



# Prabuddha Bharata

VOL. 94

JUNE 1989

No. 6

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the Goal is reached.

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## THUS SPAKE THE UPANISHADS

He is the sun dwelling in the bright heavens. He is the air dwelling in the interspace. He is the fire dwelling on earth. He is the guest dwelling in the house. He dwells in men, in the gods, in truth, in the sky. He is born in the water, on earth, in the sacrifice, on the mountains. He is the True and the Great.

As the same non-dual air, after it has entered the world, becomes different according to whatever it enters, so also the same non-dual Atman, dwelling in all beings, becomes different according to whatever It enters. And It exists also without.

From terror of Brahman, fire burns ; from terror of It, the sun shines ; from terror of It, Indra and Vayu, and Death, the fifth, run.

As the spider sends forth and draws in its thread, as plants grow on the earth, as hair grows on the head and the body of a

living man—so does everything in the universe arise from the Imperishable.

Brahman expands by means of austerity, and from It primal matter is produced ; from matter, Prana ; from Prana, mind ; from mind, the elements ; from the elements, the worlds ; thence works, and from the works, their immortal fruits.

THIS IS THE TRUTH: As, from a blazing fire, sparks essentially akin to it fly forth by the thousand, so also, my good friend, do various beings come forth from the imperishable Brahman and unto Him again return.

He is the self-luminous and formless Purusha, uncreated and existing both within and without. He is devoid of prana, devoid of mind, pure, and higher than the supreme Imperishable.

(*Katha Upanishad*: II. ii. 2 ; 10 ; II. iii. 3.

and

*Mundaka Upanishad*: I. i. 7, 8 ; II. i. 1,2.).

## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This month's EDITORIAL is on THE HOLISTIC SCIENCE OF THE LIVING AND THE NON-LIVING.

SWAMIJI AND HIS WESTERN WOMEN DISCIPLES is the continuation of the article by Pravrajika Brahmaprana from the previous issue.

SUFISM: A BROAD OUTLINE is by Shri Piyus Kanti Das, Head of the Dept. of Philosophy, Bangabasi College, Calcutta.

SHRI RAMAKRISHNA AND THE ENGLISH MAN'S CALCUTTA is by Dr. Kamala Jaya Rao, M.B.B.S., M.D., Ph. D. of Hyderabad.

LITERACY AND THE CHANGING PEASANT CULTURES IN INDIA is a paper presented at the XII International Congress of Anthro-

pological and Ethnological Sciences held between July 24 and July 31, 1988, at Zagreb, Yugoslavia. Shri B. Sing is a Reader in the Dept. of Anthropology at Lucknow University and Shri A. Bhounick is a Junior research fellow at N.C.E.R.T., New Delhi.

CHANCE ENCOUNTER ? is the document of a seeker of Truth finding fulfilment in the message of Vedanta Philosophy. It is contributed by Mrs. Dorothy Ryerson of California, U.S.A.

REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF SHRI RAMAKRISHNA FOR WOMEN (III) is a continuation of the earlier two parts published in March and April issues of Prabuddha Bharata, 1988. The author, Ann Myren, teacher of Social Sciences in the College of Alameda, California, marshals facts from the Life of Shri Ramakrishna and interprets scholarly His message for women.

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## THE HOLISTIC SCIENCE OF THE LIVING AND THE NON-LIVING

(EDITORIAL)

The distinction between the living and the non-living ceases to exist for a human being who has attained to the ultimate vision of Reality. This is the experience of saints, sages, and mystics of all countries and creeds, who could reach the superconscious state of mind, beyond its conscious and sub-conscious levels. The ancient Hindus knew it only too well. The pivotal teachings of the Upanishads like, *Sarvam Khalu Idam Brahma* (All that exists is verily the Brahman, ONE EXISTENCE-KNOWLEDGE-BLISS-ABSOLUTE), or *Ishavasyam Idam Sarvam* (One must see everything enveloped in the

Ultimate Reality), speak of this truth. Even the later ideas of Hinduism like *antahsanjna bhavettiti sukhadukkha samanvita* (Even the world of the non-living have within them the dormant feeling of sorrow and joy), testify to this highest state of mystic realisation. In recent times Shri Ramakrishna's historic life gives evidences of this ancient truth. At the highest state of super-consciousness, Shri Ramakrishna would see the presence of life even in the blades of grass and refused to walk on them. In such a state of mind, to him the stone images of Kali or Ramlala became living



just like human beings. When the sceptical and rationalist young Vivekananda doubted his realisation of life and consciousness everywhere, Ramakrishna by the super-human will of a perfected and pure mind, raised the mind of Vivekananda to the superconscious level. At that state of mind, Vivekananda, too, had the feeling of One life and One consciousness everywhere even in stones, woods, and metals.

Such views of One immanent consciousness everywhere in nature would, of course, evoke ridicule and distrust in rationalists and materialists. But in the world of scientific discovery, especially in the twentieth century, this ancient truth is being recognised, and supported in many different ways, through many kinds of experiments with the non-living like metals, and the mute world of plant-life.

#### *Human response of metals and plants:*

It is Jagadish Chandra Bose, the Indian Scientist who first proved by experiments that metals which are supposed to be inanimate objects, behave like plants or even human muscles. Bose, in fact, established the connection between physics, botany, and physiology. Bose's fame as a physicist of all times was established in 1895. In a meeting held in Calcutta Town Hall, under the Presidentship of the lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Bose transmitted electric waves through three intervening walls to a room seventy-five feet away where they triggered a relay which threw a heavy iron ball, fired off a pistol, and blew up a small mine. Bose's achievement at once drew the attention of Royal Society in England. Invited, Bose lectured before the scientists of England. London University offered him a doctorate. *The Times* of London praised the 'originality of the achievement' despite his availability of "inadequate" "apparatus and appliances". *The Spectator* spoke of the speeches "coming

from Bengali of the purest descent" to "an audience of appreciative European savants upon one of the most recondite branches of modern physical sciences" as something of "rare interest". In 1895, the year before Marconi's patent on radio-waves was issued in the market, it was J. C. Bose who first successfully demonstrated the propagation of radio-waves. A true seeker after knowledge, Bose had no interest in making patents of his epoch-making discovery. Instead of entering into the commercial market, this outstanding discovery of physics only prompted Bose to go deeper into the other aspects of physics, namely the discovery of sensitivity or organic behaviour in inorganic matter like metals.

In 1899, Bose began a comparative study of the non-living like metals and the animals. Experimentally he found that metals become less sensitive if continuously used, but returned to normal after a period of rest. The discovery of the 'fatigue of metals' led Bose from the domain of physics to physiology. To the surprise of scientists, the boundary-line between the so-called 'living' and 'non-living' became hard to ascertain. Physiologists listened with scepticism and doubt to Bose who demonstrated his experiments in the physics section of British Association at Bradford. Scientists saw with wonder the similar curves of muscles and metals, when they are responding to the effect of fatigue, stimulation, depression and poisonous drugs. Subsequently Bose found that plants also responded in the similar way like metals or muscles. On May 10, 1901, Bose demonstrated all his experiments in England, and concluded with the words,

I have shown you this evening autographic records of the history of stress and strain in the living and non-living. How similar are the writings! So similar indeed that you cannot tell one apart from the other. Among such phenomena, how can we draw a line of demarcation and say, here

the physical ends, and there physiological begins? Such absolute barriers do not exist.... It was when I came upon the mute witness of these self-made records, and perceived on them one phase of a pervading unity that bears within it all things—the mote that quivers in ripples of light, the teeming life upon our earth, and the radiant suns that shine above us—it was then that I understood for the first time a little of that message proclaimed by my ancestors on the banks of the Ganges thirty centuries ago. “They who see but one, in all the changing manifoldness of this universe unto them belongs Eternal Truth—unto none else, unto none else!”

Sir Robert Austen, one of the world's authorities on metals in those days, praised Bose for his faultless arguments, and said,

“I have all my life studied the properties of metals and am happy to think that they have life”. A month later Bose repeated the same experiments before the Royal Society in London. Now slowly reactions, obviously due to jealousy, began. Sir John Burdon Sanderson, the principal authority in Electro-physiology in London, refused to accept Bose, on the ground that ‘he himself had tried for many years past to obtain them and had not succeeded.’ But saner voices prevailed. The authoritative scientific magazine *Nature* commented on Bose's second book *Comparative Electro Physiology* dealing with the similar 321 new experiments on the sensitivity of plants.

“It proceeds so smoothly and logically, and yet it does not start from any place in the existing ‘corpus’ of knowledge.” Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bard wrote on Bose that “the western science was dealing with a genius half a century ahead of his time.”

Bose's discovery established the fact that all science is interdependent and leads to the knowledge of unity in life. He wrote,

The vast abode of nature is built in many wings, each with its own portal. The physicist, the chemist and the biologist come in by different doors, each one his own department of knowledge,

and each comes to think that this is his special domain unconnected with that of any other. Hence has arisen our present division of phenomena into the worlds of inorganic, vegetal and sentient. This philosophical attitude of mind may be denied. We must remember that all inquiries have as their goal the attainment of knowledge in its entirety.

Slowly the educated world began to recognise him. George Bernard Shaw dedicated his collected works to Bose as “the Greatest living biologist”. *Times* of London wrote,

“While we in England were still steeped in the rude empiricism of barbaric life, the subtle Easterner had swept the universe into a synthesis and had seen the one in all its changing manifestations”. In 1926, along with Albert Einstein, N.A. Lorentz and Gilbert Murray, Bose was nominated a member of the League of Nations Committee on Intercultural co-operation. Bose summed up his findings in 1929,

In many investigations on the action of forces on matter, I was amazed to find boundary lines vanishing and to discover points of contact emerging between the living and non-living. My first work in the region of invisible lights made me realise how in the midst of luminous ocean we stood almost blind. Just as in following light from visible to invisible our range of investigation transcends our physical sight, so also the problem of the great mystery of Life and Death is brought a little nearer solution, when, in the realm of the Living, we pass from the Voiced to the Unvoiced.<sup>1</sup>

After the discoveries of J. C. Bose and his interpretations, modern science is gradually discovering that there is only one Consciousness which pulsates in man, plants and even metals, in various ways. And the nature of this pulsation of life in the so-called non-living can be demonstrated not in one or two but a hundred different experiments.

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1. Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bard, *The Secret Life of Plants*, Penguin Books, 1974, U.S.A. Pp. 81-96.



### *New Experiments with plants:*

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Viennese biologist Raoul France put forth the idea that plants move their bodies gracefully like animals or humans, only they do it in a much slower pace. "Plants", says France, "are capable of *intent*." France insists that plants do react certainly, variously, and promptly to the outer world. They are constantly observing and recording events and phenomena outside. Their means of communication is something superior to our senses. His startlingly unwestern idea was that the awareness of plants might originate in a supra-material world of cosmic beings to which, long before the birth of Christ, the Hindu sages referred as 'devas' and those 'devas' were a matter of direct vision and experience. Obviously, his views were rejected as 'charmingly Jeune' and 'hopelessly romantic'.<sup>2</sup>

Cleen Backster, the foremost lie-detector of America in 1966, startled the world of science by his repeatedly successful experiment on lie-detection which he made with a plant *Dracaena Massangeana*. In the experiment the plant was connected with a galvanometer. A galvanometer's needle moved (or a pen will trace on a paper) when a weak electric current will pass through the body of the machine. The needle or pen of the galvanometer which was connected with the plant of Backster, traced various kinds of curves in response to the mental changes, or the slightest surge of emotion in the person dealing with or simply standing in front of the plant. The plant of Backster worked like a human being. It reacted even when a man with a lighted match stick approached to burn it, when a ferocious dog suddenly appeared in the room, or where there was an entrance of a person who did not wish it well. These reactions were recorded by the graph drawn by the

galvanometer connected with the plant. The plant even displayed memory by identifying from a distance a certain culprit who did something wrong previously in its presence.

Backster's researches went further. His plant once vigorously reacted when a raw egg was fed to his dog. Later experiments with similar other eggs confirmed that there was a dormant life of chicken inside the egg. Backster realised that he tapped a new field of force, a life-force which is not recorded in ordinary instruments. Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bard who explained the experiments, wrote, "Sentience does not seem to stop at the cellular level. It may go down to the molecular and beyond. All sorts of things which have been conventionally considered to be inanimate may have to be revalued." Backster's experiments were published in 1968 in the *International Journal of Parapsychology* (Vol. X), and subsequently in *National Wild Life* (Feb. 1969).<sup>3</sup> They opened new avenues of thinking about nature and plant life. Subsequently other scientists like Pierre Paul Sauvin of New Jersey, and Eldon Byrd of U.S. Navy, successfully experimented with plant life in the way of Backster. In Japan, Dr. Hashimoto of Hashimoto Electronics Research Centre demonstrated in front of sceptical audience how a cactus developed capacities of adding, and reacting to the feelings of love even from a distance. He believed that this three-dimensional world is merely a shadow of a fourth-dimensional world, which contrasts three-D world by what he calls '*mind concentration*'.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. researcher-chemist Marcel Vogel witnessed the power of psychic energy in action when he succeeded in keeping some leaves plucked from the garden, unusually green for a long time only by the continued "will" from loving human beings that "it continued

2. Ibid., P. 8.

3. Ibid., P. 33.

4. Ibid., P. 39.

to live." In 1971, Vogel experimented with a philodendra plant and found that "a certain focussed state of consciousness" projected by him on the plant, brought clear responses, which could be recorded in a recording machine. Mr. Vogel demonstrated his experiments on television. He said "Plants are living objects, sensitive, rooted in space.... They radiate energy, forces that are beneficial to man. One can feel these forces.... Life forces or cosmic energy, surrounding all living things, is sharable among plants, animals and humans. Through such sharing a person and plant become one!" From another set of experiments Vogel found that a sensitive individual can, in fact, mentally enter into a single leaf and know the exact details inside the leaf itself, including "consistent descriptions of various parts of the cellular body down to the detailed organisation of DNA molecules." Vogel concluded, "We can move into individual cells in our own bodies and depending on our state of mind, affect them in various ways. One day, this may explain the cause of disease.... No amount of checking in laboratories is going to prove a thing until the experiments are done by properly trained observers. Spiritual development is indispensable."<sup>5</sup>

Vogel, of course, admitted that such a thesis would not be accepted by mechanistic science. "But this runs counter to the philosophy of many scientists who do not realise that creative experimentations mean that the experimenters must become part of their experiments." The thesis of Mr. Vogel was, of course, experimentally verified in 1927 when the young German physicist Werner Heisenberg startled the world of science by his Nobel-prize winning discovery of the uncertainty principle. The discovery proved beyond the least shadow of doubt that the subjective element of the experimenter is inextricably connected with the process of

experiment. For the first time the world of physicists found much to their dismay that a purely objective world of external realities simply does not exist. Everything, every object of perception is connected with the subjective element of the participator-experimenter. What was a purely objective reality in science, is today known as *omnijective* (a combination of the subjective and objective) reality.

