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Prabuddha Bharata

OR

AWAKENED INDIA

By Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, and Yoga, by one or more or all of these the Vision of the Paramatman is Obtained.

ADVAITA ASHRAMA

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उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत

Prabuddha Bharata

VOL. 91 JULY 1986 No. 7

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

INTEGRAL VISION OF VEDIC SEERS*

'Truth is one: sages call It by various names'

कालो अश्वो वहति सप्तरश्मिः
सहस्राक्षो अजरो भूरिरेताः ।
तमा रोहन्ति कवयो विपश्चितः
तस्य चक्रा भुवनानि विश्वा ।।

Like a thousand-eyed,[1] seven-reined[2] horse unaging and endowed with inexhaustible vitality,[3] Time draws [the universe of which] all beings are its chariot-wheels. The wise seers mount that horse.[4]

Atharva-Veda 19.53.1

पूर्णः कुम्भोऽधि काल आहितः
तं वै पश्यामो वहुधा नु सन्तः ।
स इमा विश्वा भुवनानि प्रत्यङ्
कालं तमाहुः परमे व्योमन् ।

Above Time is placed a brimful pot (*pūrṇa kumbhaḥ*);[5] sages see it in various ways. They say that Time is set in the transcendent space within all beings.

Atharva-Veda 19.53.3

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*A remarkable hymn on Time is begun here. In the *Ṛg-Veda* time is hardly mentioned as such. But in the *Atharva-Veda* there are two long hymns on Time one of which is given here. In the Gītā the Lord says, 'I am Time' (11.32). There the destructive aspect of Time is described, but here in this hymn the creative powers of Time are described. The image of the horse and the seven reins is obviously derived from the symbolism of the Sun (cf. *Ṛg-Veda* 1. 164).

1. That is, time is all-seeing.
2. The seven reins are either the seven colours of the rainbow or the six seasons plus the intercalary month.
3. All beings age in time but Time never ages. Every being is created by Time.
4. The meaning is, sages keep time under control; they also transcend time.
5. Time is here conceived as a ceaseless flow from an inexhaustible source, the immutable Brahman which is pictured as a *pūrṇa kumbhaḥ*. Sayana, however, says that two kinds of time are mentioned here: created time (*janyaḥ-kāla*) and uncreated time, and that the 'brimful pot' represents created time.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Jñāna-mārga—its preliminary disciplines and techniques of meditation: this is the theme of this month's EDITORIAL.

THE MESSAGE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA is the transcription of a talk given by Srimat Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math and Mission, in February, 1986. The speech, delivered with power and certitude born of experience and erudition, presents the main teachings of Sri Ramakrishna in a strikingly original and inspiring way.

In THE CHALLENGE OF VEDANTA TO AMERICAN WOMEN—I Ann Myren discusses Swami Vivekananda's criticism of the role of women in American society and how some of his woman followers responded to his teaching of Vedanta. This article is a sequel to the two-instalment article by the same author published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, January and February, 1986. Ann Myren teaches social sciences at the College of Alameda, Alameda, California.

LAKSHMI DEVI by Swami Chetanananda, spiritual head of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, U.S.A, is an interesting biographical account of a woman saint who was Sri Ramakrishna's niece and disciple.

In SISTER NIVEDITA ON THE EDUCATION OF INDIAN WOMEN Srimati Mamata Ray has brought together some of the main ideas of Nivedita on education which have much relevance to the present-day situation in India. The author took her M.A. degree in political science standing first in the order of merit in the university. She is currently working with her husband, Dr. Anil Baran Ray, Professor of Political Science, University of Burdwan, on a comprehensive research project on the life and work of Sister Nivedita.

JNANA-MARGA: SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

(EDITORIAL)

Quo vadis

It is said that when St. Peter was running away from the burning city of Rome to escape Nero's persecution, he was met at the outskirts of the city by an apparition of Christ who asked him: *Quo vadis*? 'Whither goest thou?' Feeling ashamed, Peter went back to his work of preaching and organizing, was imprisoned by Nero's men, and died a martyr.

Very often we follow the Petrine way in dealing with the problems of life. Running away from the problems of life means running away from ourselves, from the tyranny of the ego, from the fires of desire and hate that rage in the citadel of the heart. Even among those who appear to be diligent in discharging their duties or in rendering social service, few have the courage or understanding to face their own selves. Jñāna-mārga is a way of life which puts an end to this eternal, endless running away from oneself. It is a direct path which leads you straight to your own self. Even if you are devotional by temperament and do not want to follow the path of knowledge, it is good to ask yourself once in a while, 'Whither goest thou?' For this kind of query or enquiry will

ultimately take you to the centre of your consciousness which is the meeting point between the individual self and the Supreme Self.

Two highways

Much of the religious freedom and catholicity found in Hinduism comes from the fact that it has from very ancient times maintained two *mārgas*: Jñāna-mārga and Bhakti-mārga. Etymologically the word *mārgaḥ* comes from the verbal root *mārg* meaning 'to seek', 'to hunt' or 'to strive to attain'. Though it is usually translated as 'way' or 'path', the word *mārgaḥ* really means an attitude towards the ultimate Reality. Jñāna and Bhakti are two basically different approaches to Reality.[1]

For one thing, the ultimate Reality is regarded as personal (*saguṇa*) in Bhakti-mārga and as impersonal (*nirguṇa*) in Jñāna-mārga. Naturally, therefore, the relationship between the individual self and the Supreme Self is a personal one ('I and Thou' or 'We') in Bhakti-mārga and an impersonal one ('I am That') in Jñāna-mārga. Again, in Bhakti-mārga divine grace is regarded as the sole means of attaining salvation whereas in Jñāna-mārga self-effort is emphasized. Śrī Śaṁkara has clearly stated that those who meditate on the Personal are dependent on the Lord for their *kaivalya* (liberation) and have no independence; but those who meditate on the Impersonal are independent so far the attainment of *kaivalya* is concerned.[2]

Another difference between the two *mārgas* lies in their starting point. Jñāna-mārga begins with an enquiry into the nature of one's own self. In the incontrovertible and immediate experience of 'I'-consciousness Jñāna-mārga has a sure ground to start with, and spiritual progress in this path is the progressive expansion of 'I'-consciousness. But in Bhakti-mārga the starting point is 'faith' in an unknown Supreme Being and the main struggle is to convert the indirect (*parokṣa*) knowledge of the Deity into a direct (*aparokṣa*) experience.

It should be noted that knowledge plays an important role in both the *mārgas*. Rāmānuja defines Bhakti itself as a special kind of cognition.[3] Teachers of Bhakti have paid much attention to the study of scriptures and the nature and criteria of truth. Why, then, is Jñāna-mārga called so? In the path of knowledge Jñāna is not merely the ultimate goal but the sole means of attaining that goal. In this path Jñāna means knowledge of the Atman, and it is regarded as all-sufficient.

Preliminary qualifications

Nowadays a large number of treatises and popular expositions of yoga and Advaita are available in different languages. This may give the impression that Jñāna-mārga is quite an easy path. But the truth is, as Śrī Kṛṣṇa has pointed out[4], it is a

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1. The Mīmāmsakas' attempt to develop an independent third highway known as Karma-mārga was defeated by the concerted efforts of all the teachers of Vedanta. Hence Karma, as Karma-yoga, has always remained as an appendage of either of the other two margas. In both Jñāna-mārga and Bhakti-marga, Karma-yoga is only a preliminary first step.

2. 'ते प्राप्नुवन्ति मामेव' इति अक्षरोपासकानां कैवल्यप्राप्तौ स्वातंत्र्यमुक्त्वा, इतरेषां पारतंत्र्यात् ईश्वराधीनतां दर्शितवान् 'तेषामहं समुद्धर्ता' इति।

Samkara, Commentary on Gītā 12.12

3. भक्तिश्च ज्ञानविशेष एव।

Rāmānuja, *Vedārtha-sangraha*, 252

4. Gītā 12.5

difficult path which only a few competent aspirants can tread successfully. There is a world of difflerence between studying the philosophy of Advaita from books and getting anywhere near an Advaitic experience. In ancient times only competent persons were encouraged to choose the path of knowledge. The characteristics of such a competent person (*adhikāri*) are found described in almost all traditional treatises. In Patañjali's Yoga Aphorisms a seeker is expected to have acquired perfection in five virtues collectively called *yama* (which includes truthfulness, chastity, nonviolence, honesty and non-acquisitiveness) and proficiency in five preliminary disciplines collectively called *niyama* (which includes cleanliness, contentment, austerity, self-study and self-surrender to God.) Treatises on Advaita prescribe a four-fold discipline known as *sādhana-catuṣṭaya* consisting of 1. discrimination between the eternal and the fleeting 2. renunciation of all desire for enjoyment here and hereafter 3. the six qualities: sense control, calmness, detachment, forbearance and faith 4. longing for liberation. Furthermore, a person is expected to have attained purity of mind through Karma Yoga and some dualistic experience through *upāsanā* (worship of and meditation on Personal God) before venturing into the realm of advaitic experience. It is clear from the writings of Śaṁkara that he intended the system of Advaita (of which he was either the founder or rejuvenator) exclusively for sannyasins who had freed themselves form all external seeking. According to him, 'only such people can have the capacity to comprehend, meditate upon and realize the inner Self.'[5]

As Advaita became popular, it had to accommodate itself to the needs and capacities of ordinary people and lost much of its social and ethical rigidity. With the shifting of the centre of learning from monasteries and Āśramas to secular institutions, the preliminary qualifications and ethical disciplines came to be ignored and the original traditions about the practice of Advaita ceased to be living. For an academic study of Advaita as a school of philosophy, moral and spiritual preparations may not be necessary, but to follow Advaita as a way of life, as a practical means to non-dual experience, it is necessary to fulfil certain conditions in inner as well as outer life. Some of the qualifications stipulated by the ancient teachers may not be quite relevant in modern times, but at least the following basic conditions are to be fulfilled by everyone who wishes to tread the path of Jñāna.

