the I and the mine is dead,' says Kabīr, ' then the work of the Lord is done.' It would be surprising indeed if, in an ardour for God so passionate and so human as this Indian mysticism displays, the imagery of the bridegroom and the bride, so often made use of by the devout feeling of Christian saints, were not found here also. It is, as a matter of fact, so prominent in some of the Indian *bhakti* sects as to form practically their sole symbol of the relation of the soul to God. This appears presently to have consequences which are in most cases fatal to the spirituality of the worship. When Krishna is the ' sole male ' and ' all besides are females,' a gross and sensual imagination has manifestly begun to usurp the place of true devotion. If the figure of Christ could not always exorcize that evil spirit from Christian mysticism in some of its degenerate forms, is it strange that that of Krishna on the contrary should have often called it up ? These types of Indian mystical devotion may be passed by here as morbid growths inevitably appearing in religious contexts with no ideal figure at their centre such as Christ. But in the religious life of such saints as Kabīr and Tukārām these gross suggestions have little or no place. We have seen that for Tukārām the symbol that most draws his heart is that of the mother with her babe. A few of his *abhangs* indeed describe the devout worshipper under the image of a woman addressing her paramour, but these are so few that they may be ignored. This, however, one cannot fail to note, that in all the Indian symbolism

that represents even in the most touching and beautiful forms the relations of the divine and human lovers it is the fervour, the generosity, the compassion, the trust of that love on the one side or the other that are present to the thought of the saint. It is seldom the case, as it is so often in Christian symbol, and as it is especially in this symbol of the bridegroom and the bride, that their purity and faithfulness are also emphasized. When the Bible metaphor makes use of the picture of a lawless love such as that of the Rādhā of the Krishna story it is to describe the nation that has forsaken God and rebelled against Him. In their use of the symbol of the bridegroom and the bride the Christian saints suggest a true marriage relationship and no lawless love—'no dubious spiritualizing of earthly ecstasies, but a lifelong bond that shall never be lost or broken.'¹

It is a thankless task to point out the limitations and defects of a spirit of devotion so sincere and so intense. No other country surely presents such a drama of desire as does the religious history of India. Its saints stand upon the bank of the river of life with an inextinguishing longing in their eyes, 'tendentesque manus ripæ ulterioris amore.' We see in them men seeking not God's gifts but God Himself. 'The seekers,' said Cromwell, 'are the next best sect to the finders.' But dare we say that these are not 'finders'? 'I have tasted sweetness at his feet,' says Tukārām. He claims to have found a peace such that 'the threefold fever has passed utterly away.' The question rather is, did that peace send him back strong to bear and suffer among men and for men? Quietism, the tranquillity that is forgetfulness of duty and of the claims of love, has ever been the chief peril that attends the mystic spirit, and nowhere more closely than in India. It is probable that Tukārām the shopkeeper and Kabīr the weaver escaped it more than most. They did not flee the world but found God's presence in the homely

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 512.

incidents of daily life. It does not appear that what Kabir calls 'the music of the forgetting of sorrows' lulled them to a slothful self-absorption. But on the other hand it manifestly did not fill them with the 'strength to be sacrificed and save.' Nothing testifies with such finality to this lack in Hindu mysticism even at its highest as does the fact that there is in it no impulse to intercession for men. The prayers of the saints are for their own needs. The Bodhisattvas of later Buddhism are ready to forgo Nirvāna in the ardour of their compassion, so that they may save creatures. But these Hindu saints, while they are willing to renounce the empty prize of liberation, do not dream of doing so for the sake of sinning, suffering men.

Lo, in the empty world apart
I hearken, waiting thy footfall.

When Tukārām says this he betrays that to him it appears that he is nearest to the God he seeks when the world is emptiest about him. In the last analysis even for such human and tender hearts as Tukārām and Kabir devout experience is 'a flight of the lonely soul to the lonely God.'

At the same time the faith of these saints is without question the very salt of Indian religion. To them and to their experience devout spirits still turn to feed their souls. It would indeed be a mistake to deny the real religious value of much in the meditations of the ancient Upanisads. With much that appears to us arid speculation, there is also in them a sense of the all-enveloping One which, as the devout Indian broods upon them, seems to enfold his troubled heart, bringing it peace. This need not be an opiate but a calming and restoring experience. 'Self-submergence,' as P. C. Mozoomdar affirms, should not conflict with 'devout self-remembrance.' But for a more various comfort the devout men of to-day turn to those human voices that speak the people's language and express the plain heart's needs. To reformers such as the late M. G. Ranade and Sir R. G. Bhandarkar, Tukārām

has been a fountain of daily spiritual refreshment. His *abhāngs* also provide a large portion of the hymn book of the Prārthana Samāj. There is no reason why his limitations should bind those who make this use of his experience any more than do those of the psalmists in the case of the Christian worshipper. If he was an idolater and had little sense of his responsibility for others, these things need not be true of those who to-day are helped by his example to seek like him the feet of God. Intercession is beginning to have place in the worship of the modern Indian theist, and the ancient mysticism may help to create in him a spirit not of passivity but of 'wise passiveness.'

Certainly the Indian saints, if we exclude Buddha, have not been among the 'great actives' of mysticism. We see also that only a few of them successfully avoided on the one hand the peril of losing themselves in the 'divine darkness' of absorption, and on the other that of finding themselves in the company of a gross and sensual deity. Indian devotional mysticism has had to steer a safe way between these two dangers that threaten it, Krishnaism and Brahmaism. But the strength of these temptations that beset it reveals to us all the more clearly the depth and intensity of the longing for divine fellowship that has overcome them. And as with the mystics of the West, so with the mystic temper of India, its safeguard against these temptations will be found when it possesses at the heart of its devotional fervour the figure of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is surely not a law of mysticism, as the Ritschians assert, that 'its yearning after God Himself cannot endure the historical.' The devotion of these Indian saints longs for concrete supports of their faith in God. Their instinct selects whatever is least unworthy in the legends of the gods. Even Kabir, who has turned from Purana and Koran in disgust, remembers gladly that 'Dhruva, Prahlad and Shukadeva' drank of the waters that he is seeking and had their thirst satisfied. They turn from their speculations and their dreams to accept

joyfully the confirmation of their hopes in God that His presence in the life of nature seems to bring. Therefore surely they should not find in Christ anything other than the crown of their desires. They will find in Him at the same time their safeguard against the perils of the mystic spirit and especially of the mystic spirit of India. This we may confidently affirm since 'many of the great contemplatives of the West have found that deliberate meditation upon the humanity of Christ was a necessity if they were to retain a healthy and well-balanced inner life.'¹

It may be asked how far those characteristics which we have found in the older saints and which are reproduced in the best representatives of the samāj movement, in Debendranath Tagore and P. C. Mozoomdar, in M. G. Ranade and Sir R. G. Bhandarkar, are revealing themselves also in the Indian Christian church. As regards the church in the Marāthi area there is one indication at least that this mystic spirit is finding in Christ its home, its 'mother's house.' Mr N. V. Tilak is not only a leader in the Christian church but a poet of the true stock of Tukārām and Kabīr. He has the same love for the things of nature and of daily experience round about him that they had and the same insight into their inner significance. And he has the same desire also for fellowship with God. The hymn book of the Christian church has been enriched by him in many directions, but in none more remarkably than in those hymns that treat of life in Christ and communion with God. The Christian community as they use these hymns enter by their means into an inheritance that is theirs by right of birth, but an inheritance that has been infinitely enriched by its consecration in Christ Jesus. Surely much may be hoped in the future from such a soil with such an enrichment.

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¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 144.