#### *The Bio-plasmic body:*

A Russian Electrical engineer-cum-amateur photographer, Semyon Davidovich Kirlian and his wife Valentina first made successful photograph of the 'strange energy' which radiates from all living things. In their photos of leaves in a living plant "rays of energy" and "whirling fireballs of light" appeared to shoot out of plants into space.<sup>6</sup> In the first Western Conference on Kirlian photography and Human Aura, in the spring of 1972 at Manhattan's United Engineering Centre, the Kirlian technique was successfully demonstrated by two scientists Thelma Moss and Kendali Johnson. William A. Tiller, chief of the Material science department at Stanford University, used the Kirlian technique to photograph the 'aura' round a human figure-tip. Later on it was found that in Kirlian photograph the aura of the "entire leaf" is found although some portion of the leaf was cut away before the photograph was taken. Tiller thought that this photography did discover the holographic aura body of the leaf. Later on Kirlian photos of faith-healers indicated "some sort of energy flow from the hands of the healer into the body of the patient."<sup>7</sup>

Working on the Kirlian technique the Russian Scientist Vladimir Inyushin summed up some of his new findings in 1968 in a long scientific paper: *The Biological*

5. Ibid., P. 45.

6. Ibid., P. 181.

7. Ibid., P. 188.



*Essence of Kirlian Effect.* While Kirlian thought that the aura in his photograph was used by the electrical state of the organism, Inyushin spoke of them as the 'biological plasma body' or the 'etheric' or 'astral' body of the ancients. In physics 'plasma' is defined as an electrically neutral, highly ionised gas composed of ions, electrons and neutral particles, which has been called the 'Fourth state of matter' (after solid, liquid or gas).<sup>8</sup>

Swami Vivekananda spoke of this aura of human body which is traditionally painted as haloes round the head or face of divine personalities.

"Haloes are symbols of inner light and can be seen by the yogi. Sometimes we may see a face as if surrounded by flames and in them read the character and judge without erring."<sup>9</sup>

'The bioplasmic body' in its latest experiments, has emerged as a distinct 'energy body', a duplicate of the actual human body which has its own 'electromagnetic field'. This is the *sukshma Sharira* or the finer body which the Hindus knew ages ago. This finer body is a combination of the 'vital sheath' (*pranamaya kosha*), the mental sheath (*manomaya kosha*), and the sheath made of thoughts, ideas, and knowledge of the individual (*vijnanamaya kosha*), which lie behind this gross body of flesh, blood, and bones. Dr. John Pierrakos, a psychiatrist who could visually perceive 'the energy body' around plants, animals and human beings, said that the energy coming out of the individuals is "a living force emanated by consciousness".<sup>10</sup>

This only is an echo of the old Hindu idea of 'personal magnetism' caused by highly pure and spiritual souls like saints and sages.

George De La Warr, a psychically-gifted civil Engineer who was experimenting in 1955-56 on how seeds treated radionically, sprout with a faster speed, suddenly came to a "shattering new reality with the most far-reaching implications." He found seeds were responding not only to radiation, but to human beings who were involved in the act of radiation. His conclusion, therefore, was that "*the mind of a human being could affect cell formation!*" He also suggested to leading English physicists that "a universal energy could be evoked by the proper attunement of one's thoughts". He was, of course, ridiculed. De La Warr reiterated his conclusion which he arrived at after seeing the effect of the extra-energy that seeds received from the human factor involved in their treatment. He said, "Indeed we must revise our concept of what constitutes matter even if such revision posed a whole overhaul of existing knowledge. How for instance, this energy could be incorporated into mathematical equations?"<sup>11</sup> Following the line of De La Warr, Dr. Robert N. Miller experimented in 1976 with seeds which were irradiated with human goodwill and "blessings." These seeds showed an "*eighty form percent faster*" growth than seeds planted without the human treatment with prayers and goodwill.<sup>12</sup> Swami Vivekananda gave the Vedantic view of this unseen human energy-field which influences others around us:

"The body is objectified thought. The 'Sun' and 'Moon' currents bring energy to all parts of the body. The surplus energy is stored at certain points (plexuses) along the spinal column known as nerve centres."<sup>13</sup>

"Part of our energy is used up in the preservation of our own bodies. Beyond that, every particle of our energy is day

8. Ibid., P. 183.

9. *Complete Works of Sw. Vivekananda* (Mayavati Memorial Edition), Vol. 8, P. 50.

10. *The Secret Life of Plants*, P. 190.

11. Ibid., P. 300.

12. Ibid., P. 301.

13. *Com. Works of Sw. Vivekananda* Vol. 8, P. 45.

and night being used in influencing others. Our bodies, our virtues, our intellect, and our spirituality all these are continually influencing others; and so, conversely, we are being influenced by them. This is going on all around us."<sup>14</sup>

More startling was the finding of Mr. J. I. Rodale who found after some experiments that the mother-plant need not necessarily have to be growing near her children for them to benefit from her 'protection'. The mother could apparently be in the next city, the next country, across the ocean, or anywhere on earth.<sup>15</sup> Rodale's findings remind us of the discovery of a holistic universe, where two similar objects were somehow instantaneously connected even despite an enormous distance. This was the result of David Bohm's successful experiment of Bell's Theorem, which proved conclusively that two identical objects are somehow instantaneously connected, whatever may be the physical distance between them.<sup>16(a)</sup>

### *The Field of life:*

Physicists have so long focussed their attention on the known fields of physics. These are the gravitational and electromagnetic forces which work in our macro-cosmic world of iron-balls and magnetic bars. In the submicroscopic fields of sub-atomic particles, we see the workings of the other two forces, namely the "Strong force" and the "Weak force". Physicists have hardly considered so far the idea of fields of living systems including both plants and living organisms. The natural sciences were so long divided into departments. The study of molecules and crystals is the province not of physicists, but of chemists, crystallographers, biochemists, and molecular biologists; living organisms were studied in

the realms of biology, and minds in the realms of psychology and parapsychology. Today however these watertight compartments have virtually disappeared and interdisciplinary study has become common.

Modern physics has at last arrived at the concept of 'fields' behind all matter, even the subatomic particles. There are many kinds of matter-fields, one for each type of particle; an electron is a quantum of the electron-positron field; a proton is a quantum of the proton-antiproton field and so on. Different kinds of matter fields can interact with each other, and they can also interact with electro-magnetic fields. All these interactions are mediated by quanta.

The latest discoveries in physics have proved that particles of matter are quanta of energy in fields, which are states of space, or the vacuum. This is the modern foundation for the understanding of material reality. "Yet this new vision of the physicists has so far had very little effect on the understanding of living organisms," writes plant-biologist Rupert Sheldrake. Quantum physics has dissolved atoms into a complex system of quantized fields. Yet in the field of biological research much of the old atomistic way of thinking has persisted. Molecules or Atoms still seem to provide the foundation for biology. In mechanistic biology there is no consideration of the possibility of new kinds of fields which are unknown to quantum physicists. Any living organism, a human body, for instance, is composed of billions and billions of molecules of different elements. If each of these molecules or atoms has a distinct force-field of its own, what is that central or ruling force-field inside one particular living organism which guides and whose power is manifested through the force-fields of each of these billions of molecules and atoms?

Since the last sixty years biologists are trying to conceive of a single force-field in

14. Ibid., Vol. 2, P. 13.

15. *The Secret Life of Plants*, P. 304.

16. (a) *Vedanta Kesari* (Monthly Journal, Ramakrishna Math, Madras), Aug-Sept. 1986.



a living organism. In 1960s M.S.C. Northop and Harold Saxton Burr postulated this field as the Bio-gravitational field or the L-field.<sup>16(b)</sup> Recently Rupert Sheldrake, a Cambridge scientist, has started building up, on the basis of some of his successful experiments, a similar idea of morphic field. Says Sheldrake,

It might not be absurd to think of an insulin molecule, as a quantum or unit in an insulin field; or even of a swan as a quantum or unit in a swan field. But this may be just another way of thinking about morphic fields: any particle insulin molecule is a manifestation of the insulin morphic field; any particular swan is a manifestation of the swan morphic field.

Morphic fields may indeed be comparable in status to quantum matter fields. If atoms can be said to have morphic fields, then these may well be said to have morphic fields, then these may well be what are already described within quantum field theory. The morphic fields of molecules may already be partially described by quantum chemistry. But the morphic fields of cells, tissues, organs, and living organisms have so far been described only in vague and general terms. Something is known of their properties from the study of developing plants and animals, but the ways in which these fields actually organise, the processes of morphogenesis remain obscure.<sup>17</sup>

The "morphic field" is only the "field" of the activities of Life-force inside a human body or a living organism.

Swami Vivekananda explains for modern man the Indian ideas of *Akasha* (Primal Matter) and *Prana* (Primal Energy) out of which, according to this theory, all the world of the living and non-living came into existence.

According to the philosophers of India, the whole universe is composed of two materials, one of which they call *Akasha*. It is the omnipresent, all-penetrating existence. Everything that has form, everything that is the result of combination,

is evolved out of this *Akasha*. It is the *Akasha* that becomes the air, that becomes the liquids, that becomes the solids; it is the *Akasha* that becomes the sun, the earth, the moon, the stars, the comets; it is the *Akasha* that becomes the human body, the animal body, the plants, every form that we see, everything that can be sensed, everything that exists.

...By what power is this *Akasha* manufactured into this universe? By the power of *Prana*. Just as *Akasha* is the infinite, omnipresent, material of this universe, so is this *Prana* the infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe. At the beginning and at the end of a cycle everything becomes *Akasha*, and all the forces that are in the universe resolve back into the *Prana*; in the next cycle, out of this *Prana* is evolved everything that we call energy, everything that we call force. It is the *Prana* that is manifesting as motion; it is the *Prana* that is manifesting as gravitation, as magnetism. It is the *Prana* that is manifesting as the actions of the body, as the nerve currents, as thought force.<sup>18</sup>

In this universe there is one continuous substance on every plane of existence. Physically this universe is one. There is no difference between the sun and you. The scientist will tell you it is only a fiction to say the contrary. There is no real difference between the table and me; the table is one point in the mass of matter, and I another point. Each form represents, as it were, one whirlpool in the infinite ocean of matter; of which not one is constant. Just as in a rushing stream there may be millions of whirlpools, the water in each of which is different every moment, turning round and round for a few seconds, and then passing out, replaced by a fresh quantity, so the whole universe is one constantly changing mass of matter, in which all forms of existence are so many whirlpools. A mass of matter enters into one whirlpool, say a human body, stays there for a period, becomes changed, and goes out into another, say an animal body this time, from which again after a few years, it enters into another whirlpool, called a lump of mineral. It is a constant change....So it is with the mind. Matter is represented by the ether; when the action of *Prana* is most subtle, this very ether, in the finer state of vibration, will represent the mind, and there it will be still one unbroken mass. If you can simply get to that subtle vibration, you will

16. (b) *The Secret Life of Plants*, P. 175.

17. Rupert Sheldrake. *The Presence of the Past*, Times Books, U.S.A. P. 119.

18. *Com. Works of Sw. Vivekananda*, Vol. 1., Pp. 147-148.

see and feel that the whole universe is composed of subtle vibrations.<sup>19</sup>

The *Prana* is the vital force in every being. Thought is the finest and highest action of *Prana*.<sup>20</sup>

This little wave of the *Prana* which represents our own energies, mental and physical, is the nearest to us of all the waves of the infinite ocean of *Prana*. If we can succeed in controlling that little wave, then alone we can hope to control the whole of *Prana*.<sup>21</sup>

In the ancient Upanishads of India, one of the most important symbols of Brahman (the Ultimate Reality) is *Prana*, the life-principle that pervades and sustains the universe and the individual body. "*Prana* is verily Brahman".—*Prana vai Brahma*, says the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.<sup>22</sup>

*Prana* which is the life principle in the individual, is also the cosmic principle of Energy. The Upanishads speak of the identity of the microcosm and the macrocosm: that which is manifest in the universe as a whole, with all its phenomena, finds complete expression in man as well, although in a miniature form.

Another symbol of Brahman is *Akasha*, whose characteristics are omnipresence and all-pervasiveness. "It is *Akasha* from which all these creatures take their rise and into which they again return. *Akasha* is older than these; *Akasha* is their ultimate end," says the *Chandogya Upanishad*.<sup>23</sup>

Both primal energy and primal matter are only manifestations or projections of the One Undivided substratum which Vedanta describes as Absolute Consciousness or Absolute Existence. This is the holistic background of all existence. Says the *Drik-Drishya Viveka*:

"The manifesting of all names and forms in the entity which is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss and which is the same as Brahman, like the foams etc. in the ocean, is known as creation."<sup>24</sup>

#### *The holistic background of existence:*

The morphic-field or the energy-field in a living organism works in a way which is strikingly different from a mere mechanical function. In 1890s, the embryologist Hans Driesch discovered that when half of a young sea-urchin embryo was destroyed the remaining half did not give birth to half a sea-urchin, but to a smaller but a complete sea-urchin. Conversely, Driesch showed that if two young embryos were artificially fused together, they produced not a double sea-urchin, but a normal single one.<sup>25</sup> The holistic capacity to regenerate is seen in living beings. A flat worm may be cut into pieces, and each piece—a head, a tail, a side or a mere slice can yet grow into a complete flat worm. In human body when part of the liver is removed, the liver tissues develop and grow into a complete liver. Branches of trees give birth to complete trees. Severed nerves grow fully again in animal bodies. Even in some physical systems like magnets, when a magnet is cut into two, two smaller but complete magnets come into being. In a holographic plate, when a part is severed from the main hologram, that part gives rise to the complete picture in a miniature form.