Brahmacarya. In the Gītā Kṛṣṇa states that the ancient tradition of yoga was lost owing to long lapse of time. How can a living tradition die ? Śaṁkara's explanation is, 'Yoga was lost because it fell into the hands of weak-minded and incontinent people.'[6] Kṛṣṇa's statement and Śaṁkara's explanation hold good in the case of the tradition of Advaita also. *Brahmacarya* or total continence is, of course, necessary in all spiritual paths, but nowhere is it more needed than in the path of Advaita. The popular notion, prevalent especially in orientalist circles in the West, that Advaita is a rational system and that all that one needs to practise it is a logical brain is wrong. The truths that Advaita deals with are beyond the reach of ordinary discursive reason and can be realized only through the power of intuition. This higher intuition, known as *medhā*, develops only through

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5. एवं विरक्तस्य प्रत्यगात्मविषयं विज्ञानं श्रोतुं मन्तुं विज्ञातुं च सामर्थ्यमुपपद्यते नान्यथा ।

Samkara, Kena-Upanisad Bhasya, Introduction

6. दुर्बलान् अजितेन्द्रियान् प्राप्य नष्टं योगम्...

Samkara, Commentary on the Gītā 4.2

continence. A person who observes strict *brahmacarya* for six or seven years can feel the *medhā* developing in him as a luminous power. This luminous inner power cuts the veil of maya and guides the seeker through the darkness of the world. To hope to realize the truth of Advaita without the practice of *brahmacarya* is to hug an illusion.

Guidance of an illumined Guru. It was customary for Indian authors to begin their works with an invocatory verse. In most of the advaitic treatises the invocatory verses are dedicated to the Guru with the clear statement that only through the Guru's blessings can the knowledge of Brahman be obtained. The Guru is not merely a guide but a conduit of spiritual power. In Bhakti-mārga the seeker has the Deity for his support, but in Jñāna-mārga the Guru is the only support. This is a belief which has come down right from the time of the Upaniṣads. In the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* occurs the story of the boy Satyakāma who, even after getting transcendental knowledge through direct communion with Nature, wanted to hear the same teaching from the mouth of his Guru. For, he said, 'Knowledge becomes fruitful only when it is directly communicated by a living teacher.'[7] A person who has not found an illumined Guru to guide him had better not venture into the path of Jñāna.

Ego knowledge. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'The first sign of knowledge is a peaceful nature, and the second is absence of egotism.'[8] Jñāna-mārga is a path that leads to the light of the *pratyagātman*, inner Self. But before reaching that inner light one has to pass through the narrow gate of the ego. Egoism eclipses the light of the Self and is the single greatest obstacle on the path of knowledge. The cause of egoism is inadequate knowledge of the ego itself. Not only egoism, but even the other defects like lust, greed, hate and fear are mostly caused by ignorance of the nature and workings of the ego. Before one attempts to have knowledge of the higher Self or Atman, one should gain adequate knowledge of the lower self or ego. This can be done by encountering the ego in the depths of one's consciousness. Serving an illumined soul is also an easy way of getting rid of egoism.

Impersonal attitude. The goal of Jñāna-mārga is the realization of the Impersonal. One can be true to this ideal and seek it with sincerity only if one has an impersonal outlook on life right from the beginning. But as Dr. Jung has shown, the inner tendency of a person is usually found to be the opposite of what he appears to be outwardly, and people who claim to be Advaitins are seldom found to have an impersonal outlook. Many of them tend to take a personal view of everything, get emotionally involved in the affairs of other people, and cling to their own personalities too much. In fact, their very desire to seek the Impersonal may be prompted by the oppressive sense of their egoism, rather than by a positive love for the Impersonal. A person with a natural, positive inclination to the pursuit of Jñāna-mārga regards himself only as a part of the vast stream of life and has the capacity either to enter into a kind of mystic communion with Nature or to 'feel' for the sky and the sun, mountains and lakes, trees and herbs, the wind and fire. He sees the whole universe *sub specie aeternitatis*, as the denouement of cosmic drama. There is a direct relationship between a person's attitude towards himself and his attitude towards

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7. आचार्याद्-ह-एव विद्या विदिता साधिष्टं प्रापतीति

Chāndogya-Upanisad 4.9.3

8. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Centre, 1942) p. 493

Reality. To look upon God alone as impersonal but to cling to one's own personality is not Advaita, whatever else it might be. Before attempting to depersonalize God, one should depersonalize oneself.

Love of knowledge. What Bhakti is to a devotee of God, Jñāna is to a seeker of impersonal Brahman. That is to say, the follower of Jñāna-mārga values Jñāna above everything else; and he does it not because of its utility but for the sheer joy of knowing. Love of knowledge acts as a strong force counteracting the pull of *kāminī* and *kāñcana*, lust and greed. Once true love of knowledge dawns in a person, he will find detachment and renunciation becoming effortless. Even secular knowledge has great purifying effect. This may be seen in the lives of western scientists like Michael Faraday and George Washington Carver who lived contented lives in the pursuit of knowledge, ignoring fame and fortune. In India love of knowledge enabled hundreds of great scholars to lead utterly simple, often mendicant, lives expecting nothing but the joy of knowledge as their only reward. The story of Vācaspati Miśra, the great ninth-century scholar who was perfectly at ease in all the systems of Indian philosophy (*sarva-tantra-svatantra*), may be cited in this context. It is said that one night when he was writing his magnum opus, an exhaustive gloss on Śaṁkara's commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra,* the lamp ran out of oil and the light became dim. He craned his neck nearer to the lamp when a woman entered, poured oil into the lamp and brightened it. Vācaspati raised his head and their eyes met. 'Who are you?' asked the scholar. She was none else but his own wedded wife; he had forgotten all about her for many years. Vācaspati consoled her by saying, 'I will make your name immortal.' He gave her name, Bhāmatī, to his work which is considered to be next in greatness only to Śaṁkara's own commentary.

The starting point

The whole rationale of Jñāna-mārga rests on the fundamental thesis that by realizing one's true Self it is possible to know the ultimate Reality and mystery of creation. In the Upaniṣads the question is raised: What is that knowing which everything else is known,[9] just as through a lump of clay all that is made of clay is known?[10] The Atman—this was the answer that the sages found. Apart from the question of ultimate Reality, even the ordinary worldly problems of life are related to one's own self. Very often people try to solve these problems one by one with the help of external factors, as if the problems existed outside of themselves. A better way is to deal with one's own self directly. When we catch hold of the self, we will be able to understand how the problems are related to it and then will be able to solve the problems by bringing about changes in the self. This is the method adopted by the followers of Jñāna-mārga. They try to understand everything through the self. The self is thus the starting point of Jñāna-mārga. Without understanding the self it is not possible to tread the path of knowledge.

The self has different dimensions, some of which are intimately known to us and some either transcendent or otherwise hidden from our direct knowledge. The word used for all these dimensions of the self in Indian scriptures is the Atman. There is a famous verse which gives the etymological meaning of Atman as follows: 'The Atman is so called because it pervades, it receives and experiences objects in the

9. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.1.3
10. *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* 6.1.6

world, and because from it the world derives its existence.'[11] This is a general definition which covers both the empirical and transcendental aspects of the Atman.

The empirical dimension of Atman is known as the Jīva or the ego.[12] It is the embodied self which is the experiencer (*bhoktā*) and the agent of action (*kartā*) in us. Investigation into the nature of experience led the ancient sages to the conclusion that the basic factor in experience was consciousness which they called *prajñānam*. The *Pañcadaśi* defines it as follows: 'That through which one sees, hears, smells, speaks and tastes is called consciousness.'[13] All sense activities are coordinated and owned by the unitary I-consciousness, which is what *prajñānam* means. Atman is the ground of this I-consciousness. This transcendent aspect of Atman is known as *pratyagātman* or inner Self. Vidyāraṇya in *Pañcadaśī* calls it *kūṭastha*. It is the unchanging witness, *sākṣin*, of all thoughts and actions in us. The realization of this inner Self is the first and proximate goal of Jñāna-mārga.

When the inner Self is realized, it will be found that it has a higher, infinite dimension. This higher infinite dimension of Atman is known as Brahman. The realization of Brahman is the last and ultimate goal of Jñāna-mārga. This realization takes place through a progressive expansion of the *pratyagātman*.[14]

In his commentaries Śaṁkara has made a clear distinction between the realization of *pratyagātman* and the realization of Brahman. A similar distinction between the two types of experience has been made by Rāmānuja, Madhva and other teachers of dualistic schools. What, then, is the difference between the non-dualistic and dualistic views? According to the teachers of dualistic schools, there is a *qualitative* difference between the realization of the inner Self and the realization of God; the latter is entirely different from the former, and attainment of the inner Self does not by itself lead to the realization of God which can take place only through His grace. But according to Śaṁkara, there is no qualitative difference between the realization of *pratyagātman* and the realization of Brahman; the latter is only a *quantitative* expansion of the former. This is yet another significant difference between Jñāna-mārga and Bhakti-mārga.

Two mental processes of comprehending reality

On the basis of the mental processes involved in comprehending Reality, the soul's approach to God may be divided into two types. Suppose you are expecting two persons, X and Y, and one of them turns up. You can identify him by saying, 'This is X' or by saying 'This is not Y'.

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11. यच्चाप्नोति यदादत्ते यच्चात्ति विषयानिह ।
यच्चास्य सन्ततो भावस्तस्मादात्मेति कीर्त्यते ॥

Quoted by Samkara on *Katha Upaniṣad* 4.1

12. The relation between the ego and the higher dimensions of the self were discussed in several earlier contexts especially in the Editorials of *Prabuddha Bharata* July and August 1985.

13. येनेक्षते शृणोतीदं जिघ्रति व्याकरोति च ।
स्वाद्वस्वादु विजानाति तत् प्रज्ञानमुदीरितम् ॥

Pancadasi 5.1

14. There are actually two views on how the realization of Brahman takes place. According to the more widely accepted view of the Vivaraṇa school, what happens is the identification (*aikya*) of the inner Self with Brahman. But according to *Pañcadasi*, what happens is the sublation (*bādha*) of the notion of individuality. In this context it should be noted that it is not the ego or 'I'-consciousness but the *pratyagātman* (called *kutastha* by Vidyāraṇya) that becomes one with Brahman. Cf. *Pañcadasi ch.* 8

The first mode of identification is known as via positiva and the second mode as via negativa. The ultimate Reality too can be comprehended in this two-fold way. In Vedanta the positive way of comprehending Reality is known as the path of *iti, iti* (short form of *idam brahma iti*) usually (but not quite correctly) translated as 'this, this'. The negative way of comprehending Reality is known as the path of *neti, neti* (short form of *na idam brahma iti*) usually translated as 'not this, not this'.

It is generally held that via negativa is followed in the path of knowledge and via positiva is followed in the path of devotion. Such a view is not quite correct, for both the approaches may be made in either of the two *mārgas*. In Christian spirituality, which is the path of devotion, both the approaches are found. Via negativa is there known as apophatism, and via positiva, as cataphatism. In Hinduism Bhakti-mārga follows exclusively the *iti, iti* process, whereas in Jñāna-mārga the *iti, iti* and *neti, neti* processes both find application.

Apophatism in the Greco-Christian tradition

The apophatic tradition in the West has a long history going back to the ancient Greeks. Plato's philosophy is mostly cataphatic, since for him the source of all knowledge is the Good which is the Sun of the intelligible world. But all the same, he recognizes the paradox that the Good which is 'not only the author of all things known, but of their being and essence... is not itself an essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power.'[15] His predecessor Parmenides spoke of the need to negate the phenomenal in order to establish the sole reality of the transcendental. It was the third-century Greek mystic Plotinus who clearly formulated the via negativa. A key concept in the thought of Plotinus is beauty. He agrees with Plato that physical beauty is 'borrowed beauty', a mere shadow or reflection of spiritual beauty. Denying the independent reality of physical beauty, one should enter into oneself to contemplate the beauty of the soul, and from there, by a second negation ascend to the World Soul and to the Intelligence, denying which again 'one stands before the Supreme Principle, providing the mind free access to the knowledge of all.'[16]

Philo, the first-century Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, provided the connecting link between Greek thought and Christian theology. According to the Old Testament narrative, when Moses went up Mt. Sinai he found its top covered by a dark cloud (or smoke), and only after penetrating into that cloud could he meet God face to face. Philo interpreted the cloud as symbolic of the apophatic approach to divine Reality beyond human images and concepts. This interpretation of Philo was accepted by Clement of Alexandria, the earliest writer on Christian mysticism, and the image of the cloud profoundly influenced mystical thought all through the Middle Ages. It came to be believed that man could see God only by purging the mind of all concepts and sense-experiences and by entering the 'cloud of unknowing'. This is Christian apophatism.

One of the first to systematize Christian theology on Platonic lines was St. Gregory of Nyssa. He too followed Philo's concept that God can be seen only through darkness, that is, by giving up all sense experiences and intellectual knowledge. For Gregory the quest for God is a continuous groping in darkness. At each stage of that search, what was considered

15. Plato, *The Republic* 509 b.

16. Plotinus, *Enneads* V. ix. 2; I. vi. 8

the ideal and goal of that search, on arrival turns out to be a disappointment; it appears merely as the beginning of a new ascent. Gregory's apophatism has remained the foundational principle of theology in the Eastern (especially the Greek orthodox) Church. It was revived and applied in the practice of a new type of contemplation known as 'Hesychasm' by Simeon the New Theologian in the tenth century and by Gregory of Palamas in the 14th century.[17] A few lines from one of Simeon's *Hymns* (No. 25) are given below to give an idea of apophatism in Eastern Christianity.

I remained seated in the middle of the darkness,
I know,
but while I was there surrounded by darkness,
You appeared as light, illuminating me completely
from
Your total light,
And I became light in the night, I who was
found in the midst of darkness.
Neither the darkness extinguished Your light
completely, nor did the light dissipate the
visible darkness,
But they were together, yet completely separate,
without confusion, far from each other, surely
not at all mixed,
except in the same spot where they filled
everything.

The dominant trends in the spirituality of the West have always been positivism and affirmation. But around the fifth century A.D. a Syrian monk under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite, introduced apophatism into the West through his small treatise *Of Mystical Theology*. Translated into Latin in the tenth century, it remained the most influential mystical work for several centuries in the West. The following exhortation of Pseudo Dionysius was cited throughout the Middle Ages as the locus classicus for the method of contemplation:

In the earnest exercise of mystic contemplation, thou leave the senses and the activities of the intellect and all things in this world of nothingness or in that world of being, and thus with thy understanding laid to rest, thou strive to unite thyself with Him, Who is beyond all knowledge ...and so shalt thou be led upwards to the Ray of that Divine Darkness which exceeds all existence.[18]

The Pseudo Dionysius's concept of the 'Ray of Divine Darkness' became a guiding principle in western spirituality and several important mystical works appeared expounding the apophatic pathway. The chief among these are the booklet *De Adhaerendo Deo*, attributed to Albertus Magnus (+ 1280)[19], *The Cloud of Unknowing* by an anonymous fourteenth-century English contemplative, and the *Dark Night of the Soul* by the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross. The fourteenth-century German theologian Meister Eckhart went further and spoke of a Godhead transcending God and denied the reality of the phenomenal world. He said:

Creatures are pure nothings. I do not say that they are either important or unimportant but they are pure nothings. What has no Being is nothing. Creatures have no being of their own, for their being is the presence of God. If God withdrew from them even for a moment, they would all perish.[20]

The main current of western thought throughout the Middle Ages was, however, cataphatic as seen in the lives and works

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17. The famous book *Philokalia* is a collection of all the important original writings on Hesychasm.

18. *Mystical Theology* trans. C. E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1977) pp. 191-92. Slightly adapted.

19. Almost the whole of *De Adhaerendo Deo* was translated by Wolfram H. Koch and published in *Vedanta Kesari* (Madras) December, 1938.

20. *Meister Eckhart* trans. Raymond B. Blankney (New York: Harper and Row, 1941) p. 185.

of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Theresa of Avila.

We have discussed Christian spirituality here only to show how the apophatic (*neti, neti*) process was applied by Christian mystics in the path of devotion. As already mentioned, Bhakti-mārga in Hinduism follows only the cataphatic (*iti, iti*) process. How through this process one gets God experience has been clearly described by Swami Saradananda in an illuminating chapter of his monumental work *Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa-līlāprasaṅga*.[21]

There is, however, one vital difference between Christian apophatism and Hindu apophatism. In Christian theology God is regarded as a personal (though not always anthropomorphic) Being endowed with various attributes. Negation does not mean negation of divine attributes. It only means denial of the ability of the human mind to comprehend the essence of Godhead. In other words, what Christian spirituality holds is *epistemological apophatism*. Even Eckhart could not accept a totally attributeless, *nirguṇa*, Godhead, although he spoke of the emptiness of the 'desert of the Godhead.' In Advaita Vedanta the *neti, neti* process is not mere denial of the human mind's ability to comprehend the ultimate Reality, but the denial of all attributes in Brahman. In other words, the advaitic process of *neti, neti* is *ontological apophatism*. (That is why Hindu Bhakti-mārga does not accept the *neti, neti* process, for it believes the ultimate Reality is personal, *saguṇa*.)

Negation and affirmation in Jñāna-mārga

As mentioned earlier, Advaita Vedanta has adopted both the via negativa and the via positiva. As a matter of fact, there are separate scriptural dicta dealing with these two pathways. The Advaitic tradition classifies Upaniṣadic statements into three groups: 1. *Brahmetara-nirākaraṇa vākyas*. All statements (especially *neti, neti*) which deny attributes to Brahman and distinguish It from non-Brahman are included in this category. 2. *Aikyopadeśa vākyas*. The four well-known *mahāvākyas* like *tat tvam asi*, which speak of the unity of the individual Self and the Supreme Self, belong to this group. 3. *Brahma-svarūpa nirūpaṇa vākyas*. These define the true nature of Brahman in positive terms. These positive definitions are of two types: direct (*svarūpa lakṣaṇa*) and indirect (*taṭastha lakṣaṇa*). 'Brahman is Truth, Knowledge, Infinity'[22] is an example of direct definition. 'Brahman is that from which all these beings originate...'[23] is an example of indirect definition.