Rupert Sheldrake writes,

"The capacity to regenerate is, in fact, one of the most fundamental features of living organisms, and any theory of life has to try to explain it.... Process of regeneration reveals that in some sense organisms have

19. Ibid., Pp. 150-151.

20. Ibid., P. 50.

21. Ibid., P. 149.

22. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (IV., i. 3).

23. *Chandogya Upanishad* (I. ix., 1).

24. *Drik Drishya Viveka*, (14).

25. *The Presence of the Past*, Pp. 79-80.



a wholeness that is more than the sum of their parts ; parts can be removed, and yet wholeness can be restored.”<sup>26</sup>

This fundamental holistic pattern behind all systems was first proposed by physicist David Bohm. Bohm’s successful experiment with Bell’s Theorem in 1972 confirmed the fact that there is a far deeper underlying unity behind all natural phenomena. Bohm proposed the theory of implicate Order in which all things and events are unfolded in a total wholeness and unity. The implicate Order is not inserted into material systems in space and time, but the explicate order of space and time, of matter and events unfold from this underlying order. Any describable event, object or entity in the ordinary, explicate order is “an abstraction from an unknown and unidentifiable totality of flowing movements.” This universal flux Bohm calls holo-movement. “The holo-movement which is ‘life implicit’ is the ground both of ‘life explicit’ and of ‘inanimate’ matter! And this ground is what is primary, self-existent, and universal.” The “Holo-movement” is the way in which the ‘implicate order’ works, and it is an “unbroken and undivided totality.”<sup>27</sup>

This ‘implicate order’ which is ‘primary’, ‘self-existent’ and ‘universal’, ‘an unidentifiable totality’, which is the ground for both ‘life-explicit’ and ‘inanimate matter’, whose functionings go on in an ‘unbroken and undivided totality’, is the SELF or BRAHMAN, the substratum of all things, ‘living’ and ‘non-living’, described in the Upanishads.

Vivekananda explains the holistic background of the living and the non-living:

Now when we study metaphysics, we come to know the world is one, not that the spiritual, the material, the mental, and the world of energies are separate. It is all one, but seen from different

planes of vision.<sup>28</sup> Whatever is, is one. Let us say, it is a sort of tapering existence ; the thickest part is here, it tapers and becomes finer and finer. The finest is what we call spirit ; the grossest, the body.<sup>29</sup>

This mind is a part of the universal mind. Each mind is connected with every other mind. And each mind, wherever it is located, is in actual communication with the whole world.<sup>30</sup> The end and aim of all science is to find the unity, the one out of which the manifold is being manufactured, that one existing as many.<sup>31</sup>

David Bohm’s idea of ‘implicate order’ is approaching the holistic world view of Vedanta. The ‘morphic field’ located in a particular body, proposed by Sheldrake, is connected with an universal field, according to David Bohm. “Moreover”, writes Bohm, “such a field would not be located anywhere. When it projects back into the totality (the implicate order), since no space and time are relevant there, all things of a similar nature might get connected together or resonate in totality. When the explicate order enfolds into the implicate order, which does not have any space, all places and all times are, we might say, merged, so that what happens in one place will interpenetrate what happens in another place.”<sup>32</sup>

Today science is slowly shifting to the new paradigm of a Holistic Universe. What is a paradigm? Thomas Kuhn explains the meaning of Paradigm,

“On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community. On the other hand, it denotes one sort of elements in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solution which, employed as models or examples,

26. Ibid., P. 76.

27. Ibid., P. 304.

28. *Com. Works of Sw. Vivekananda*, Vol. 2., P. 31.

29. Ibid., P. 16.

30. Ibid., Pp. 12-13.

31. Ibid., Vol. 1., P. 133.

32. *The Presence of the Past*, P. 306.

can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzle of normal science."<sup>33</sup> A new paradigm may emerge as a sudden illumination or a 'gestalt switch' or an 'intuitive leap' as Einstein said, to a

completely new way of thinking.

The materialistic and mechanistic science of the 19th century is gradually accepting the new paradigm of a Holistic Science, a paradigm which is emerging powerfully out of the latest discoveries and findings in all branches of 20th century Science.

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid., P. 266.

## SWAMIJI AND HIS WESTERN WOMEN DISCIPLES

PRAVRAJKA BRAHMAPRANA

(Continued from the previous issue)

But like other God-men of his class, Swamiji had the amazing capacity to both manifest or mask his greatness, in order to remove the vast barrier between guru and disciple. In this connection, Edith Allan wrote, "It was the close contact with the Swami that I most deeply cherish." She continued, "Most people emphasize his great power, the side of him that was so awe-inspiring. But there was this other side to him—his great love. He was like the most tender and loving mother."<sup>32</sup> Through a variety of informal living situations that naturally availed themselves to Swamiji in America, he bound his Western women followers to him with his indescribable love.

The kitchen was one of Swamiji's favourite places of relaxation. There he was his most lovable self. While at the Meads' home in South Pasadena, Swamiji would help Sister Lalita to prepare the dinner in the late afternoons. To quote Mrs. Hansbrough, or Shanti, Lalita's sister:

He liked to prepare one meal every day while he was at our home in Lincoln Park. He cooked curries and often chapatis, of which Ralph and

Dorothy [our children] used to be very fond.... Several of the ingredients that he used had to be ground, and since he did not like to stand beside a table, he would sit cross-legged on the kitchen floor with a wooden butter bowl in front of him.<sup>33</sup>

After grinding the spices, Swamiji would then fry them in butter before adding them to the main dish. At this time, such clouds of smoke would rise from the stove, that the sisters' eyes would smart. And so before launching on his spice-frying, eye-smarting ritual, Swamiji would call out a warning, "Here comes Grandpa! Ladies are invited to leave!"<sup>34</sup>

The kitchen was also one of Swamiji's favourite training grounds. To quote Marie Louise Burke: "To be with him even in his most merry of moments was to grow. He never sermonized; he simply opened one's eyes, and one rarely forgot those off-hand lessons." Once, Mrs. Hansbrough recalled:

While Lalita was preparing something in the kitchen for Swamiji, he was walking to and fro across the room. Suddenly he asked her, "Were you happily married?" For a moment she hesitated, then she answered, "Yes, Swamiji." He left the kitchen for a moment and then came

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid. P. 231-232.

<sup>34</sup>. *Vedanta for the West*, Vol. 158, P. 57.

<sup>32</sup>. Burke, *Second Visit*, P. 414.



back. "I am glad," he said dryly, "that there was one happy marriage!"<sup>35</sup>

Needless to say, these were never-to-be-forgotten moments. Years later, Sister became known as a "stickler for telling the truth," even in small matters.

Swamiji's genius was such that everything was his spiritual arena: he could infuse the most mundane household matters with holiness or use a scintillating social engagement as the fulcrum for imparting top Vedanta philosophy. Maud Stumm, a young artist and special guest of the Leggetts, remembered: "A very large and elaborate dinner was given at Ridgely. The flowers and lights on the table were wonderful, and the ladies (were) all in the loveliest gowns and jewels." Mesmerized at first by the glamour and beauty of the evening, Maud then felt Swamiji's eyes and quiet voice: "Don't let it fool you, Baby."<sup>36</sup>

Swamiji never minced words when it came to any behavior—such as chivalry or vanity—that belied one's true nature, the sexless Self. Once he wrote to his brother-disciples [25 September 1894]:

To [Americans] ministering to the body is a great thing: they would trim and polish and give their whole attention to that. A thousand instruments for paring nails, ten thousand for hair-cutting, and who can count the varieties of dress and toilet and perfumery?...[That] enjoyment is their God. It is a country where money flows like a river, with beauty as its ripple and learning its waves, and which rolls in luxury.<sup>37</sup>

Swamiji's greatness was such that he could live anywhere the Lord placed him—whether a bare room or a posh mansion—and remain centered within. Once, however, this fact was curiously called into question

when Miss Waldo observed him standing before a floor-to-ceiling mirror in a New York drawing room. Sister Devamata described the scene:

This mirror seemed to fascinate Swamiji. He stood before it again and again, gazing at himself intently. In between he walked up and down the room, lost in thought. Miss Waldo's eyes followed him anxiously. "Now the bubble is going to burst," she thought. "He is full of personal vanity." Suddenly he turned to her and said, "Ellen, it is the strangest thing, I cannot remember how I look. I look and look at myself in the glass, but the moment I turn away I forget completely what I look like."<sup>38</sup>

Western women were among the privileged class who witnessed some of Swamiji's most exalted spiritual moods. While at Camp Percy with Francis Leggett, Josephine MacLeod, and her sister Betty, Swamiji entered so deeply into meditation that his breathing stopped altogether and his robe became soaked with tears. Weeks later, at Thousand Island Park, he entered again into what is purported as being nirvikalpa samadhi.<sup>39</sup> This time, Christine Greenstidel and Mary Funke received the darshan of that state. They took a stroll with the Swami into the woods about a half a mile away from civilization, and there, according to Mary Funke:

He [Swamiji] selected a low-branched tree, and we sat under the lowspreading branches. Instead of the expected talk, he suddenly said, "Now we will meditate. We shall be like Buddha under the Bo Tree." He seemed to turn to bronze, so still was he. Then a thunderstorm came up, and it poured. He never noticed it. I raised my umbrella and protected him as much as possible. Completely absorbed in his meditation, he was oblivious to everything.<sup>40</sup>

35. Burke, *Second Visit*, P. 232.

36. Ibid. P. 109.

37. *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970), P. 140. [hereafter referred to as *Letters*].

38. His Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences*, P. 138-139.

39. Burke, *New Discoveries*, Vol. III, P. 107-108, 177.

40. His Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences*, P. 262-263.

The fact that Swamiji was the guru of thousands of disciples in the West—men and women—is certain. Once Swamiji postulated that, perhaps, he had more than two or three thousand disciples. When asked whether they were all initiated with mantras, Swamiji replied, “Yes.”<sup>41</sup>

How and where he made his disciples is largely a hidden chapter in Swamiji’s life and mission. We do know that while at Greenacre, he wrote to the Hale sisters: “The inn people are more or less well-to-do [here], and the camp people are healthy, young, *sincere*, and holy men and women. I teach them *Shivoham, Shivoham*, and they all repeat it, innocent and pure as they are and brave beyond all bounds.”<sup>42</sup>

We also know that when he held classes at the Turk Street flat and other places across America, he gave meditation instructions. In *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*, Josephine MacLeod divulged hers. She wrote that when she and her friend Mrs. Roethlisberger went to him for meditation instructions, he said, “Meditate on the word ‘Om’ for a week and come again and tell me.” After a week, Joe and her friend returned. Mrs. Roethlisberger told Swamiji, “I see a light.” He said, “Good, keep on.” And Joe interjected, “O no, it is more like a glow in the heart.” Again Swamiji said, “Good, keep on.”<sup>43</sup>

Swami Abhayananda, a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order who knew Tantine, further disclosed the story of the mantra Swamiji had given her:

I heard from her [Tantine] that Swamiji had given her something, and a little later she came to him and said, “Swamiji, I can’t do this.” And he said, “All right; don’t worry.” Then many years later when she was staying at Belur Math that mantra began to well up within her without

any effort on her part. Every day she would meditate in the early morning, and it would come automatically. This she told me.<sup>44</sup>

Though Joe clearly received a mantra from Swamiji, she never claimed to be his disciple, but rather his friend. Swami Abhayananda explained Tantine’s understanding of the guru-disciple relationship: “She [Tantine] was his [Swamiji’s] disciple. I know it very well. But she looked upon him as more than her guru—as her own self.”<sup>45</sup> Holy Mother verified this in her own way. In a 1904 letter to Josephine MacLeod, Sister Nivedita wrote: “The Holy Mother told me last night that you are a jnani. I hope it won’t turn your head to be told so.”<sup>46</sup>

There are other inscrutable ways in which a world teacher such as Swamiji brought religion home to his Western women disciples. In a lecture entitled “Discipleship,” delivered in San Francisco, Swamiji disclosed: “The touch of the guru, the transmittal of spiritual energy, will quicken your heart.”<sup>47</sup> Swamiji’s “touch” would come when sometimes least expected by a look, a word, or a gentle stroke.

It was no accident that Swamiji used to scan his audiences before beginning his lectures.<sup>48</sup> Once, Mrs. Allan related, in San Francisco, “He looked out at the audience for a moment and then said: ‘Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached!’ It was like an electric shock! Marvelous!”<sup>49</sup>

Nor was it mere whimsy that Swamiji would sit by the hour and talk or simply

41. Burke, *Second Visit*, P. 415.

42. *Letters*, P. 131.

43. His Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences*, P. 233-234.

44. Burke, *New Discoveries: Vol. III*, P. 97.

45. Op. Cit.

46. Vedanta Society of Southern California, (MacLeod Collection, letter dated “Calcutta, Wednesday in Easter Week”).

47. Burke, *Second Visit*, P. 419.

48. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, Vol. VI: A New Gospel* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1987) P. 64.

49. Ibid. P. 295-296, 446.



chit-chat with the most unsuspecting ladies. Tantine remembered that "one evening at Ridgely he was so eloquent, about a dozen people listening, his voice becoming so soft and seemingly far away; when the evening was over, we all separated without even saying goodnight to each other. Such a holy quality pervaded. My sister, Mrs. Leggett, had occasion to go to one of the rooms afterward. There she found one of the guests, an agnostic, weeping. 'What do you mean?' my sister asked, and the lady said, 'That man has given me eternal life. I never wish to hear him again.'<sup>50</sup>

Swamiji sometimes accepted Western women disciples, whether they knew it or not. Miss Katherine Whitmarsh, Tantine's grandniece, was about two years old when Swamiji came to Ridgely. Miss Whitmarsh, or Prasanna as she is called, remarked that her mother "didn't have any religious interest,"<sup>51</sup> but "she used to say that Swamiji was the most delightful dinner companion she had ever had."<sup>52</sup> Prasanna remembered:

Swamiji used to talk to my mother about his mother and about me. I used to have a temper, and mother would stand me in the tub and pour cold water over me. Then Swamiji used to tell her that he had a temper as a little boy, and his mother would stand him in the tub and pour cold water over his head. He used to say to mother, "If you stand in the tub and pour cold water over the head, it will take the temper away."<sup>53</sup>

It used to strike Miss Whitmarsh how much her mother loved Swamiji. "He was so opposite to what she was,"<sup>54</sup> she remarked.