Of the three types of statements mentioned above, the first one gives authority to the process of *neti, neti*, while the third one gives authority to the process of *iti, iti*. In the second type of statement both the negation and affirmation find application. Now, which of these processes represent the right or more important approach to Brahman—*neti, neti* or *iti, iti*? Teachers of Advaita have not given a unanimous answer to this question.

It may be mentioned here that though the concept of negation occurs in several Upaniṣads[24], the phrase *neti, neti* occurs only in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* where it is repeated five times. The Upaniṣad

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21. English translation, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970) Part II, ch. 1.

22. सत्यं ज्ञानम् अनन्तं ब्रह्म ।
Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1

23. यतो वा इमानि भूतानि जायन्ते...
Taittirīya Upaniṣad 3.1.1

24. As for example, in *Katha Upaniṣad* (4.11) 'There is no diversity whatsoever; he who sees diversity goes from death to death'.

itself states, 'There is no instruction greater (or better) than this *neti*'.[25] Commenting on this passage, Śaṁkara says:

> But Brahman has none of these distinguishing marks. Hence It cannot be described as we can describe a cow by saying, 'There moves a white cow with horns.' Brahman is described by means of name, form and karma superimposed on It, in such terms as 'Knowledge, Bliss, Brahman'... When, however, we wish to describe Its true nature, free from all differences due to limiting adjuncts, then it is an utter impossibility. Then there is only one way left, viz. to describe It as 'Not this, not this' by eliminating all possible specifications of It that one may know of.[26]

In his commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra* (3.2.22) also Śaṁkara categorically states that there is no better way of indicating Brahman than by the process of negation.

However, an eminent post-Śaṁkara Advaitin, Sarvajñātma Muni, states in his great work *Saṁkṣepa Śārīraka* that the *neti, neti* process is only of secondary importance, and that it is only affirmative statements such as 'That thou art' which are of prime importance in understanding the true nature of Brahman.[27]

Some of the statements of Sri Ramakrishna seem to support Śaṁkara's assertion rather than that of Sarvajñātma Muni. In his homely way the great Master used to say, 'Everything in this world, except Brahman, has been defiled by the mouth.'[28] However, the great prophet of harmony that he was, Sri Ramakrishna united both the via negativa and the via positiva into a single integral quest and realization. According to him the path to higher realization has two stages: a stage of mystic ascent known as *Jñāna* based on *neti, neti,* and a more advanced stage of mystic descent based on *iti, iti.* He explained his unique doctrine as follows:

> The Jñāni gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, 'Not this, not this.' Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the Vijñāni, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime and brick-dust. That which is realized intuitively as Brahman, through the eliminating process of 'Not this, not this', is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The Vijñāni sees that the Reality which is nirguṇa (without attributes) is also saguṇa (with attributes).[29]

When the chief meditation techniques of Jñāna-mārga are discussed in these columns next month, it will be seen that some of them are apophatic and the rest cataphatic.

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25. न हि एतस्मादिति नेत्यन्यत् परमस्ति ।
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.3.6

26. Samkara, Commentary on ibid

27. On this point vide, S. S. Raghavachar, 'The Place of Negation in Advaita' in *Prabuddha Bharata* January, 1982.

28. Swami Dhireshananda has made an ingenious attempt to interpret this statement as an exposition of *neti, neti.* See his article (in Bengali) *Ucchista Brahma* in *Udbodhan* (Calcutta Magh 1392) Vol. 88, No. 1.

29. *The Gospel*, p. 103

THE MESSAGE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

SWAMI BHUTESHANANDA

The message of Sri Ramakrishna is so vast and deep that it is impossible to expound it in detail. I can only touch upon a few salient points of it here. Whatever fell from the lips of Sri Ramakrishna or whatever he did was for the good of the world. Therefore I believe that whatever of his teachings that I share with you will be helpful to you in your life.

From the early days of his life Sri Ramakrishna was mad after God. God realization was his only concern in life, other things were absolutely secondary for him. He said, 'Verily, I tell you, I know nothing but God'. He lived for God realization; however, he wished to have this realization not for his own enjoyment but for the joy of sharing it with others. Let me give you an illustration. One day he was in a mood of deep samādhi. The mood was persisting but he was trying to keep it under control. When a man enters samādhi and gets completely absorbed in God, it is impossible for him to communicate with others. So Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother of the universe, 'O Mother do not make me forgetful of the external world. I want to talk to the devotees.' Ordinary people cannot understand the deep significance of this utterance. Samādhi is a state which all followers of spiritual life aspire for; it is the culmination of the pursuit of spiritual life. For Sri Ramakrishna samādhi had become natural and habitual. But when he was in the company of devotees, he tried to avoid getting absorbed in samādhi lest he should forget the world and thereby the people assembled before him be deprived of the great truth which he was eager to share with them. He was an unending fountain of the eternal wisdom derived from his various experiences of the ultimate Reality. At the same time, he was also a keen observer of the external world when he was not absorbed in samādhi.

There are some points that Sri Ramakrishna particularly emphasized. First, according to him, God realization is the only aim of human life. Without God realization everything else is incomplete and, with God realization, nothing more remains to be attained here or hereafter. Now, what did Sri Ramakrishna mean by God realization? To put it briefly, it means an intuitive experience of the ultimate Ground of all existence in which the seer and the seen become one. God realization does not merely mean the vision of various divine Forms or having some higher feelings which may be described by different people in different ways. Complete absorption of the individual self in the Absolute: that is what Sri Ramakrishna meant by God realization. As it has been beautifully described in the Upaniṣads: 'Just as pure water falling into a vast sheet of pure water becomes one with it, so also becomes the self of a contemplative man who has realized God'.[1] That is to say, in that state the individual ceases to be an individual any more. He is not lost; rather, he becomes the Absolute himself. This experience of unity is the

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* Talk delivered by Srimat Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, on Sunday, 16 February 1986, at Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bangalore.

1. यथोदकं शुद्धे शुद्धमासिक्तं तादृगेव भवति ।
एवं मुनेर्विजानत आत्मा भवति गौतम ॥

Katha-Upaniṣad 4.14

real meaning of God realization. However, there are various other forms of spiritual realization, and Sri Ramakrishna accepted all of them. That was the catholicity and breadth of vision that Sri Ramakrishna had about God realization.

The second salient message of Sri Ramakrishna is that not only we should have that realization in our soul, but also it should be shared with others. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that there were some people who, when they got any good thing to eat, would eat it themselves, wipe their lips and remain mum. They had no wish to share it with others. Sri Ramakrishna condemned such an attitude. The great realization that one achieves in the spiritual path has to be shared with others. Only then will life attain full maturity. By sharing that realization with others, by helping others reach the same experience, our experience becomes fulfilled in the real sense of the term. One day Sri Ramakrishna asked his dearest disciple Narendra (who later on became Swami Vivekananda) about his goal in life. Narendra replied: 'It is my desire to remain absorbed in Samadhi continually for three or four days, only once in a while coming down to the sense plane to eat a little food.' Hearing this, Sri Ramakrishna said: 'You are a small-minded person. There is a state higher even than that. "All that exists art Thou": it is you who sing that song.'[2] The Master further said that he wanted him to be like a banyan tree with its branches spread all around giving shelter to thousands of weary travellers. This incident shows the general trend of the thought of Sri Ramakrishna. He himself took great pains to disseminate spiritual ideas among the people and to help them in pursuing the highest goal. If the first half of his life was spent in gathering the treasures of spiritual experience, its second half was spent in sharing that wealth with other people.

We now come to the third message of Sri Ramakrishna. As he put it, *yato mat, tato path*, 'As many minds, so many paths.' All paths lead to the ultimate goal of God realization. This was not a mere intellectual conviction but a fact that he himself had experienced through the pursuit of different religious paths. He was a great experimenter in this respect. After he had had God realization in one way he wanted to know how other people followed their paths, how they reached the goal and what that goal might be. So he followed each path, paying scrupulous attention to all the injunctions and traditions concerning it. And he invariably found that every path led to the same goal, namely, God realization. The realization itself is something incommunicable, because it is one's own innermost experience which is beyond the reach of words. But as far as words would go, he tried to describe his experiences in his own unique way, being endowed with all the knowledge of the different paths. He can thus be of immense help to the followers of different paths. That is the unique feature of Sri Ramakrishna.

In the history of world religions we never find any teacher doing spiritual experiments in the manner Sri Ramakrishna did. We find expressions of great catholicity in the scriptures of Hinduism, and, perhaps of other religions as well. The ancient Vedas declare: 'Truth is one: sages call It by various names' (*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*). Divine Incarnations and prophets have made similar statements. But history has no record that any of these great teachers actually practised the

2. Cf *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, revised edition (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979), Vol. 1, p. 162.

different paths and ultimately realized the same goal through each of them. As far as we know, Sri Ramakrishna alone did it, and this is what makes his life unique. The catholicity that he taught was not just an expression of a broad mind or philosophical outlook but had a deep experiential content. It was one of the most valuable experiences that he gained through his experiments. When he spoke of other paths, it was about his own experiences of those paths that he spoke. He respected every path and never criticized any path.

Tremendous faith is necessary for strict adherence to a particular path to the end. We must have unflinching faith in the goal. But if we can have equal respect for the paths that others are following, it is so much better. Sri Ramakrishna did not ask us to accept the truh of the harmony of all paths even on the basis of his own experiments. Rather he asked us to go on experimenting on our path as well as on other paths. He has taught us not to talk of the superiority or inferiority of any path before we are in a position to evaluate properly the worth of these paths. If we can follow the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, we can look upon the followers of different paths as fellow-travellers to the same goal as ours. This message of Sri Ramakrishna is of utmost importance particularly in these days of communal hatred and conflict. It is usually the lack of proper understanding of your own religion that makes you pass judgement on other religions. Have respect for other faiths if you can, otherwise do not pass any judgement. What is really important is sincerity. Regarding this Sri Ramakrishna said:

> Whatever path you follow—whether you are a Hindu, a Mussalman, a Christian, a Śākta, a Vaiṣṇava or a Brāhmo—the vital point is aspiration. God is our Inner Guide. It doesn't matter if you take a wrong path—only you must have longing for Him. He Himself will put you on the right path.[3]
>
> The grace of God falls alike on all His children, learned and illiterate—whoever longs for Him. The father has the same love for all his children. Suppose a father has five children. One calls him 'Bābā', some 'Ba', and some 'Pā'. These last cannot pronounce the whole word. Does the father love those who address him as 'Bābā' more than those who call him 'Pā'? The father knows that these last are simply too young to say 'Bābā' correctly.[4]

May be, a person is not able to follow the right path; even then, if he is sincere to the backbone, God will see and guide him along that path until he reaches the goal. This is Sri Ramakrishna's view on different faiths. The differences between different religions can be eliminated, and all communal conflicts can be resolved if we take this teaching of Sri Ramakrishna seriously. Only then can we really be humble and tolerant and be able to accept the different paths as equally valid. This kind of humility born of introspection is of utmost importance in our lives today.

For God realization we must identify ourselves with spiritual life only, and everything else should be regarded as secondary. We should concentrate all our energies in a systematic manner towards that goal which is God. This earnestness, this one-pointedness born of living faith in one's goal, is absolutely necessary for progress in spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna never said that spiritual life must be pursued in one uniform way. He said that there is infinite variation in human temperament, and so there must be variety in the paths which only can enable all people to reach the goal. If you rigidly insist on one path only, most of the people

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3. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942) p. 673
4. ibid p. 407

will have to go without spiritual life. That is absurd, and should never be done. God has created the universe in multiple ways with an infinite variety of forms. Similarly God has created various paths for the realization of the highest Truth so that everybody may find a path suitable to him. This is the simple understanding that Sri Ramakrishna insisted upon. He wanted to make spiritual life natural to everybody and he taught his disciples never to try to impose their own ideas on anybody.

Once Swami Vivekananda, who had already accumulated sufficient spiritual power, wanted to test it by transmitting it to one of his brother-disciples. He did it and the result was that the brother-disciple to whom his power was transmitted underwent a complete change. The brother-disciple had originally been following the path of duality, that is, maintaining the relationship of the worshipper and the worshipped with God. But when Swamiji transmitted his power to him, he became immersed in the idea of the unity of the universe and the soul's identity with God. Sri Ramakrishna called Swami Vivekananda and said: 'What is this ?... Don't you see what harm you have done to him by injecting your attitude of mind to him ? He has been progressing well till now with a particular mental attitude, the whole of which has now been destroyed ... What is done is done. Don't act so thoughtlessly from now on. The boy, however, is lucky that greater harm has not befallen him.'[5] Swamiji remembered this teaching throughout his life, and emphasized it in several of his lectures.

Sri Ramakrishna was a man of complete renunciation which he regarded as a spiritual aspirant's most valuable asset. 'Through renunciation alone have people attained immortality', says the Upaniṣads.[6] Sri Ramakrishna used to say, *tyāg chāḍā kichu habe nā* 'Nothing can be attained without whole-hearted renunciation.' But at the same time, Sri Ramakrishna said that renunciation did not mean the same thing to everybody. A monk who has renounced worldly life can renounce inwardly as well as outwardly. However, a householder cannot do that, and for him it will be enough if he practises renunciation only inwardly. He can meet the requirements of normal social life and discharge his duties towards his family and society. But at the same time he must have complete detachment in his mind. Detachment is what renunciation really means. It should be noted that this sort of division of renunciation into 'outer' and 'inner' does not reduce the importance of either. Inner renunciation alone is not sufficient for a sannyasin. He is supposed to uphold the example of total renunciation to the world, and so he has to be a man of renunciation inwardly as well as outwardly. A householder need not renounce externally but he must practise internal renunciation. This is another important message of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna knew that all people are not equally anxious for God realization. He divided mankind into four groups: those who live in bondage, those who are trying to get rid of that bondage, those who have achieved freedom from bondage, and those who never got involved in bondage but remain ever free. Explaining this classification, he said:

> Suppose a net has been cast into a lake to catch fish. Some fish are so clever that they are never caught in the net. They are like the ever-free. But most of the fish are entangled in the net.

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5. *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, p. 167

6. त्यागेनैके अमृतत्वमानशुः ।
Mahanarayana-Upanisad 12.14

Some of them try to free themselves from it, and they are like those who seek liberation. But not all the fish that struggle succeed. A very few do jump out of the net, making a big splash in the water. Then the fishermen shout, 'Look! there goes a big one.' But most of the fish caught in the net cannot escape, nor do they make any effort to get out. On the contrary, they burrow into the mud with the net in their mouths and lie there quietly, thinking, 'We need not fear any more; we are quite safe here.' But the poor things do not know that the fishermen will drag them out with the net. These are like the men bound to the world.[7]

Most of the people are in bondage and remain ignorant of that fact. A disciple asked Sri Ramakrishna, 'Sir, is there no way out for such people?' The Master at once replied with great emphasis, 'Certainly there is.' He then pointed out the different ways open to bound souls.[8] What are these ways? Taking God's name, keeping the company of holy men, constantly thinking of God, and now and then retiring to solitude. It is good to get away, once in a while, from your usual environment, where people remain entangled in worldliness, and think about God in solitude. That way you will learn to cultivate dispassion towards the world as well as an intense desire for God realization. Thus Sri Ramakrishna has given hope to the people who are supposed to be always in bondage.

Sri Ramakrishna was the greatest optimist anyone can think of. He never thought that a person could be doomed for ever. There is always hope for everybody; he spoke only about that hope and never had a word of condemnation for anyone. Sri Ramakrishna saw even in the worst sinner the living presence of God. He recognized potential divinity and the latent power to manifest it in all people, only the sinner and the ignorant are not aware of it. Inner struggle is necessary to become aware that you have the possibility, the innate capacity, to realize your ultimate goal. This consciousness of the goal will make you constantly discontented wherever you may be, so much so that you can never be at peace until you have reached the goal. Sri Ramakrishna holds the hope of salvation for everybody. For him there is no such thing as eternal damnation, because God resides in every being. There cannot be a being in whom God is not, in whom Divinity is not hiding itself, as it were, and waiting for its expression. Sri Ramakrishna asked people never to think of their sins but to think of the glories of God and of the way they might realize Him, and to have abiding faith in the ultimate victory of spiritual struggle. There is not a single soul for whom there is no ray of hope, for whom there is no prospect of God realization. This boundless faith in man is a most striking feature of Sri Ramakrishna's message. He was always a prophet of hope, a prophet of the ultimate victory of good over evil. Indeed, this is to be considered the main message of Sri Ramakrishna. This message of the Master is not meant only for any particular sect or particular religion. It is meant for everybody who has eyes to see and ears to hear.

Sri Ramakrishna spread broadcast the idea that, wherever you may be, the Divine Spirit is throbbing in you and waiting for an opportunity to manifest through you. You are all the children of God. Not only that, you are simply the essence of God. Only the veil of ignorance that covers the soul has to be removed, and the inner light will shine at once. Suppose, says Sri Ramakrishna, there is a room which has been dark for a thousand years. It now needs only the striking of a match for the darkness to go. It goes at once; it does not go bit by bit, although the darkness

7. *The Gospel* p. 86-87
8. ibid, p. 87

had been there for a thousand years. Similarly, a man may have been apparently sinful for many years. But that does not matter. It is only a dream: he has been dreaming that he is doomed. He has to be awakened from that bad dream. Just shake him, help him to break the dream. Then he will awaken and realize that the experience of the state of downfall was merely a bad dream, and that he is eternally free.

Sri Ramakrishna's message gives you hope, encouragement and immense amount of inspiration so that you never feel satisfied with the condition in which you are. It makes you feel 'divine discontent' and yearning for going ahead. Never remain satisfied with where you are; go ahead, and stop not till the goal is reached, says Sri Ramakrishna. To illustrate this point he gave a fine parable:

> A wood cutter once entered a forest to gather wood. A brahmachari said to him, 'Go forward.' He obeyed the injunction and discovered some sandal-wood trees (by selling which he got a lot of money). After a few days he went still farther and discovered a gold-mine and, next, mines of diamond and precious stones. With these he became immensely rich.[9]

The idea is that we should not feel satisfied if we get some experience of joy in our pursuit of spiritual life. Spiritual life has endless possibilities. The more we advance, the higher will be our experience. And the higher our experience, the greater will be our ability to solve our problems and the more we will find peace and joy in life. This spiritual quest must go on until our death. Only when we completely merge ourselves in the Absolute and cease to be individuals, and become free from all limitations, can we claim to have achieved the goal of life. We have to reach that one ultimate Reality which is the Absolute, without which nothing exists and beyond which there is nothing more to be attained, as the Gītā says.[10]

It is the ultimate goal which we have to seek, follow without wavering, without slackening our pace of enquiry, undeterred by any circumstances. Whatever that state may be, the ultimate experience is beyond words. It is so deep and transcendent that it cannot be communicated through words. In fact, the question of communicating it does not even arise because, in that state, other people cease to be separate entities. You become the whole world, and the sole expression of that one ultimate Reality. That is the goal we have to seek. This goal may be experienced by people in different ways; do not be confused by that. Take it for granted that there are different kinds of experience because of the differences of the experiencing mind. But ultimately all these experiences are meant to lead you towards the ultimate goal—the realization of infinite, absolute Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, *sat-cit-ānanda*. Beyond this no attempt has been made in the scriptures to describe the ultimate goal. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that everything in the world had been defiled by the mouth but Brahman alone had not been defiled in that way. All the knowledge that people boast of is in fact different kinds of ignorance, because they fall short of the ultimate Truth. True knowledge is that which removes all distinctions between you and the ultimate Reality. It is attained through complete purification of the mind.