50. His Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences*, P. 244.

51. "Unpublished Conversations of Miss Katherine Whitmarsh," 17 November 1988, recorded by Pravrajika Brahmaprana, Sarada Convent, Santa Barbara.

52. Op. Cit.

53. "Unpublished Conversations of Miss Katherine Whitmarsh."

54. Op. Cit.

One of Prasanna's most vivid memories of her mother was her passing. She said: "We were sitting there [near her bedside] when she died. The maid had been with us for so many years, that we told her to come. The first thing she did, however, was to go over and see that mother looked all right—her hair and everything. She said, 'Look! Madam's hair is standing on end!'"<sup>55</sup>

Swamiji loved children, and Western mothers were able to observe Swamiji's affectionate and fun-loving or sometimes gravely spiritual interplay with them. To quote Marie Louise Burke:

Swamiji had a word or a blessing for everyone, even for the baby, Frances. One morning, as Alberta [Leggett] told it in later years to her sister, the child came in from the garden, some flowers in her hand. She gave them to Swamiji, who said gravely, "In India we give flowers to our teachers." And he pronounced over her some Sanskrit words.<sup>56</sup>

In this connection, Mrs. Hansbrough remembered that one morning after breakfast, Swamiji suddenly laid aside his pipe and called her daughter Dorothy to him. The little girl went and stood between his knees, with her hands on his thighs:

Swamiji put his hands at the back of her neck at the hairline and tapped up and over the top of head to the eyebrows. Then he called Ralph [Sister Lalita's son] and did the same thing. Ralph must have knelt, [she said], because Swamiji did not leave his seat.<sup>57</sup>

Mrs. Hansbrough recognized this moment as a sacred one—a "baptism" she called it. But Swamiji refused to label or explain it. He simply brushed it off as "just a custom we have in India."<sup>58</sup>

55. "Unpublished Conversations of Miss Katherine Whitmarsh."

56. Burke, *New Discoveries*: Vol. V, P. 138.

57. Burke, *Second Visit*, P. 223.

58. Ibid. P. 223-224.

Interestingly enough, even animals were nonexempt from the guru's touch. Sister Devamata wrote:

We recognized in him a power that no other teacher possessed. It was he alone who was shaping our thought and conviction. Even my dog—an Irish setter—felt this. He would stand perfectly still and a quiver would run through his body whenever Swamiji would lay his hand on his and tell him that he was a true yogi.<sup>59</sup>

Swamiji's mission did not end with his passing. During his life he had given something so tangible to his Western women disciples, that they, in turn, shared that with us through their lives, their letters, and their reminiscences. In Josephine MacLeod's 7 September 1902 letter to Sister Lalita, we are so moved by Joe's grief at Swamiji's passing, it gives us pause to wonder how closely we are living with Swamiji through these women. Joe wrote:

Dear Miss Mead,

I have waited to write you and your sisters till I could tell you the details and life of the last few weeks and hours of Swamiji. Now, I know indeed that the cablegram from Nivedita reading "Grieve not, all victory and benediction" that she sent me is true. His death was indeed a triumph and all India has thrilled to it.... On July 4th the day he died, besides meditating 3 hours in the morning, teaching the Vedas and Sanskrit grammar during several hours in the afternoon "he walked two miles with one of the monks, talking all the time about the rise and fall of nations from Babylon and Egypt downwards. On his return he spoke again of how well he had been feeling all through the day and free, and after evening meditation, he lay down in his own room with one of the young disciples to fan him and after an hour the brahmacharin, thinking him to be sleeping saw his hands tremble a little and he gave out a deep breath and he did not breathe at all for a minute or so. Then another deep breath and his head rolled off the pillow and all was still. The man thought this unusual and called for help. All came to find Swami lying flat on his back. His eyes fixed on

the centre of his eyebrow. His face all radiant with a divine calm, the beauty of which can never be fathomed, nor the like of which has one ever seen before. Every one could well see that he was in samadhi and thought he would rise again. They tried all the means, but he never spoke again...."<sup>60</sup>

Swamiji loved you—you three sisters—with such tenderness. "You were the women of which America could be proud—the silent courageous worker—fearless and self-reliant—and so pure...." And then your way of leagueing together to give him a dollar a month of your hard earned money. It was that practical intelligent use of life that he saw epitomized in you all! He said to me once, "I can never love the rich and happy but it is the hard working American girl that I love—that my heart yearns to help....", and I always knew that he thought of you in these moments.

Dear Miss Mead—while he lived you served him and now he is dead. My heart turns to you with an inexpressible tenderness. I do not know which way my life will turn. I believe one can only do well what one *loves* to do. So I will wait till this first anguish is over before I try to make a future.... J. MacLeod.<sup>61</sup>

Swamiji came to America, wore our clothes, ate our food, and spoke our language. He moved in many circles—from the intellectual and aristocratic to simple, middle class America—in order to reach and liberate his American devotees. These are the tests he passed for us. Naturally, who else would we turn to—but one who loved us so unconditionally that, in a sense, he sacrificed his health and thus shortened his life so that we as women could be unabashed companions of an Everfree soul; the Prophet, whose complete faith in our inner strength and resources invoked in us the ability to draw on those resources; and the Man among man, who respected our womanly national character to such a degree that he boldly declared, "If I have to come

59. His Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences*, P. 134.

60. Extract of letter from Swami Saradananda to Josephine MacLeod enclosed in Joe's letter to Sister Lalita.

61. Vedanta Society of Southern California, MacLeod Collection.



back as woman I must and will come as an American woman" ?<sup>62</sup> Clearly, it was Swamiji who vindicated Americans and women to the world, and American women to India.

Swamiji once declared: "I want to be a voice without a form,"<sup>63</sup> and to this day, his words lift off the pages of his books and become like a warm, fatherly presence tugging gently at us. Who has the credibility to comfort women who have agonized over choosing the huseholder path, but Mary Hale's sannyasin brother who drolly called her romancing "hooking a Willy"<sup>64</sup> and ended his letter's postscript to her with "Write when you find time between

dances"?<sup>65</sup> If at times, we feel we have not progressed, or that our spiritual practices have become dull and dry, his was the tender voice that reminded us he is always watching for the "face upon which the finger of the Lord has written in unmistakable letters 'mine'."<sup>66</sup> And, if we feel we have no true friend in the world whom we can call our own, we hold Swamiji to his unconditional promise the day he told Edith Allan that if she ever got into any trouble, to call on him and he would hear her wherever he was.<sup>67</sup>

(Concluded)

62. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West, New Discoveries: The World Teacher, Vol. IV* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986) P. 64.

63. *Letters*, P. 84.

64. Swami Vidyatmananda, "Whatever Happened to Mary Hale?", *Prabuddha Bharata* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1979), letter cited from Swamiji to Mary Hale, 16 March 1899, P. 65.

65. *Op. Cit.*

66. *Letters*, P. 74.

67. Burke, *Second Visit*, P. 414.

## SUFISM: A BROAD OUTLINE

PIYUS KANTI DAS

The base-stone of Islamic religion seems to be the fear of and obedience to an all-powerful Allah who dispenses justice and mercy on the faithful who believes in Allah and obeys the message of Allah's only prophet Mohammed. The same Allah also punishes the unbelievers or Kafers, and therefore it is the duty of the faithful ones to convert the unfaithful ones. This is clear from the message of the prophet Mohammed himself. But the heart and mind of a section of later Muslims could not be satisfied without a feeling of love for God. They had also a yearning for His vision and communion. Sufism contributed these elements which the lovers of God among the Muslims very much needed for their souls' satisfaction. These pious and God-seeking Muslims were designated by the

term 'Sufi'. Different explanations have been given by the scholars as to the origin of the word 'Sufi'. The most reasonable explanation seems to be that the word 'Sufi' came from the early Sufi mendicants' practice of wearing 'Suf' (coarse wool) as a mark of austerity. The use of 'Suf' gradually disappeared but the words 'Sufism' and 'Sufi' continued to designate the doctrine and its followers.

The sufis are mystics, and mysticism is inseparable from Sufism. Mysticism is the view that does not believe in the competence of reason or intellect only in order to know the Divine Reality. As Kabir puts it: 'They are blind who hope to see God by the light of reason', and 'Philosophy cannot attain God'. To describe mystic experience, we may say that the experience which is called

'mystical' is a supersensuous perception of Reality. It is other than sense-experience and also other than the exercise of mere reason.

Mystics in general believe that reason is discursive. It ends in abstractions and does not lead to the knowledge of God. Rational or intellectual approach involves the duality of subject and object and as such it cannot know God who is believed by most mystics to be the One, a unified whole. But God, according to the mystics, is not unknowable. The mystics believe that God can be found in direct spiritual experience. It is only by intuitive insight that God can be known or comprehended. Many mystics, including some sufi teachers, believed that they had realised God through such visions. It may be noted that the urge to know through mystical intuition is not the same as the impulse to know through scientific or metaphysical method. The desire to make a sense of the universe is common in scientific, metaphysical and mystical urge, but in the mystical urge another thing enters. This is the desire for 'salvation'. Entering into a communion with God or the feeling of being one with God is what is considered 'salvation' or the way to salvation in this context. Again, mystic experience, unlike the scientific or metaphysical knowledge, has the quality of ineffability i.e. a mystic cannot describe his mystical experience in language. It is very difficult to give a definition or concrete description of mystic's knowledge. According to William James, mystical states are more like feeling than intellection. Mysticism, according to some thinkers, need not concern itself with the formulation of an intellectual understanding of Reality or with demonstrating its soundness through reason or philosophy. In some mystics, however, both the roles are merged into one. The great Indian mystic Shankara is an example of this kind of mystic philosopher. This is also perhaps true of a good

number of mystics including many sufis. Some mystics are seen defending what they realise in what goes by the name of intuitive experience. It may further be said that though mystic states have likeness with feeling, the mystics seem to experience them also as a state of knowledge and this knowledge carries with it a sense of authoritativeness so far the mystics themselves are concerned. All mystics do not deny the validity of the philosophical knowledge of God. Henry Suso (1295-1366), a disciple of the great mystic Eckhart, is the example of such a mystic. He, however, emphasised the sense of certitude the mystic experience carries with it.

Mysticism has an important role in the history of religion inasmuch as the founders of some religions and religious sects have been credited with mystic experience of God and the followers of such religious teachers consider a similar experience the summum bonum of their spiritual aspirations.

Mystic thoughts have been differently classified by different writers. Here we shall divide mysticism only into Pantheistic and Theistic mysticism. There are different theories as to the relation between God and the world. Pantheism and Theism are two such theories. The point at issue between the different theories is whether God is transcendent above or is immanent in the world. Pantheism and Theism accept God as wholly immanent and partly immanent respectively. Pantheism denies the existence of anything outside God. It is the theory that God is the world and God is everything. Such views are traceable even in the Upanishads. In modern times, Spinoza is its first great propounder. He identifies God and the Infinite Nature or Substance. God, Nature and Substance indicate to him one and the same thing. It follows that finite human minds also have no independent existence in Spinoza's system. He finds them absorbed into one God. Spinoza calls



them finite temporal modes of the eternal Substance. Theism does not accept the Pantheistic absorption of things and beings into God. According to it, God is both immanent and transcendent in relation to the world. Immanence is not taken here in the Pantheistic sense of identity. As distinguished from the Pantheistic view that all is God, Theism puts forward the view that all is in God. The finite things and beings have real and distinct existence though their being is dependent upon the Being of God who has also a transcendent existence in relation to man and the world.

Mystics in general are not Pantheists, but some mystics are so. Eckhart's view well illustrates Pantheistic mysticism. He says that there is no existence outside God and that God alone is existent. God is the creator, but He does not create outside Himself or near and beside Himself. The created things and beings exist in Him. They exist by the existence of God and they are not external to Him. To take another example, we may mention the name of John Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) who thinks that the creatures were originally present in God and returning to that state of unity is the aim of mystic activities. Without this unity creatures would be reduced to nothingness. On attaining this unity the soul is lost in the ineffable abyss of the Godhead. This stage of unity is unattainable by reason, but it is accomplished by love. Most of the mystics, however, are theists. Communion with God, not identity or complete unity with Him, is their goal.

To come back to our discussion on Sufism, we may mention here that Sufism first arose in Persia and other non-Arabic or half-Arabic Muslim countries. The oppression of the Arabs over the non-Arabic conquered people made them revolt in the form of economic-cum-political outbursts. But these movements were crushed by the Abbaside Calipha with terrible torture. When active

revolt fails, people are likely to look towards the 'other world' where compensation may be found. Some people of the non-Arabic Muslim countries looked towards world-denial and asceticism as means of escape. They began to explain oppression and miseries of life as God's will which eventually became an important factor in Sufism. Asceticism, became the key-note of early Sufism. Al-Hasan al-Basri (died in 728 A.D.) in a letter to Calipha Umar (717-720 A.D.) advocated that man should welcome poverty and treat the acceptance of wealth as a sin. Some scholars are of the opinion that this asceticism was partly a revival of Pre-Islamic asceticism which could be found among the Gnostics, Neo-Platonists and Buddhists. Asceticism came to be considered by the Sufis as a means of purification of the heart and mind. The idea of gaining paradise as an end of life was condemned by the Sufis as obstacle to the way to God. One day, Rabia of Basra (died in 801 A.D.), a great lady Sufi saint, was seen running with fire in one hand and water in the other. On being questioned, she said that she was going to set fire in the paradise and to drown the hell under water. What the great lady emphasised in this action was that God should not be worshipped for fear or hope. God should be loved for God's sake. Rabia could not even love the prophet, because her love of God absorbed her entirely and she could not keep in her heart love for anybody else.

There was another section of ascetics among the Muslims. They were called Zahids or faqirs or Quranic ascetics. They renounced the pleasures of life for fear of God and hell. But to the Sufis, it was no renunciation. The Sufi renunciation was for the realisation of God for God's sake. God-realisation was the aim of all true Sufis. Salvation comes as a consequence of God-realisation. Salvation is necessary, some Sufis contended, for getting rid of the mise-

ries of life. Some Sufis, however, accepted fear as a door to wisdom while acknowledging the superiority of love to fear.