I pray to Sri Ramakrishna that through his blessings we may all proceed towards the same goal, show respect towards others who are following different paths, and also be considerate towards those who remain forgetful of God and feel it our duty to help them get rid of their worldly dream.

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9. ibid, p. 109

10. यल्लब्ध्वा चापरं लाभं मन्यते नाधिकं ततः ।
Bhagavad-Gītā 6.22

THE CHALLENGE OF VEDANTA TO AMERICAN WOMEN—I*

ANN MYREN

Swami Vivekananda saluted American women, calling them goddesses ; he praised their independence, energy, loyalty, purity, and capacity for work. But he also challenged American women with plain truths about themselves. He raised questions about the behaviour of women, their aspirations, their ideals and their role in society. A prophet, Swamiji clearly saw into the heart of American society and anticipated its future problems. 'There is no chance for the welfare of the world', wrote Swamiji, 'unless the condition of women is improved.'[1] It was his conviction that the condition of women underlies the condition of all societies. Swami Vivekananda had a prophetic message specifically for American women which contained spiritual truths not only for women but for the whole of society.

Today American society appears to be only remotely influenced by spiritual ideals ; the Swami thought such a condition very dangerous. He stated emphatically, '*Truth does not pay homage to any society, ancient or modern. Society has to pay homage to truth or die.*'[2] This compelling statement is a warning to Americans. If we do not pay heed to the spiritual basis of all life and social order, our society may die. And as women are more influential than men in the raising of children, there is a special message here for women. In 1895 Swamiji said prophetically, 'The new cycle must see the masses living Vedanta, and this will have to come through women.'[3] He further said, 'There is a chance of Vedanta becoming the religion of your country, because of democracy. But it can become so only if you can and do clearly understand it, if you become real men and women.'[4] What the Swami meant by becoming 'real men and women' was that the individual person should realize the Self, the basis of Reality.

To realize the Self, the Atman, is to know in the deepest and also the most pragmatic way that all persons are absolutely equal because they are all the Self. And in Swamiji's view becoming 'real men and women' means working toward this realization of the Self. The philosophy and practics of Vedanta also provide the basis for freedom and individualism. It is the individual person who must make the effort to gain the ultimate Truth. And from that realization comes the real expression of freedom, a freedom which is spiritual. This spiritual freedom flows over into society, affecting the social order. Spiritual realizations invigorate society and provide the stimuli for the practice of social values which are in accord with spiritual truths. America is a likely ground for Vedanta because of its comparative youth, lack of tradition, and democratic values. In bringing vital spirituality into life and society, women in this 'new cycle' have three special tasks: they must develop along lines which are conducive to their own spiritual growth ; they must stimulate spiritual growth in society ; and they must become 'real'

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* A sequel to the two-instalment article published in *Prabuddha Bharata* January and February, 1986.

1. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1956 edition), Vol. 6, p. 330. (Hereafter referred to as CW with date of edition, volume and page.)
2. CW, 1976, 2:84
3. CW, 1974, 7:95
4. CW, 1955, 8:126

women, that is, realize the ultimate Truth.

Swami Vivekananda admired the social and economic independence of American women. One reason for this admiration is that independence is a necessary condition in the real pursuit of spiritual truth. A society which fosters the independence of women emphasizes a value basic to spiritual life. The Swami commented on women who worked, unwilling to give up their newly-won rights and privileges for marriage. These women, he said, would only marry for love, preferring to remain single if true love did not come their way.[5] They could be independent because working outside the home was becoming a reality for women. By 1900, slightly over 18 per cent of the labour forces were women.[6]

As he was an extremely astute social observer, the Swami no doubt knew that women's working outside the home would bring problems. First, women would not have to marry because they could be economically independent. Second, it would change the nature of the family and the raising of children. And third, it would affect marriage, the traditional method of societies to control sexual relations. And although there have always been unmarried women in societies, to have a powerful trend develop which indicated to women that marriage was no longer necessary, would inevitably affect attitudes toward sexual relations. In our present permissive society, sexual relations outside of marriage have become the accepted norm for many people. In the 1970's and now in the 80's, family life has been severely disrupted.

Although, in this age of sexual permissiveness, to discuss chastity may seem very regressive to some, it is a subject which must be understood. Swami Vivekananda insisted on chastity; he was death on unchastity. For the unmarried, chastity means refraining from sexual relations; for the married, chastity means confining sexual relations to the marriage. A chaste woman or man who is married is faithful to her or his spouse. Swamiji's support of this ideal has significance for American society. The Swami taught the highest spiritual truths to Americans. He made the highest Truth accessible to women and men. The highest Truth, knowledge of the Spirit, comes only to those persons who have control of their senses. And the most difficult drive to control is the sex drive. Thus to demand chastity is to put the most difficult task directly before a person. 'Chastity is the cornerstone of all practice', he said.[7] Only if a person practises chastity, can he have a solid foundation for spiritual practice.

Swami Vivekananda said that the foundation of society was 'morality, ethics, laws.'[8] In short, renunciation. 'Self-sacrifice, indeed is the basis of all civilization', he said.[9] It is self-sacrifice or renunciation which is the basis of spiritual life, and it is also renunciation which is the basis of the social order. What those who practise renunciation are doing is to carry out with greater commitment the basic law which is the foundation of society. Actually the main task of society is to help women and men toward a higher life, a life based on the Spirit. Consequently, chastity is an essential practice. It is a true practice, and if a society wants to endure, according to the Swami, it must 'pay homage to the truth.' Restraint is the key to individual and social well-being.

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5. CW, 1974, 7:471
6. W. Elliot Brownlee and Mary M. Brownlee, *Women in the American Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 3.
7. CW, 1956, 1:520
8. CW, 1964, 4:243
9. CW, 1974, 7:269

Swamiji levelled several broadsides at American women. Although he admired the education and intellectuality of America's women, he was not willing to allow women to sacrifice purity for intellectuality. He thought that Indian women were not so learned as American women, but were purer. This is not to say that he wanted American women to stop using their brains; no, he always wanted people to think, but he also wanted women to raise themselves. And the raising of women can only come through spiritual discipline. The goals that women must strive for are moral and spiritual. Leaving no behaviour unobserved, he criticized such practices as flirting, and thought the traditions of courting were absurd. A man, he said, would court perhaps 200 women before he took a wife. 'Bah!' he protested, 'If I belonged to the marrying set I could find a woman to love without all that!' Swamiji knew these customs were not right, and he accused Americans of covering what was bad with roses and calling it good. The West was in his own words, 'young, foolish, fickle, and wealthy. What mischief can come of one of these qualities; but when all three, all four, are combined, beware!' His blows ended in a resounding condemnation of the women he observed in Boston. 'There', he said, 'women are all faddists, all fickle, merely bent on following something new and strange.'[10]

What was it that brought on such severe criticisms? It may be that the women of Boston were not taking his message seriously. He had something vital to say to American women, something which would give their future purpose and the right direction. But the women flocked to this exotic Oriental for a little sense thrill. At the same time the Swami also criticized American men. To them, he said, 'every woman save his own wife should be as his mother.' Gallantry filled the Swami's soul with disgust. How dare a man go so far as to pay a woman compliments and treat women as playthings, he asked. He wondered why women allowed men to venture so far. Further, he said, these customs were the cause of divorce. His point was that with these traditions men and women mired themselves in sense life. The senses always demand more and will continue to do so until brought under control.

Now with such cutting criticisms, what could the Swami tell women and men that would lead them to nobler ideals? How could women really develop? Swamiji's solution is quite dramatic. He said to men and women, 'Not until you learn to ignore the question of sex and to meet on a ground of common humanity will your women really develop.'[11]

Here we have the words of a prophet spoken nearly a century ago. The Swami described precisely what many women in this country are striving for today: to meet on the common ground of humanity. At the present time the eradication of sex barriers is a major effort of the women's movement. Many women today demand equal pay, equal civil rights, equal education, equal entrance into the professions, equality in every social area. However, these present-day social reformers have failed to get to the true basis for equality, to the common ground of all humanity, the

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10. CW, 1959, 5:412-3. According to Marie Louise Burke's account in *Swami Vivekananda in the West, New Discoveries, The World Teacher, Part II*, (to be published by Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, in 1986) Swami Vivekananda's criticism of Boston women was really a criticism of American women in general whom he found to be neither 'steady' nor 'serious'.

11. Ibid.

Self. It is as the Self that all humans are equal. Making adjustments in social and economic conditions will never provide equality. Of course women must struggle for these rights, but if it *is* equality women want, it can only come by going to the very foundation of social life. The cause of all the mischief is the perception of the difference between the sexes. If the religion of oneness were practised, if people came to understand themselves as the Self, if the highest spiritual knowledge actually came to form the basis of social order, the emphasis on the distinctions of sex would disappear. Then, as Swamiji said, women could reach their highest development. So could men for that matter. To be relieved of the limitations of a materialist outlook which is based on sense knowledge and to be inspired by the knowledge of the unlimited, perfect, pure nature of the Self, will bring a flowering of talents in women and men. The kind of society which is responsive to spiritual truth allows the best development of the individual person.

The Swami respected the wishes of women who did not want to marry because he saw a valuable life-purpose for those who remained single. Unencumbered by family, a woman would be able more easily to pursue spiritual truth. For example, to Josephine MacLeod he pointed out that 'the natural ambition of woman is through marriage to climb up, leaning upon a man ; but those days are gone. You shall be great without the help of any man, just as you are.'[12] Although he was writing to Josephine MacLeod, his comment has a very important implication for all women ; 'but those days are gone' indicated not only the unmarried state of Miss MacLeod but also a change in American society toward greater independence for women, a change he observed that had begun with the Civil War. Josephine MacLeod had had suitors and was actually engaged at one time. After a few weeks she broke off the engagement and ever after was thankful. ' "You can't catch Josie", she would say, with a pirouette and a bell-like chuckle, and then (looking at one intently, for she was in dead earnest): "You see, I never did get caught." '[13] Like Josephine MacLeod other single women can become 'great' without the help of a man.

Fortunately we have Josephine MacLeod's 'Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda' in which she indicated the scope and power of Swamiji's teaching and her own 'greatness'. First he made her realize that 'there was nothing secular in life ; it was all holy.'[14] And although she never took any religious vows ('I *haven't any* Renunciation', she wrote, 'but I've freedom.') she had, in her own words, become 'utterly secure in [her] grasp on the ultimate.' Of course, Josephine MacLeod had certain qualifications as a recipient of the Swami's power. And Swamiji commented two days before his own death on her character, her purity. 'She is pure as purity, loving as love itself', he told Sister Nivedita. Thus Josephine MacLeod, a woman living freely in the spiritual sense, but in the world, a world she saw as holy, had gained 'greatness' with her 'grasp on the ultimate' just as the Swami had said.[15]

Because Swami Vivekananda was a prophet, the life of Josephine MacLeod is extremely important. Prophets do not have time to work extensively ; they work intensively. The example of Miss MacLeod shows us that women can pursue independent lives and accomplish a great

12. CW, 1955, 8:554

13. Frances Leggett, *Late & Soon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 28.

14. *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), p. 229.

15. Ibid., pp. 243-4

deal spiritually. Furthermore, she used her freedom effectively in making a great contribution to Vedanta. For many years she travelled about, meeting people, and telling them about Swami Vivekananda and Vedanta. She called this activity her 'work' and undertook it with a real spirit of service.

Another woman, as independent as Josephine MacLeod, was Miss Sarah Ellen Waldo, who worked for the Swami and Vedanta. The Swami probably met Miss Waldo in the first months of 1895 when he was giving classes and lectures in New York. Miss Waldo was certainly full of spirit of service. She cooked for the Swami, edited his talks and lectures, took dictation, read proof, saw visitors for him, and even taught classes for him. Swamiji had difficulty getting proper lodgings because he was an Indian. Consequently, when he did find a place in New York, it was not very good, and the food seemed unclean to him. So he asked Miss Waldo to come and cook for him. She lived in Brooklyn, two hours away by horse-car, but this did not prevent her from arriving at the Swami's lodgings in the morning to do the cooking. She would return home at nine or ten at night, and then on the days that the Swami was free the trip was reversed. On those days when he took the horse-car to Brooklyn, he found rest, relaxation and freedom in Miss Waldo's sunny apartment.

Besides this personal service that Miss Waldo did for the Swami, she did a valuable work when she took down the translation of Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtras* which the Swami dictated to her.[16] She also helped to edit *Karma Yoga* which was published later on. But her most important contribution to the work was *Inspired Talks*, the notes of Swamiji's talks to his students at Thousand Island Park in the summer of 1895. It has been said that *Inspired Talks* is the most representative of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Miss Waldo, a loyal friend and faithful worker, unmarried and independent, was an excellent example of the best of American womanhood. It is not possible for a person to be as close to the Swami as Miss Waldo was and not be absolutely pure. To have been able to withstand the force of the Swami's power took an unusual person, one who was highly developed spiritually. Both Miss Josephine MacLeod and Miss Sarah Ellen Waldo represented the best of American womanhood in their purity. And they also represented the growing sense of independence of women by the way they lived and practised Vedanta. In the 1890's it took a strong, independent woman to take up Vedanta, a religion foreign to America and one which had met with virulent criticism by many of the clergy.

There were four other unmarried women whom the Swami met whose lives will help us understand what he wanted for American women. These young women were Mary Hale, her sister, Harriet, and their two cousins, Isabelle and Harriet McKindley. Swamiji knew these four young women very well because he had lived in the Hale household on several occasions. He encouraged the two Harriets to marry because they had the temperament for married life. About Harriet Hale he wrote, 'She is not so imaginative and sentimental as to make a fool of herself', but she had 'enough sentiment as to make life sweet, and enough of common sense and gentleness as to soften the hard points in life.' Her cousin

16. Sister Devamata, 'Memories of India and Indians', *Prabuddha Bharata* 37 (May, 1932): 242-4. A more precise and detailed account of Miss Waldo's activities can be found in *Swami Vivekananda in the West, New Discoveries, The World Teacher, Part I,* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1985) by Marie Louise Burke.

Harriet McKindley was 'just the girl to make the best of wives.'[17]

However, when it came to Mary Hale and Isabelle McKindley, he had quite different advice. In particular he told Isabelle and Mary that they were spoiling their lives by their lack of commitment to either spiritual life or married life. Persons like these two young women, who had 'high-strung nerves, [were] tremendously imaginative, with intense feeling, always going high one moment and coming down the next', must, if they want to be great, 'fight to the finish—clear out the deck for battle.' There must be 'no encumbrance—no marriage, no children, no undue attachment.' These persons must live and die for the 'one *idea*.' He wished Mary happiness in marriage if she wanted it, or he would have liked to hear from her that she was doing great deeds.[18] Swamiji persisted in his idea of renunciation for Mary Hale. He wrote to her from Almora in 1897, 'Renounce and be happy. Give up the idea of sex and possessions. There is no other bond. Marriage and sex and money are the only living devils. All earthly love proceeds from the body. No sex, no possessions ; as these fall off, the eyes open to spiritual vision. The soul regains its own infinite power.'[19] These are mighty strong words and obviously not meant for everyone. Here he spoke to Mary Hale, an unmarried woman, who apparently had the capacity for a truly spiritual life, a life of complete inner renunciation. Of course Swamiji was in favour of marriage for most people, and he thought the real basis of marriage was renunciation.

Writing four years later in August 1901 to the still unmarried and uncommitted Mary Hale, he, to use his own word, became 'exercised' with her. He deplored her lack of commitment and insisted that she should 'get a little bit of manliness.' What was her fault ? Lack of 'assertion of individuality.' 'Your haughtiness, spirit, etc.', he wrote, 'are all nonsense, only mockery ; you are at best a boarding-school girl, no backbone! no backbone!'[20] It seems what Mary Hale lacked was the ability to assert her individuality, renunciation, an actual inner commitment to spiritual life. Swamiji held out the highest for Mary Hale ; he loved her deeply and he wrote to her, indicating that she had the capacity for the highest life, spiritual life with 'no encumbrance, no marriage, no children, no undue attachment.' Why, in Swamiji's eyes, was Mary Hale acting like a school girl ? Because she lacked the 'assertion of individuality', the commitment to spiritual life.

This word 'individuality' was used by Swamiji in a much different way from its popular usage today. He used the word in its original meaning to denote something which cannot be divided, the indivisible, something which cannot be changed.[21] It was not by chance that he chose that word to chide Mary Hale into action. He asked, in a lecture, 'The Goal', given in 1900 in San Francisco, 'What is the individuality of man ?' And he answered, '[It is]... God in man. That is the [true] individuality. The more a man has approached that, the more he has given up his false individuality.'[22] He often teased Americans about their 'in-di-vid-u-al-ity', pointing out that their notion of individuality was false, superficial, based on the outward appearance of persons. Swamiji knew from his own experience the indivisible nature of

17. CW, 1955, 8:389-90.
18. CW, 1955, 8:391.
19. CW, 1959, 5:137.
20. CW, 1955, 8:559.
21. CW, 1955, 8:181-2.
22. CW, 1976, 2:467-8.

existence, the oneness of life, and it was the aim of his life that everyone should attain the experience of Oneness. When a person attains God, true individuality is also realized. So the course for Mary Hale was clearly charted ; but it was up to her to set out on her journey to the Infinite. She did not, however, take the Swami's advice about marriage, for she married after his death.

We can see from his relationships with these women and from what he said to them, to Josephine MacLeod, Sarah Ellen Waldo, Isabelle McKindley, and Mary Hale, that he expected American women to practise internal renunciation and pursue spiritual life. Each could in her own way achieve true individuality. Swami Vivekananda laid great emphasis on the necessity of women's solving their problems *by themselves*. And, as a prophet, his actions and teachings have a special significance. By teaching these unmarried women internal renunciation, he was setting a pattern for American women. Unmarried women who devoted their lives to striving for spiritual truths, could do so effectively regardless of their social situation. For that matter, Miss Waldo said that the idea of renunciation, meaning formal renunciation, never entered her head.[23] Swamiji taught unmarried women internal renunciation. To them he preached the doctrine of true independence, a life based on spiritual principles, a life directed toward the realization of the Self.