One of the causes of the origin of Sufi outlook, as stated before, is the oppression of the ruling power. It may be mentioned that certain complexes created in the mind also play their part in inducing an individual to renounce the worldly possessions. Curbed desires remain in the sub-conscious mind and seek fulfilment. In the same way, the instinct of self-assertion if thwarted or if a feeling of egoism is injured, the mind immediately reacts for revenge. But if taking revenge becomes impossible, it creates complexes in the sub-conscious mind. Purification of mind means cleansing of the mind from such desires and complexes. However, if a desire is denied fulfilment for a long time the mind ceases to desire it. This is also true of the Sufis who renounced the world.

Asceticism, as mentioned, also entered into the Muslim community through the conversion of pre-Islamic Gnostics and Neo-Platonists. Perhaps, Buddhism also made a contribution in that sphere. But there is no sufficient reason to believe that Sufism has originated from pre-Islamic asceticism as some thinkers believe it to be. This is true also of the relation between Sufism and Quranic asceticism. Nor the Quran can be said to be the source of Sufi thought. Some points of difference between the Quranic Islam and Sufism may be noted in this connection. Islam stands for the dualism of God and man, but the Sufis aim at returning to the original union or unity with God. Again, while Islam believes that the world has been created for man and so he should work in it, Sufism stands for renunciation of the world. There are other points of difference also, such as Sufi renunciation is for the realisation of God for God's sake, while Quranic asceticism is for the fear of hell and in the hope of getting

a place in paradise. We, however, need not make the sweeping generalisation that all the Zahids or Quranic ascetics turned to asceticism for the fear of hell and in the hope of entry into paradise. It will also not be reasonable to assume that the Quranic influence had nothing to do with the Sufis though the former cannot be treated as the source of the latter.

Next came the age of Sufi mysticism. Sufism, after it came in contact with Indian philosophy, developed new ideas. Under the influence of India's theistic thought, a section of the Sufis came to believe that the phenomenal world is a handiwork of God and need not be hated. They also came to believe in the doctrine of Divine grace. A section of the best known Sufis, however, was influenced by Advaita Vedantic views. Even before the conquest of Sind by the Arabs in 712 A.D., Advaitic ideas began to percolate in the Muslim world. The conquest of Sind exhilarated the process. Abu Ali of Sind was the spiritual preceptor of Abu Yazid of Bistani, a celebrated Sufi. Abu Yazid developed the doctrine of 'Tauhid' or 'identity of essence'. By identity, in this context, he meant the identity of the individual self and God. The merger of the individual self with God, in Yazid's view, should be the aim of life. He said: 'I am He'. 'Verily I am God'. 'There is no God except me, so worship me'. Further he said: 'I am the wine-drinker, the wine and the cup-bearer'. The idea of the identity between God and the individual self now became the mainstream of Sufi thought. Mansur al Hallaj, another celebrated Sufi saint, visited India for learning Indian thought. He was so carried away by mystic experience and said that he did not feel duality. He became convinced of the identity of God and the individual self and said: 'I am the Creative Thought or God'. These utterances of Abu Yazid and Mansur al Hallaj are like translations of the



Advaita Vedantic assertion 'Aham Brahmasmi'. It was too much for the orthodox Mullahs to tolerate. Inevitable as it was, royal persecution came down heavily upon the Sufis. To evade persecution, Abu Yazid pretended to be insane. Many Sufi saints including Mansur al Hallaj were executed. Hallaj went to the extent of saying that mystics are superior to prophets revealing within themselves the creative truth which called them into being. He was crucified in 922 A.D.

A Persian mystic Abu Said who died in 1049 A.D., regarded the Sharia as superfluous to those who had attained the goal of mystic path. He went even to the extent of preventing his disciples from going to Mecca for pilgrimage. Ibn al' Arabi who died in 1241 A.D., said that love alone was his religion. One of his disciples described the Quran as polytheistic.

Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (1059-1111 A.D., known as Algazal), an authority on Islamic theology, also leaned towards Sufism. He denied the ultimate authority of reason and said that direct realisation is the path of knowing God. He made efforts to make Sufism acceptable to orthodoxy. But, he said that certain things of mystic experience he was not at liberty to disclose and it is suspected by the scholars that Ghazzali reached the same point as Hallaj. He, however, kept himself acceptable to orthodoxy by constantly appealing to the authority of Muhammad and expressed the view that sainthood is derived from prophecy. However, he laid stress on his belief that salvation is not possible without ecstasy and inward transformation.

Sufism as a medieval system of philosophy was theological. God is the object of realisation. Realisation meant to the theistic Sufis communion with God, and to the pantheistic Sufis unity with God. Sufism as an ascetic doctrine guaranteed liberation from the miseries of life and

knowledge. Being redeemed became identical with God. Sometimes, God was also described as Truth or Thought or Supreme Mind. Most Sufis understood Supreme Mind on the analogy of human mind. Some Sufis were of the view that the material existence is an emanation from this Supreme Mind. It emanates from the Supreme Mind just as ideas emerge from the human mind. Before manifestation, the universe was latent in the mind of God. This emanation or manifestation was stimulated by the impulsive principle of love and through a series of emanations the universe came into being. Emanation, it may be noted, included matter. Some later Sufis like Ibn Arabi and Jili specifically states it. Thus Divine existence pervades everything in the universe. It appears that, according to most Sufis, the universe is not an illusory show. But its transitory and short-lived pleasures, they thought, stand as obstacles on the way to God.

Arabi is regarded as one of the greatest authorities on Sufi philosophy. He considered both man and nature as mirrors in which God is displayed. God is manifested in creation. God's relation to phenomenal objects is like spirit's relation to man. As to God's relation to man, Arabi said that when a man contemplates himself he contemplates God, and when God contemplates Himself he contemplates man.

Sufism developed the view that man has two souls—the rational self (ruh) and the animal self (nafs). Some scholars are of the opinion that this view has been borrowed by Sufism from its precursor system viz. Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism. Rational self being potentially pure is capable of subduing the carnal desires of the animal self and coming into communion with or uniting with its original source, namely God. Renunciation is necessary, for it helps the rational self to subdue the animal self's desire for transitory worldly pleasures.

As to the nature of rational self (ruh), some well-known Sufi thinkers including Junaid expressed the view that it is spirit and is incomprehensible. God alone knows its essence and nature. What we can say is that it is an existence associated with intelligence and reason.

Some Sufis believed in something like the teleological explanation of the existence of God. They saw design in creation. Most Sufis considered God as 'All-powerful, Wise and Merciful.' However they were also in favour of renouncing the world. Some later Sufis, of course, considered the world as helpful in men's pursuit for knowing God.

The aim of Sufi contemplation is attainment of communion or unity with God. To the question whether personality survives in the ultimate union with God, some Sufis will say that it does, while some others will say that it does not. At times, the mystical union was explained on the analogy of love and marriage. According to Alfred Guillaume, the Sufi has a positive passion for losing himself in the infinity of the Godhead. This is certainly true of many of the Sufis. Yet Guillaume's remark appears to us an unwarranted generalisation since there is nothing to show that all the Sufis had such a passion for pantheistic absorption.

It may be mentioned in this connection that the joy which the mystic feels in union or communion with God is mingled with suffering because of his being separated from God as soon as the mystic ecstasy is over. He is required to wait with a painful heart for the renewal of the ecstasy.

A subsidiary object of spiritual aspiration, according to Sufism, is the knowledge of God. This knowledge is necessary for the realisation of unity or communion with God. True knowledge of the world and soul is helpful in attaining the knowledge of God. Many Sufis believe that the human heart is a mirror in which a man sees the vision

of God. It is because the mirror is polluted by worldly desires, cleansing of the heart by ascetic practices becomes necessary.

A Sufi spiritual aspirant is required to begin with a two-fold practice of detachment from worldly enjoyments and attachment to God. In this path to God-realisation, he requires a spiritual director to guide him. Such a director is called a 'pir', or 'murshid', in Muslim terminology. The aspirant proceeds to God through 'hal' and 'muqam'. The first is the spiritual mood of the seeker and the second is the stage of attainment on the path towards God-realisation. This process continues till the goal is attained. 'Hal' is a gift of God and he grants it by his grace. After such a 'hal' is granted, the aspirant proceeds to a higher 'muqam' by his own effort. Through this process the aspirant reaches God. A state of reciprocal love between the aspirant and God develops. An aspirant's love is reciprocated by Divine love. Thus, in the process to salvation or in attaining communion or unity with God, love and yearning for Him play a great role.

Renunciation is a negative principle and so a positive principle was needed to keep the Sufi aspirant on the true path to God. Emphasis was thus laid on love for God as a positive principle. Love for God was taken to mean a passionate longing for Him. It was considered by most of the Sufis a more effective means than renunciation. Renunciation did not mean to all the Sufi saints abstinence from physical pleasures and many of the Sufi saints were married. The highest and the most complete love is associated with mystic experience which is the highest form of knowledge. As mentioned before, love between man and God at one stage becomes reciprocal. This stage comes after a seeker succeeds in cleaning his heart.

Before we conclude this broad outline on Sufism, we should mention and explain the



doctrine of 'Nur-I-Muhammadi'. The central aim of the Sufis, in whatever way their views may be interpreted, is union or unity with God. It was considered dangerous by the orthodoxy. We have already mentioned about the persecution of the Sufi saints. In order to avoid troubles some of the best known Sufi saints like Ibn Fariz of Cairo who died in 1235 A.D., introduced the idea of Muhammad as a substitute for the idea of God and expressed the view that if a man wanted to know God, he must achieve union with the idea of Muhammad projected by God Himself to be His likeness with the purpose of leading mankind back to Him.

We should also mention here two other doctrines, namely, the Doctrine of Saintship and the Doctrine of *Insan-ul-Kamil*. The first doctrine was expounded by Ibn Arabi whom we have mentioned before. He said that every prophet has a saintly aspect which is higher than his prophetic aspect. Prophets and saints, Arabi said, are the manifestations of the Reality of Muhammad and a saint represents its most perfect manifestation. Further, as Muhammad was known as the seal of the prophets, Arabi claimed for himself the title of the Seal of the Saints. Seal, in this context, seems to mean 'most authentic'. The second doctrine, if divested of confusing terminology, upholds the view that God descends into the matter and man ascends to God. A man who succeeds in his effort to ascend to God is 'intermediate' between the Creator and His creatures and is called by various names, such as the first intelligence and the pure soul. It is not quite clear whether this 'intermediate' mediates between God and man. The propounder of this Doctrine of *Insan-ul-Kamil* is Abdul Karim al-Jili (1365-1415 A.D.).

To make Sufism a bit more intelligible, it is necessary to explain the concepts of 'Fana' and 'Baqa'. Different interpretations

have been given to the terms, but the main import is clear. 'Fana' means dominance of God's presence in the heart of a spiritual aspirant and the total annihilation of the latter in God; and 'Baqa' means its subsistence with God. The former doctrine is consistent with the philosophy of some of the Sufis whom we have described as pantheist for their belief in the identity of the individual self and God.

An important contribution of Sufism to Muslim worship is the development of 'dhikr' which means praise of God and was enjoined by Muhammed himself. The Sufi contribution lies in the emphasis laid on it. The Sufis maintained that 'dhikr' should be continuously practised and not merely at the five canonical periods. Meditation is another kind of worship the Sufis added to Islam. 'Dhikr' consists in recitation of some secret formula (such as La'-i-la-ha-il-al-lah) and is preparatory to meditation. The objects of meditation are mainly the names and attributes of God as set forth in the *Quran*.

As has been mentioned, the Sufis regard either union (wasl) with or absorption (fana) in God as their goal. But those who set out for the above goal require the guidance of a spiritual preceptor called 'Pir', 'Shaikh' or 'Murshid'. These preceptors were believed to have reached the goal and as such their authority was considered divine. The authority of a Sufi saint was considered divine also because he was believed to have had inherited the whole significance of Shie'h Imam. The Sufi Orders stress the companionship of saints for the initiates or novices which was necessary for their spiritual well-being. A true disciple (murid), at least in some cases, was required to be more obedient to his master than to God. Jalal-ud-din Rumi described his master as *Shams-i-Tabrige* or the monarch supreme who had come from above clothed in the garment of mortality. It is the preceptor

who leads the disciples through different stages to God.

It has already been mentioned that the discipline of the Sufi seeker is 'dhikr' which ordinarily means remembering God or repeating His name. 'Dhikr' is of two kinds—'Dhikr-i-jali' or reciting aloud and 'Dhikr-i-khafi' or reciting mentally. To this

practice was later added music and dance.

About music, however, there was difference of opinion among the Sufis. Some took it up as a means of bringing trance which is helpful in realising God. Some did not accept it as it came from no acknowledged authority of Islam. This also was true of dance. Ghazzali rightly spoke of them as novelties.

## SHRI RAMAKRISHNA AND THE ENGLISHMAN'S CALCUTTA

DR. KAMALA S. JAYA RAO

When young Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya arrived in Calcutta, the city of Calcutta was in a process of ferment and transformation. The young and educated Indians were enthusiastically plunging into the socio-religious reformation movement started by Raja Ramamohan Roy. The Orthodox Hindu society was in convulsions due to the impact of Westernisation. Europeanised young Calcuttans were aping the dress and life-style of their British rulers and ridiculing their own tradition and culture. Those who learnt the language of English rulers put on superior airs. Their dreamland was England. Their prestige was in European culture, literature, and their pride was in unquestioning surrender to Western culture. With a profound sense of humour, Shri Ramakrishna used to enjoy the aping of Western culture by Indians. 'Haven't you noticed that, if you read a little English, you at once begin to utter English words: *foot fit it mit?* Then you put on boots and whistle a tune, and so on,' remarked Shri Ramakrishna.<sup>1</sup> The 'Englishman' is an

epithet with which Shri Ramakrishna used to describe all Western-educated Indians.

The city landscape was also changing. On the ruins of Indosaracenic architecture was built the capital city of British India, with its Greco-Roman buildings and Gothic arches. The white man brought along with him, not only his culture and religion, but also some of his modern innovations. To an ordinary country lad, Calcutta offered much entertainment and much to marvel at. Shri Ramakrishna enjoyed the human drama of contemporary Calcutta. Back home in his village, he would recount, for months on end, his experiences in the City, with the curiosity of a child and the fun-making of a wise witness of worldly life. The Calcutta life was for him a variegated scenario of trivial, sensory attractions and pleasures which Shri Ramakrishna beautifully paraphrased into that all-inclusive phrase, woman and gold. What charm could they hold for him, who realised all this to be a framework of illusion?

Yet Shri Ramakrishna did not shun the city and live a hermit's life at Dakshineswar. He went to Calcutta many times, to be entertained by his 'rasaddar' Mathur Babu or to see and converse with devotees like

(All references are based on incidents from the *Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna*. The dates on which the incidents and conversations occurred are given herewith:

1. Date of the incident: 27 October, 1882.



Keshav Chandra Sen, Balaram Basu and Adhar Sen, or meet scholars and writers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. He took in every bit of Calcutta, not with the greed of the worldly-minded but with the wide-eyed innocence and joy of a five-year old whose infinite bliss was in his living with the Divine Mother. It is thus we find him riding in a phaeton through the European quarters, peeping out of the carrier's window, at the beautiful mansions there. These were palatial buildings, in which lived the aliens, and some among their race would, within a few decades, pay him great homage and even adore him as God. But presently the inmates were perhaps not aware who was passing by, for over their windows and doors were draped thick, velvet curtains like veils of ignorance separating man from God. Behind them bustled the mem-sahibs in corsetted, ankle-length Victorian dresses, their blond tresses coiffured into high buns. Sometimes their manicured fingers played over the piano-board and Shri Ramakrishna would hear their singing voices. Perhaps, occasionally he did get a glimpse of one of them and beneath that white alabastrine skin he must have perceived only the black-hued Kali, his Mother Divine. The porticoes of the mansions were supported by massive Greco-Roman pillars, an amazing sight for a country lad. Hriday, his nephew, would exclaim, 'Look uncle! There is the Viceroy's palace with the big columns'. The uncle was, however, unimpressed: 'The Mother revealed to me that they were merely clay bricks laid one on top of another'.<sup>2</sup> He perhaps also foresaw that a hundred years hence even these mansions would disappear, having been replaced by ugly, cement concrete multi-rise apartments in which the people of Calcutta would continue to live like 'worms crawling in the dark'.

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2. Ibid., 9 March 1884.

But this very Calcutta with all its myriad faces brought only revelations of Divine Knowledge to Ramakrishna's god-centred mind. The European residences must have been surrounded by gardens with well laidout paths, and green grass lawns, where jostled the oriental hibiscus and oleander and the exotic jasmine with the imported, non-fragrant dahlias, zinnias and bougainvillaea. One entered them through high, ornamental gates. The pillar posts on either side supported big glass lamps. When darkness descended, the gas inside these lamps would also be lit, throwing an incandescent glow all around. These had a different lesson for Ramakrishna: 'Every house has a connection for gas, and gas can be obtained from the main storage tank of the Gas Company. Apply to the Company, and it will arrange for your supply of gas. Through prayer all individual souls can be united to the Supreme Soul'.<sup>3</sup>

There were, in Calcutta, other architectural features to be seen, too, like for instance, the Ochterloney Monument. When jetweary travellers go up the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Empire State Building in New York, what do they see? They see upto the Horizon. Other weary couples like themselves, with children screaming and crying out of sheer exhaustion, at the bottom of these towers and buildings, see a souvenir shop, a restaurant and bar, and the ubiquitous cameras constantly clicking away. These are what they should be seeing when they are at the bottom, not at the top. Ramakrishna's visit to Calcutta Monument brought forth such nuggets of wisdom: 'As long as you stand at the foot of the Monument, so long do you see horses, carriages, Englishmen and Englishwomen. But when you climb to its top, you behold the sky and the oceans stretching to infinity. Then you do not enjoy buildings, carriages, horses or

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3. Ibid., 8 April, 1883.

men. They look like ants. Many people talk of Brahma-jnana, but their minds are always preoccupied with lower things—houses, buildings, money, name and sensory pleasures. All such things as attachment to the world and enthusiasm for ‘woman’ and ‘gold’, disappear after the attainment of the knowledge of Brahman.<sup>4</sup>

Not only did Shri Ramakrishna climb atop the Monument, but he went down a sloping road too, to see the Fort. He said: ‘Man doesn’t know what it is that causes his downfall. Once, while going to the Fort, I couldn’t see at all that I was driving down a sloping road ; but when the carriage went inside the Fort, I realised how far down I had come’. ‘Men do not realise how far they are dragged down by women’.<sup>5,6</sup>

Then, there was the day when his devotees wanted to get a portrait photograph of his taken. Did they then realise that for the first time ever in the history of mankind, a true picture of an Incarnation would be handed down to men and women of future generations, those unfortunate ones who would not be able to see Him in flesh and blood ? Henceforth, no haloes will be painted around his head nor an additional pair of arms be attached to the torso. People will now believe that ‘when God becomes man, He is exactly like man’<sup>7</sup>—the logical corollary to ‘God made man in His own Image’.

They arrived at the studio, with Shri Ramakrishna attired in a red-bordered dhoti, polished slippers, a dark coat properly buttoned up and his hair neatly combed. What child was there, whose curiosity was not aroused by the sight of the big, black box on a tall tripod, with the photographer disappearing behind folds of black silk cloth ? Shri Ramakrishna too had to know

how it all worked. His head went under the black cloth and he understood it all: ‘A real devotee develops the power of assimilating instruction. An image cannot be impressed on bare glass, but only on glass stained with a black solution, as in photography. The black solution is devotion to God’.<sup>8</sup>

It is amazing how a mind that reeled when the ebb-tide and flood-tide was explained<sup>9</sup>, could now grasp all these principles of modern science. There was before him the telegraph wire sending messages across hundreds of miles. Ramakrishna said: ‘If there is a tiny break in the telegraph-wire, the news cannot be transmitted. Yoga is not possible if there is the slightest obstacle’.<sup>10</sup>

What his reaction would have been to the balloon flight at Calcutta Maidan<sup>11</sup>, we shall never know. There he saw the English boy leaning against a tree, his body bent in three places. No, that was no white-skinned boy. Shri Ramakrishna said that it was Krishna of the complexion of a dark, monsoon cloud, standing cross legged under the tree of Vrindavan. An Indian devotee would like to think that for the English lad this surely must have been the last birth, as the compassionate glance of an incarnation of God fell on him.

Another day it was a visit to the museum of the Asiatic Society. There may have seen some ugly, frightening skeletons standing as testimony to His advice to householders: ‘Always analyse what you see. What is there in the body of a woman ? Only such things as blood, flesh, fat, entrails and the like. Why should one love such a body ?’<sup>12</sup> There were also some strange objects on display. They are fossils, he was

4. Ibid., 1 January, 1883.

5. Ibid., 15 June, 1883.

6. Ibid., 25 May, 1884.

7. Ibid., 24 December, 1883.

8. Ibid., 10 June, 1883.

9. Ibid., 7 September, 1884.

10. Ibid., 11 October, 1884.

11. Ibid., 21 September, 1884.

12. Ibid., 24 August, 1882.



told. 'A whole animal has become stone! Just see what an effect has been produced by company! Likewise, by constantly living in the company of a holy man one verily becomes holy'<sup>13</sup>.

His devotees never left his company. They were an enthusiastic lot and went with him wherever he went. They never stood in awe of him, for they loved him too deeply for that. How many times he told them that God was their own, to be loved and not to be feared. They showed him around Calcutta as a host would a highly-honoured guest. Like doting parents, they catered to every whim of his, like, for instance, the time when in the middle of nowhere, he declared he was thirsty.<sup>14</sup> Keshav's nephew brought him a glass of water from the India Club where the worldly-minded smoked, drank and played cards. Why did he do that? Blessed is the man who drank from the very glass, later. Again a devotee would like to think that it was perhaps for a promise made in some past life.

They took him to the Zoological Garden one day. As a sightseeing excursion it was not much of a success, for they showed him the lion first: 'I went into samadhi at the sight of the lion, for the carrier of the Mother awakened in my mind the consciousness of the Mother Herself. In that state who could see the other animals? I had to return home after seeing only the lion'.<sup>15</sup>

The trip to the circus was a different affair. Oh! what breath-taking feats! A single false step, a short moment of distraction and there would be disaster: 'Did you see how the Englishwoman stood on one foot on her horse while it ran like lightning? How difficult a feat that must be! She must have practised a long time....Spiritual

practice is extremely necessary; otherwise one cannot rightly live in the world'.<sup>16</sup>

Thus did Shri Ramakrishna go round Calcutta, seeing, observing, and teaching. What he saw were, however, only few of the wonderful things brought in by the British Culture. There were many more enthralling things in England. To the young Indian turned-Englishman, England was Paradise and God. But, 'God is our England', declared Shri Ramakrishna.<sup>17</sup> To him God alone was real and everything in this universe proceeded from Him. Everything was created for His own pleasure like a rich man's garden. Why be enamoured of the garden where flowers bloom today and wither away tomorrow? 'But almost everyone is satisfied simply by seeing the garden. Only one or two look for its owner. People enjoy the beauty of the world; they do not seek its owner', lamented Shri Ramakrishna.<sup>18</sup>

The question then arises: why did Shri Ramakrishna, who saw and talked with the Mistress of the Garden, at *his* will, go round Calcutta, a trivial part of Her Garden, with such joy and curiosity? His actions verged on the scandalous. Imagine, a God-man buying the cheapest circus ticket, sitting on a bench and watching young English girls perform acrobatics! If one were to wonder if he munched peanuts, it would not be blasphemy. Why did he not shun all these, if only to set an example to his disciples and devotees?

One can almost hear his rejoinder (with a smile undoubtedly), "Why should I or why should you, either?" To him the world was not apart from God and he would say: 'How can you eliminate from the Reality the Universe and its living beings? If you do that, It will lack Its full weight. You

13. Ibid., 9 March, 1884.

14. Ibid., 27 October, 1882.

15. Ibid., 24 February, 1884.

16. Ibid., 15 November, 1882.

17. Ibid., 25 May, 1884.

18. Ibid., 10 June, 1883.

cannot find out the total weight of the bel fruit if you eliminate the seeds and the shell'.<sup>19</sup> To him there was no distinction between the natural world and the so-called man-made world, between the quiet solitude of Kamarpukur and the maddening crowd of Calcutta. In the circus of Life, he had a free ticket to a ringside seat. His teachings were based on almost all aspects and even the small happenings in our daily lives.

19. Ibid., 16 December, 1883.

The lesson underlying Shri Ramakrishna's outings is perhaps this. In this world of the senses, sensory attractions cannot altogether be avoided. But one must be aware that every stimulus that impinges on our senses has an essential core, a spiritual content, which can help us avoid the snare. Admire the bel fruit, but do not stop there. Break open the shell, discard the seeds and enjoy the essential part inside. Then one can build around oneself a 'mansion of mirth' and live happily ever after.

## LITERACY AND THE CHANGING PEASANT CULTURES IN NORTH INDIA\*

B. SINGH AND A. BHOWMIK

### *Introduction*

The entire human race is engaged today in attaining socio-cultural transformation. In this crucial battle the world-countries including even those which have attained independence recently are seen competing against one another. In this crucial march of progress some nations have gone ahead while others are lagging behind. This situation of unequal development in countries of the modern world led social scientists to class the whole world into two divisions: developed bloc and under-developed bloc. A term "Third World" has also been used often to address the developing nations of the under-developed bloc. This Third World comprises altogether nearly three million rural communities in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Oceania. People inhabiting these rural communities in the developing countries of the Third

World are considered to be a great responsibility of as also a potential threat for the continued existence of the developed world.

Cultures of these small communities of the developing world have been identified as "hybrid or compound cultures" by Redfield (1953, '55, '56) and as "traditional cultures" by Spicer (1952), Foster (1962), Dobrowsky (1971) and Shanin (1971) to quote but a few names of Ethnographers, Social-anthropologists and Sociologists. The term "traditional culture" implies cultural content and values of the peasant world which are transmitted orally and not through any transmission media of mechanical character. Low level of technology, stability of settlement, anonymity with respect to the names of producers and contributors, belief in fatalistic values, a conservative outlook and obstinate adherence to customs, existence of rut and inertia in thoughts and actions and finally a slow rhythm and tempo of development were considered by scholars to be some of the basic features of these traditional cultures.

\* Article presented at the XIIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences held between July 24-July 31, 1988 at Zagreb, Yugoslavia.



Since people belonging to these traditional cultures lacked in scientific reasoning and rationalistic attitude and pursued a rigid adherence to their customs and beliefs, the challenging task of speedy socio-cultural transformation was by no means an easy task to accomplish. To be successful at this, there was a dire need for employing some effective measures. At this juncture literacy was thought to be a vital force. Being convinced about the effectiveness of this powerful instrument in bringing about the desired transformation most of the Third World countries launched a campaign for promotion of literacy in their rural and urban areas.

Government of India took serious efforts in past four decades for universalisation of education. Consequently the literacy rate in India has gone up from merely 8 per cent in 1947 at the time of country's independence to 29 per cent in 1971 and 36 per cent in 1981. Although the number of schools and colleges is increasing every year and education upto elementary and primary level is provided free of cost and children of both scheduled and backward castes and tribes are offered scholarships for their education, these measures, however, failed to improve the literacy situation in the country to the desired extent as indicated from the educational survey reports. These reports suggest that there has been a gross wastage of educational facilities and school going children drop-out in a fairly high percentage every year. Among these drop-outs majority of students belong to low socio-economic status groups. Poverty and illiteracy of parents are the responsible factors for this situation.

A cursory look at the state of literacy in Uttar Pradesh shows that the State has failed in making a satisfactory progress in this regard. Major handicaps for its low literacy rate are lack of financial resources, lack of educational facilities and mounting

population pressure. The literacy rate in Uttar Pradesh according to 1981 Census Report is 27.16 per cent as against 36 per cent literacy rate of the whole nation. Literacy rate in the case of female population is merely 14.4 per cent while in the case of male population it is 38.76 per cent. Literacy situation in rural areas of the country is poorer as compared to literacy percentage in towns and cities as is evident from population profiles of the Uttar Pradesh State.

### *Aim*

Present study was conducted with the two-fold objectives: One, to assess the impact of increasing literacy on various facets of socio-cultural life of rural community in Western Uttar Pradesh and two, to discuss the role of education in bringing about an attitudinal change among villagers. This attitudinal change involves adoption of scientific, rational and universalistic attitude by literate persons and removal of rut and inertia from them.

### *Field Work*

Field work for this study was conducted over a month's period beginning from middle of March to middle of April 1988 in a peasant village named PANCHENDA KALAN near Muzaffarnagar town in Western Uttar Pradesh. The selection of Muzaffarnagar town which is also a district headquarter, was based on two considerations: Firstly the rural literacy percentage of this district, is higher as compared to several other districts in Western Uttar Pradesh having a clear cut dominance of Jat peasants and secondly peasants of Muzaffarnagar district have greater political consciousness than peasants in the neighbouring districts. This greater political consciousness of peasants belonging to Muzaffarnagar district became evident from



their active participation in launching a non-political and non-violent agrarian movement at an unprecedented large scale recently. The study group comprised all the households and the entire population of the said village community. The village Panchenda Kalan has altogether 581 households out of which 441 households belong to dominant Jat group, 132 households to a scheduled caste, while the remaining 8 households belong to four service-castes. It has a total population of 4129, out of which Jats number 3082, the scheduled caste 1005 and the service castes 42. A major source of livelihood for all the households in this village is land and agriculture. Total number of literate persons is 1451. As regards castewise breakup of literacy it is found that 1147 persons belong to the Jat group, 279 belong to the scheduled caste and 25 belong to the service castes. In a sex-wise break up of literacy it is found that the male literacy is 51 per cent while female literacy is 23 per cent. This indicates that the ratio between male and female literates is poor and there exists a lower level of literacy among female persons than male persons. This suggests that parents in this village are mostly indifferent to female wards while they are interested in the education of their male wards. Reasons for this situation are two: firstly both illiterate and semi-literate parents think that male children after completing their education will take job outside the home and prefer to settle in a town or city, while female children having received education beyond the high school will cease to take interest in their household responsibilities. Parents do not appreciate at all the engagement of female persons in service or business of any kind.

### *Socio-cultural Changes*

Spread of literacy has resulted into numerous changes in various socio cultural aspects of this community. It is found that,

consequent upon education, there has been diversification in economic roles. Literate villagers no longer stick to their traditional caste occupations. Their first choice is service in a Government or semi-Government department. Educated persons who failed to secure Government jobs for themselves either take job in private business concerns or start their own business such as dairy-farming, canecrushing, brickfield or small workshop for repairing of tractors or motor cycles. Educated persons who are lacking requisite technical know-how or capital for the initial investment in business engage themselves in raising agricultural crops both cereal and cash crops. It is found that these educated men who practise agriculture make use of modern technological devices in various agricultural operations such as ploughing, seedling, watering etc. They also use better quality seeds, fertilizers and pesticides etc. to grow these crops. Consequently many of them are able to get more yield from their fields than illiterate peasants.

However in the case of educated female persons it is found that they are generally discouraged by elders in the community to join service or conduct business. Parents often insist them to discharge only household duties. In some exceptional cases where educated females accepted for themselves the service role in utter disregard of parents' advice, the village elders looked upon them and often forced them to settle in a town or at the place of their service away from the village.

A close examination of the impact of increasing literacy on the communities' social aspects indicates that the evil of untouchability which is not yet non-existent, has gradually weakened and several social disabilities associated with it are now being either ignored or given little attention to by educated men. A low caste person can now take water from well which belongs to a



high caste household in the village. He can take bath and wash his dirty clothes at the well site without causing displeasure to the high caste men. He can also enter a temple in a public place and make offerings to God or deity inside the temple. Strict observance of social distance while eating at the residence of a high caste person on the eve of a feast is no more adhered to by educated men of high castes.

Literacy has brought about changes in the customary marriage patterns also. Educated male persons now demand greater freedom for themselves in the selection of life partner. Prior to settlement of a marriage many of them insist on their parents to allow them to see the prospective spouse, which they consider necessary in order to make their opinion concerning a marriage proposal for them. Though all negotiations with regard to marriage are still done by parents, a marriage proposal cannot be approved unless consent for marriage has already been given by their son for whose marriage proposal came. It is thus clear that the choice of spouse in most cases rests with the prospective bridegroom and his parents do not have to play any significant role in this matter.

Observance of the marriage ritual earlier lasted for two to three days but now this has been reduced to one night. Also the marriage party which used to comprise more than hundred participants formerly now has 15 to 20 only. This has been done to cut large wedding expenses.

As women in this rural area of Western Uttar Pradesh traditionally contributed their labour also in the performance of various agricultural operations except ploughing besides their domestic roles, purdah seclusion in them was never of the strictest kind. But nowadays most of the village women especially educated ones do not seem to observe this extreme practice. Also uneducated women who work outside the home in fields

and barnyard take a relaxed view of this practice and as such observe it more casually.

Increasing literacy has enabled villagers to take a rationalistic view of their rituals and customs. Consequently some rituals connected with land and agriculture have been dropped, as they are no longer considered to be significant. Collective worship of deity for promotion of cattle wealth is no longer done. Neither collective propitiation of yet another deity to ward off the epidemic of small pox is held. These examples show that rituals of the peasant world remain no longer unquestioned.

In political arena of the local community increasing literacy made people aware of great significance of some of the democratic values. Consequently the idea of equal opportunity, freedom of expression and majority view are now respected by literate villagers. Authoritarian attitude of the high caste people has changed and now a spirit of tolerance has come to prevail on their part. Local elections are contested without intimidation and threats by men of different groups and caste is gradually losing its earlier significance in maintenance of peace and order at the local level. Not only educated male persons but sometimes educated female persons also contest elections. Exploitation of low caste men by people of high caste is decreasing. The local community which suffered heavily due to inter-caste tensions and factionalism till recently is recovered from that earlier stage and it is now moving ahead slowly and steadily to attain a transformation of the desired kind.

A word about family planning drive: In Western Uttar Pradesh this drive was never supported by illiterate villagers who considered measures in this respect as unnecessary and unethical. Consequently they have been supporting the idea of large family with several sons and daughters. But literate men and women today fully understand

its implications and willingly adopt measures to control the size of their family in the interest of better living.

As stated above spread of literacy has proved to be of great advantage to most people in traditional cultures of Western Uttar Pradesh. It has however failed in mitigating dowry and its attendant evils like bride torture leading to loss of life sometimes, desertion and eventual divorce by husbands. Increasing education has rather created the conditions in which not only dowry is mounting but more female persons become dowry victims every year. Maladjustment in educated couples, leading to wife desertion and divorce, is gaining scan-

dalous proportions nowadays.

To conclude it can be mentioned that literacy has caused numerous socio-economic and political changes and it has substantial effects on all sorts of personal qualities and attitudes of people belonging to traditional cultures in this area. It is, however, strongly felt that the parents must be convinced about the desirability of female education in peasant society and they must change their conservative attitude towards them. Unless female members are provided equal opportunities and facilities for education and the barriers faced by them in availing of these opportunities are removed the goal of a speedy transformation of rural society in India will not be attained.

## CHANCE ENCOUNTER?

MRS. DOROTHY RYERSON

A favourite pastime of many of my Vedanta friends is exchanging information about their first introduction to this Vedanta philosophy. They usually start out, "It just happened," and then they recount their experience. Most people who have shared their experience with me feel it was almost like a miracle.

One of my friends was invited into the apartment next to hers for a cup of tea. She saw a picture of Swami Ashokananda on the piano. His eyes impelled her to ask who he was. This woman, who was apparently one of our older members, told my friend about the Vedanta Society. The next Sunday my friend attended a lecture, became a member, was initiated by Swami Ashokananda, and continued for many years until she passed on.

Another friend of mine was passing our "Old Temple" on Webster and Filbert

Streets in San Francisco, saw the towers and wondered, "What is this?" When she rang the bell and inquired, she was told about the Vedanta philosophy, that it was universal, and that a person could "realize" God in any religion. She decided that she would like to come to hear a lecture. She became a dedicated member.

Another friend was taking her two little boys to school. While they waited for a bus she was talking to them in German, for they had just moved here from Germany. A blind lady, who was also waiting for the bus, heard them speaking, and said to them in German, "I am blind, will you help me get on the bus?" "Of course," said my friend. They struck up a conversation and "just happened" to get off at the same stop. As they walked along in the same direction, the blind lady said that she was going to her church. When my friend inquired and was



told about Vedanta, she said that this was just what she had been looking for. My friend had just moved to this country and had been searching for a place where she could learn more about yoga. When she looked in the classified section of the telephone book, she found so many different yoga references that she had not been able to make any choices up to this time. From then on she and her family began attending lectures and have been dedicated members for many years.

In my particular case I too was searching at one time. I had gone to several different churches but the messages I would hear from their pulpits did not answer my needs. Some of my fellow-workers were Catholic and attended "first Fridays" at a little church near our office. I started attending these early morning services with them. As I commuted to San Francisco from Marin County, and would arrive too early to go to work, I was able to accompany my friends. I liked the mass and the ritual at the Catholic church, and decided to talk to the priest about becoming a Catholic. The priest was a wonderful person and asked me several questions. When I told him I had always believed in reincarnation, he said, "We believe one life is enough!" I said, "Sometimes I think one life is too much." This priest said, "I could take you in but you would not be happy here. The only way to find happiness is to follow your heart. I will pray for you."

Of course I was disappointed, but with the priest's promise to pray for me, I decided to seek further. I looked up the names of metaphysical bookstores in the city, and on my next lunch hour I visited one that was downtown. I told the librarian who offered to help me that I was searching for a church which would answer my spiritual needs. Even though I told her I had already tried the Catholic church, she handed me a book about women saints. When I took it

home and tried to absorb some of the knowledge that led the saints to their goal, it didn't take me long to realise that I was not a candidate for that status. I know my limitations.

When I returned the book to the librarian and told her my reaction, she handed me a large book which was *The Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna*, by "M." "You might like this," she said. I began reading it as soon as I got on the bus. The words just seemed to reach out and set my inner being on fire. I hated to go back to work, but one does what one has to do.

When I read the portion which said that all paths lead to God if faithfully followed, and that all religions are true, I knew this was what I had been searching for. When I finished reading it, I knew I had to have one for myself. When I returned the book I asked where I could buy a copy. I was told about the Vedanta Society and that I could get a copy there. Although remembering names is not one of my accomplishments, I have never forgotten the name of this young woman whom I never saw again. Did she "just happen" to play her part in helping me start a new life?

When I called the Vedanta Society to learn where they were located, I was told that they had lectures on Sundays and Wednesdays. I was also told that I could buy *The Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna* at their centre. This was the "Old Temple" on Webster and Filbert Streets. Was it destiny? Was it just chance?

As I have said, I lived in Marin County and commuted to work. I had a friend in Marin who was more familiar with Eastern philosophies than I, so I called her and told her about *The Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna* and the Vedanta Society. We decided to attend the next lecture which was on May 1, 1949.

It may seem very strange, but when we

walked into the Old Temple we both felt we had come home. The minister was called a "Swami" and wore a robe different from any we had ever seen. The lecture he gave held us spellbound. All that he talked about made sense to us, and we were very comfortable with it. From then on we attended all the services and have been going ever since. We both became members and were later initiated by Swami Ashokananda. We started studying the different yogas which were contained in the books of Swami Vivekananda. The world suddenly had a new meaning. Both my friend and myself felt that we were not struggling alone. We both felt divine guidance.

A study of the Vedanta philosophy has made it apparent to me that there is a divine intelligence in charge of our world. Different religious faiths call "it" by different names, but it is all ONE.

Did it "just happen" that a rich widow of the Shudra caste in India wished to show her devotion to her conception of God as "Mother" by building a temple at Dakshineswar? When she was unable to find a priest who would perform the worship, did it "just happen" that a young Brahmin boy (Gadadhar, later known as Shri Ramakrishna) would be encouraged by his older brother to accept this position? This was unique, because it was not usual for someone of the Brahmin caste to serve in a Shudra temple. However, by accepting this position, Shri Ramakrishna was able to perform his own spiritual practices and attain the status for which he was born. As he worshipped the Divine Mother he ultimately became aware of the truth that all religions are true, and one can realise God on any path.

At Dakshineswar Shri Ramakrishna was available to many people who were searching for enlightenment. Biographies of Shri Ramakrishna tell us how his fifty years

of life were spent in attracting the people who would eventually bring his message to the world. With instant communication being available anywhere on this earth, with science having developed means to destroy the world by nuclear forces, it was absolutely mandatory that this universal message be brought to the world to avert its destruction.

It is said that when events in the world demand it, a new incarnation is born. It so happened that the English influence in India at that time made communication possible by providing a common language. The young disciples of Shri Ramakrishna were able to speak English and were instrumental in bringing the Vedanta philosophy to the West. Through them and their Master a bridge was built between the spiritual attainments of the East and the material achievements of the West. Both were needed. How this is accomplished is told to us in the biographies of Swami Vivekananda. In reading these biographies, it seemed to me that even a great sage like Swami Vivekananda did not have a definite plan when he came to this country. Unfortunately, maps for the road of life are not furnished with birth certificates. We all have to listen to the still small voice within to get our bearings as we go along.

When Swamiji's efforts to attend the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 appeared to be impossible, did it "just happen" that he would meet a wonderful woman on the train to Boston who would be so impressed by his wisdom that she invited him to visit her? Did it "just happen" that this woman introduced Swamiji to a Harvard professor who was so impressed with him that he paved the way so Swamiji could be a delegate at the Parliament of Religions? All of this is described by Marie Louise Burke in her book, *Swami-Vivekananda in the West, New Discoveries*. After Swamiji's talk at the Parliament of Religions the seed was sown and new hope



was brought to the world. Reasonable people, who could not accept the doctrine that man is a sinner, were able to accept Swamiji's concept that man is divine, a spark of this Pure Being, who has given us life, who sustains us, and to whom we shall return.

All of these Vedanta people, whose lives have touched mine, have felt that it was like a miracle when they heard the Vedanta lectures or read the books of Swamiji. They feel very grateful that they have been touched by God, that He loves them, and has given them hope for Self-realisation.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF SHRI RAMAKRISHNA FOR WOMEN—III

ANN MYREN

(*The Women Devotees of the 1880's*)

### Introduction

The story of Shri Ramakrishna and his women devotees is a new chapter in the history of God-men. It is a wonderful story which reveals the real nature of women, their great spiritual attainments, and a side of the Master which has yet to be explored fully.

In the *Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna* M wrote, "Shri Ramakrishna had many woman devotees, but he did not talk much about them to his man devotees."<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is the basic problem. The Gospel, which is one of the important sources of the Master's teachings, has very little in it about women, and what there is was written from a man's point of view, a man who had been specifically warned about lust. Accordingly, when the Master warned M about women, he made them appear vile in order to advance M on his spiritual path. Shri Ramakrishna said to M:

Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You have children, and still you enjoy intercourse with your

wife. Don't you hate yourself for thus leading an animal life? Don't you hate yourself for dallying with a body which contains only blood, phlegm, filth, and excreta. He who contemplates the Lotus Feet of God looks on even the most beautiful woman as mere ash from the cremation ground. To enjoy a body which will not last and which consists of such impure ingredients as intestines, bile, flesh and bone! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?<sup>2</sup>

This scolding by the Master gives us an inside picture of M. Obviously, he was caught by "woman" which is not the fault of "woman" but a fundamental problem of self-control which afflicts humanity, male and female. It seems likely that he was shamed every time he heard the caution about *kamini-kanchana*, "woman and gold" and because he was an honest man, took special care to include this teaching with great frequency. What is lacking in the *Gospel*, by M's own admission, is material about women. Even though the Master warned women about *purusha-kanchana*, "man and gold"<sup>3</sup>, nowhere in the *Gospel* does this teaching appear. Such dispropor-

1. M, *The Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna*, trans., Swami Nikhilananda, (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1952), p. 804.

2. *Gospel*, p. 341.

3. "Reminiscences of Swami Ramakrishnananda", *Vedanta and the West*, 190 (March-April 1968), p. 52.

tion is unfair to women, and even more importantly, because of the language, the expression *kamini-kanchana* makes women appear to be the cause of the failure of men to control their own sexuality. This hostile attitude of men toward women has shown up in all the world's major religions.

Shri Ramakrishna spoke in Bengali vernacular to both women and men, but in the context of current English usage, the impression the *The Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna* makes on many women is an unfortunate one. It is explained in a footnote<sup>4</sup> that the Master meant lust whenever he used the word *kamini*, but translating the word literally as "woman" still casts the blame for male impurity on women. Plainly, the Master's complete and true message for women and men needs clarification. Despite its "woman and gold" problem, there are in the Gospel some especially revealing passages which tell us significant things about the relationship of Shri Ramakrishna to women and his high regard for them.

Women fare better in the other great primary source, *Shri Ramakrishna the Great Master* by Swami Saradananda<sup>5</sup>, a monastic disciple, who was Shri Sarada Devi's attendant for many years. As in the *Gospel* there is not an abundance of material about women in this book, but when women are portrayed it is with sympathetic understanding and keen insight. Women are seen as having valid spiritual lives, experiences, and relationships with the Master. For that matter, Swami Saradananda got much of his material about women and the Master from Yogin Ma, whose great spirit and intellect made her able to state woman's viewpoint.

A third major source for material about women and the life of the Master is *Shri*

*Ramakrishna and His Disciples* by Sister Devamata.<sup>6</sup> This is an important work because it gives a woman's perspective. Sister Devamata, who was very close to Swami Ramakrishnananda, got her material from him, from other direct disciples, and from women who knew Shri Ramakrishna. She presents householder women in a very favourable light with many significant details which add to the completeness of an historical account of the times.

Of course there are many other sources of material on women and the Master and all will be duly noted. But these three sources have a compelling authenticity about them which makes them worthy of special note. In some of the other sources the actual authors are not given, as in the case of *The Disciples of Ramakrishna*<sup>7</sup> and *The Life of Shri Ramakrishna*<sup>8</sup>. Also there are some materials which have not been translated into English and thus are not available to this writer.

### *The Settings*

Most of the great drama of Shri Ramakrishna took place at Dakshineswar, but Cossipore, Kamarpukur and the city of Calcutta are also important. Each of these places has a distinctive bearing on the way women acted. That is, each place provided a different set of social circumstances and demands. First, let us see how the setting of Dakshineswar affected the actions of the women. In the 1880's Dakshineswar was village-like, which meant that a woman's life was a little freer than in Calcutta. For example, one time at Dakshineswar the Master's feet were badly torn

4. *Gospel*, p. 82.

5. Swami Saradananda, *Shri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans., Swami Jagadananda, (Madras: Shri Ramakrishna Math, 1952).

6. Sister Devamata, *Shri Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, (La Crescenta, California: Ananda Ashrama, 1928).

7. *The Disciples of Ramakrishna*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1955).

8. *Life of Shri Ramakrishna*, (Mayavati, India: Advaita Ashrama, 1948).



by thorns. This had come about because women on the way to the Ganga habitually begged him for blessings of one kind or another. In order to avoid these women he had retreated into the jungle<sup>9</sup> This open familiarity was more typical of village life than city life where women usually would only meet Shri Ramakrishna in the inner apartments reserved for them. Rules about *purdah*, seclusion, were less strict in the country.

However, all social activity was not free and easy at Dakshineswar. Generally the sexes did not mix. For that matter, M stated that the Master wanted the men and women to live separately for then only would the two groups make progress<sup>10</sup>. We must keep in mind that spiritual progress was what the Master wanted for his devotees, both women and men. Consequently, he did not encourage familiarity. However, women did have access to Shri Ramakrishna. For example the wife of Navagopal, a householder disciple, told Sister Devamata that when she came to Shri Ramakrishna's room, he would send all the gentlemen out and remain talking with her alone.<sup>11</sup> Other times the ladies spent their time with Holy Mother waiting for the men to leave so they could go to Shri Ramakrishna's room.

It seems, however, that in this village-like atmosphere, sometimes the men and women enjoyed the holy company together. Manomohan, the brother-in-law of Rakhal who was later known as Swami Brahmananda, took the women of his family to Dakshineswar where they watched the music and dancing from the north verandah. Describing that scene, M said, "Many people gathered about the room. The verandahs to the south and north, and the

semicircular porch to the west of the room, were crowded with people."<sup>12</sup> In his narrative M had already placed women on the north verandah so we must conclude that there were both women and men in this particular audience.

Generally speaking the customs regarding the separation of the sexes and the seclusion of women were relaxed when women went on pilgrimages to visit holy persons or holy places. Then the company might be mixed, male relatives accompanying the women. This behavior was acceptable especially for older women and widows.<sup>13</sup> Respectable Bengali women did attempt to maintain *purdah* by travelling in closed carriages to places of pilgrimage. But when they arrived at their place of pilgrimage, the strict segregation of the sexes broke down.<sup>14</sup>

An excellent example of the lack of restrictions for holy people was the boat trip that Shri Ramakrishna, Latu, Kali and Golap Ma, who was in her early twenties<sup>15</sup> and a widow, made to Calcutta so that the Master could visit the doctor. On the way back to Dakshineswar they felt very hungry; but only Golap Ma had money, four pice. The Master asked Kali to purchase an anna's worth of sweets. He did, the Master ate them, drank some water from the Ganga and said, "Ah, I am satisfied," and with that the hunger of the three disciples vanished.<sup>16</sup> Besides this rather unusual experience, everyone probably had

12. *Gospel*, pp. 599-600.

13. Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 20.

14. *Ibid.*

15. In 1886 the ages of some of the women discussed in this article were as follows; Gopal Ma, sixty-four; Yogin Ma, thirtysix; Lakshmi, twenty-two; Golap Ma, twenty-two; Benodini Dasi, twenty-three. Two other women Shri Sarada Devi, thirty-three and Gauri Ma, twenty-nine, will be discussed in forthcoming articles.

16. *Life of Shri Ramakrishna*, p. 527.

9. Sister Devamata, *Life in an Indian Monastery*, (La Crescenta, California: Ananda Ashrama, 1927), p. 234.

10. *Gospel*, p. 804.

11. *Shri Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, p. 125.

a good time on this outing, and it does not seem that the men were restricted by the presence of a woman. Had a woman been a problem, would Golap Ma have been invited to join the party? Obviously, Shri Ramakrishna was very close to Golap Ma and both of them expressed the freedom of action that occurs in very close spiritual relationships.

Conflicting social customs placed Balaram Bose, a householder disciple, and his wife in a quandary. They lived in Calcutta and in order for Smt. Krishna bhamini, Balaram's wife, to maintain *purdah* they would have to take a carriage with servants to Dakshineswar to visit the Master. However, a carriage seemed ostentatious—to call on the soul of simplicity and renunciation, Shri Ramakrishna, with all the trappings of wealth does somehow seem out of place. But without a carriage how could Mrs. Bose be kept from public view? The Boses solved this conflict by rising at three in the morning and walking the six miles to Dakshineswar while the streets were free from traffic and people. They spent the day, then left for home at eleven at night to avoid public exposure once again.<sup>17</sup> Keeping in mind the desire of the women to abide by the customs of *purdah*, it now becomes apparent why the Master frequently sent the women home late at night. They not only could enjoy the holy atmosphere of Dakshineswar, the Master's company, the rituals, the singing and dancing, but they could also escape public view.

In the Ramakrishna literature we are generally introduced to women who somehow have already become accomplished in religion. There are no details about the childhood of these women, and as there is no ceremony considered as significant for girls as is the investiture of the sacred thread

for boys, their religious training is not described by any of the male authors and thus becomes a matter of speculation at least to the non-Indian reader. In nineteenth century Bengal, however, there were religious traditions which governed a girl's life. It was the custom to initiate a girl at the age of five into various *vratas* or vows which gave religious authority and sanctity to the activities of her life. These *vratas* or vows included specific religious rituals of worship, regional and seasonal *vratas* and *vratas* to correct temperamental faults. When the girl was married, she would take up the *vratas* for married women.<sup>18</sup> As this was the traditional training for Bengali girls during the time of Shri Ramakrishna, there is no question but that the women who knew him had undertaken many *vratas* and were thoroughly versed in religious rituals and ceremonies.

But when visiting the Master, religious ritual was set aside by his spontaneous expression of divinity, of truth, of joy, which went straight to the hearts of the devotees. One time when the Master was living at Cossipore many women devotees visited him. This was a special occasion because it was the first day of the Bengali year, Tuesday, 13 April 1886. Among the many women there were the wives of Balaram and Manomohan, and also Golap Ma, known as the Brahmani of Baghbazar. Some of the women brought their children. Rakhal was there attending Shri Ramakrishna, who by this time was sick with cancer of the throat and communicated with the women by signs through Rakhal. Some of the women offered flowers at the Master's feet, and two young girls, nine or ten years old, sang songs about the Divine Mother. Shri Ramakrishna indicated his approval of their songs. Then at the Master's request Golap Ma sang a song which began, "O

17. *Shri Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, p. 122.

18. *Women in Bengal*, pp. 14-5.



Hari, I shall sport with you today/For I Ma had the nature of a child, so it was not have found You alone in the nidhu immodest for her to sing of her devotion to wood...."<sup>19</sup> According to the Master Golap the Lord in that informal gathering.

19. *Gospel*, p. 953.

(*To be concluded*)

## PRACTICAL HINTS FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Man has no idea of the spirit, he has to think of it with the forms he has before him. He has to think of the blue skies, or the expansive fields, or the sea, or something huge. How else can you think of God? So what are you doing in reality? You are talking of omnipresence, and thinking of the sea. Is God the sea?

Two classes of men do not worship God as man—the human brute who has no religion, and the Paramahansa (highest Yogi) who has gone beyond humanity, who has thrown off his mind and body and gone beyond the limits of nature.

Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to worship God as man, and blessed are those races which have such a “God-man” to worship.

It would be wise to stop praying to God, and only pray to Christ. God understands human failings and becomes a man to do good to humanity.

Some require an image outside, others one inside the brain. The man who puts it inside says, “I am a superior man. When

it is inside it is all right; when it is outside, it is idolatry, I will fight it.”

What makes men miserable? Because they are slaves, bound by laws, puppets in the hand of nature, tumbled about like playthings. We are continually taking care of this body that anything can knock down.

As to fear, what are our lives but bundles of fear? The deer has only one class of fear, such as that from tigers, wolves, etc. Man has the whole universe to fear.

It is very good to be born in a church, but it is very bad to die there.

If a young man does not go to church, he ought to be condemned. But if an old man goes to church, he also ought to be condemned; he has no business with this child's play any more; the church should have been merely a preparation for something higher. What business has he any more with forms and Pratikas and all these preliminaries?

(Compiled from Bhakti Yoga)

Swami Vivekananda

Arise! awake! and stop not till the goal is reached! Katha Upa. I. iii. 14

Vol. IV, No. 35

JUNE—1899

## SIKHISM AND ITS PRINCIPLES

Here a few pieces from the Granth may be quoted with advantage, as showing its affinity to the Advaita Vedanta. Guru Nanak says:—

“Omkar is pervading all things. In the heart dwells the pure Lord God. There is no difference between Ishwara and Jiva, the saint as well as the thief are Brahman. From the mighty elephant to the tiny ant the one Brahman is pulsating. He is the sole cause and Himself is the effect, yet He does not do anything. He is like the sun by whose energy everything in the universe is done yet the sun is not the doer.... He can know the arrangements of this universe who believes himself to be the pure Advaitin.... One absorbed in Atman is not different from it. How can there exist distinction between two waters when mixed? .... There is nothing except the Lord, O Nanak! Om Soham, and Atman are the same Lord Brahman.”

In another place it is said:

“He who has known his own self,” says Nanak, “is the true knower;” or “See one in all” says Guru Arjun Dev. Here we find the highest idea of Vedanta before us.

“False love is seen in the world. Every one, be it a friend, or a relation, in this world, is interested in one’s own comfort. Every one says, ‘It (the world) is mine, it is mine;’ and every one has given up oneself to its charms. None is

companion at the last moment, that is a strange custom. This ignorant mind (Manas) does not accept my advice, I am tired of advising it every moment. One who sings the praises of the Almighty, says Nanak, is beyond all these cares and anxieties.”

“Both Rama and Ravana who had long lines of progeny have passed away from the surface of this globe. Say, O Nanak! there is nothing permanent, the world is like a dream. Everything that has come into existence will vanish today or tomorrow. Nanak says, sing the praise of the Lord and leave all other bondages.”

“He is Satguru in whose company our mind gets happiness, the restlessness of the mind vanishes and perfection is attained.” Through the kindness of the Guru,—kindness, which is the result of the Sikh’s own faith in and love for the Guru, Brahmajnana or the knowledge of Brahman, is got and the Sikh becomes a Brahmajnani. It is said:—

“One becomes a saint even if the guru casts a kind glance.” Then all duality ceases, the sikh becomes the guru, nay Brahman Himself, as is said:—

“A Brahmajnani is the Lord Himself.”

Bawa Budh Singh