(*To be concluded*)

23. Devamata, 'Memories', p. 242.

They Lived with God

LAKSHMI DEVI

SWAMI CHETANANANDA

One day at the Udbodhan, the Calcutta residence of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother was talking to a devotee about Kshudiram, her father-in-law:

He had fervent faith in God and was devoted to the goddess Śītalā, who was ever by his side. It was his custom to get up before dawn to pick flowers [for worship]. One day he had gone to the Lahas' garden when a little girl of about nine came to him there, saying: 'Come this way, Father. These branches over here are loaded with flowers. Let me hold them down while you pick the blossoms.' He asked, 'Who are you, my child, and why are you out here so early ?' Then she told him, 'It is I, Father, from the Haldar's house.' Because of his [Kshudiram's] piety and devotion, God himself was born in his house, and along with him came all his companions.

Kshudiram had three family deities—Raghuvīr (an aspect of Śrī Rāma), Rāmeśwar Śiva, and the goddess Śītalā. The symbol of Śītalā which he worshipped is actually a pot full of water with a mango twig on the top and red vermillion marks on the outside. The goddess is meditated on as wearing a red cloth and using the twig to sprinkle water for peace and prosperity. Now it so happened that when

Sri Ramakrishna was living in Dakshineswar, he often received various kinds of sweets and fruits from the devotees. One day a thought came to his mind: 'I get so many nice things to eat here and Mother Śītalā at Kamarpukur does not get any of them.' A few days later he had a dream in which Mother Śītalā told him: 'I dwell in one form in the water pot and in another form in your niece Lakshmi. It will be equivalent to feeding me if you feed her.' After that, whenever some special food was given to the Master, he would feed Lakshmi with his own hands if she happened to be with him. In the circle of Sri Ramakrishna's devotees Lakshmi was considered an incarnation of Śītalā.

Lakshmimani Devi was born at Kamarpukur in February 1864. Her father, Rameshwar, was Sri Ramakrishna's second elder brother. Lakshmi had two brothers, Ramlal and Shivaram. As a little five-year-old girl, Lakshmi would help with the worship of the family deities by making sandal paste and picking flowers. Her playtime was mainly spent in performing her own worship, and she was very fond of solitude. Lakshmi started to read the first primary book in the village school. When she came home she shared her lessons with her aunt, Sri Sarada Devi, who was ten years older. Later, in Dakshineswar, they learned the second primary book from a young boy named Sharat Bhandari, who had been appointed by the Master to teach them.

During the rainy season Dakshineswar would become very unhealthy and so Sri Ramakrishna would generally visit Kamarpukur, Jayrambati and Sihar in the company of his nephew and attendant Hriday. On one occasion while he was at Kamarpukur, the stock of special rice which was used for the food offering to Raghuvīr ran out. Rameshwar's wife asked her daughter Lakshmi to go to Mukundapur and buy some. Lakshmi was then ten years old, a thin girl wearing a short cloth. It was raining. Putting a bamboo basket on her head, she left through the back door with half a rupee. The Master was then talking with some villagers near the main gate. After some time Lakshmi returned without any rice and met the Master at the gate. He asked her, 'Lakshmi, where did you go?' The little girl burst into tears and said, 'I went to Mukundapur to buy rice for the Lord, but I couldn't get any.' The Master's heart went out to her in her predicament and he said, 'Oh, what suffering there is for the people of the world!' He then called his sister-in-law, who explained that though they had rice for their meals they had no special rice for the offering.

Immediately the Master took decisive steps to end the family's food problem. He called his neighbour, Sri Ram Yogi, and his boyhood friend, Gayavishnu, and asked them to buy some land. After a long search, six acres of land were found. In order to make the purschase official, the Master went one day to the court at Goghat by palanquin. As he described it: 'Once I went to the Registry Office to register some land, the title of which was in the name of Raghuvīr. The officer asked me to sign my name; but I didn't do it, because I couldn't feel that it was "my" land.' After returning to Kamarpukur, the Master said to Lakshmi: 'Henceforth you won't suffer from lack of food. And you won't have to run to Mukundapur for rice anymore.'

Lakshmi had heard from the Master that Kṛṣṇa dwelt under a kadamba tree. One day while Sri Ramakrishna was resting after his midday meal she left home to look for a kadamba tree to see Kṛṣṇa. She could not find one in Kamarpukur, but she kept searching until she found one in a neighbouring village. For a long time

she waited under that tree, but Kṛṣṇa did not come. She finally returned home. When the Master saw her, he asked, 'Where did you go?' Lakshmi explained that she had gone to find Kṛṣṇa under a kadamba but she had not seen him. Then the Master said to her: 'That kadamba tree is not outside. It is within.'

Lakshmi's stories of the Master are first hand and full of details. Many years later she related to an American devotee the following incident:

When Thakur [Sri Ramakrishna] was in his village, every evening he was in the habit of sitting by the door of his mother's home, watching the people as they passed along the street outside. All the women had to go that way to bring water from the tank [pond]. They would come with their jugs and seeing him at the door, they would sit down in the little yard in front with their water jugs beside them and forget everything in the joy of hearing him talk or sing of God. Fearing lest they might be neglecting their duties, he asked concerning them. One girl said: 'I have a cow. When I heard that you were coming I cut straw enough to last a month and filled my room with it.' To another he said, 'How is your baby?' 'Oh! I forgot', she exclaimed. 'I left it with a neighbour.' She had walked more than a mile to come.

One day Thakur said, 'Now, today you must sing and I will listen.' They all remained silent. Not one dared utter a sound. But there was one girl whom Thakur loved very much, so much that whenever she did not come he would send for her. As soon as she saw that no one else would sing, she sang a song in a weak, high-pitched, quavering voice. All the girls began to laugh at her, but when she had finished, Thakur was delighted. 'See how great is her devotion', he exclaimed. 'Just because I asked her she has sung so frankly and simply. She alone among you has true devotion.'

Another story was told by Lakshmi to some Calcutta devotees:

Sri Ramakrishna could not bear to hear any worldly talk. Once at Kamarpukur he overheard from his home the conversation of some village women who were at the bathing ghat of the Haldarpukur (pond). They were discussing their menus for that day. The Master said to Hriday: 'Look, those women are talking only about how they prepared different fish curries. Shall I go and tell them not to talk such nonsense?' Hriday discouraged the Master because the aristocratic women from the Haldar family were there. But as soon as Hriday left, the Master rushed to the pond and said to the women, 'Do you want to pass your precious life talking only about fish preparations or about God?'

Once, while the Master was staying at Kamarpukur, he had said: 'It would be nice if Lakshmi becomes a widow. Then she would be able to serve the family deities.' Lakshmi was married at the age of eleven to Dhanakrishna Ghatak of Goghat village. The marriage had been arranged by her father, Rameshwar, before his passing away in 1873. When Ramlal brought the news of her marriage to the Master, who was then at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna immediately said, 'Lakshmi will be a widow', and went into samādhi. Hriday was shocked. After a while the Master came back to the normal plane of consciousness and Hriday said to him: 'You have so much affection for Lakshmi. Hearing the news of her marriage you are supposed to bless her, but instead of that, what an awful thing you have said.' Sri Ramakrishna replied: 'What can I do? The Divine Mother spoke that through me.... Lakshmi is a partial incarnation of Śītalā, who is a spirited goddess, while the person who has married her is an ordinary human being.'

A couple of months after the marriage Dhanakrishna went to see Lakshmi at Kamarpukur before leaving on a journey in search of work. He never returned. Following the Hindu custom, Lakshmi waited for twelve years and then went to her husband's home to perform the *śrāddha* ceremony (a ritual for the departed soul). Sri Ramakrishna forbade Lakshmi to accept any part of her

husband's property, so she gave away her share to other members of his family.

After the disappearance of her husband Lakshmi continued to live in Kamarpukur for three years, and then she moved to Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother were staying. She was then a beautiful young girl of fourteen. Sri Ramakrishna advised her: 'Do your duties and practise religion at home. Do not travel to the holy places by yourself. Who knows who might harm you? Live with your aunt (Sri Sarada Devi). Life in the world is not safe.'

Lakshmi narrated her memorable days with the Master at Dakshineswar as follows:

> We (Holy Mother and Lakshmi) used to live in the *nahabat* (a small concert tower at the temple garden). The Master used to refer to the *nahabat* as a cage and to us as 'Śuk-Śāri' [two birds in Indian folklore who were adept in talking about Kṛṣṇa's glories]. When fruits and sweets that had been offered to the Divine Mother were brought to the Master, he would remind my brother Ramlal, 'Don't forget that there are two birds in that cage. Give them some fruit and peas.' Newcomers would take the Master's words literally. Even Master Mahashay [the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*] did so at first.

How we managed in that tiny room of the *nahabat,* I sometimes wonder. It was the divine play of the Master! Usually it was shared by Holy Mother, another girl, and myself; and sometimes Gopaler-ma, who was a large woman, or other women devotees from Calcutta, would stay with us. Moreover, we had to store our groceries, cooking vessels, dishes, and even the water jar in that room. Since the Master had a weak stomach, we also had to store the food for his special diet.

All through his life the Master had stomach trouble. When grandma [Sri Ramakrishna's mother] was living in Dakshineswar, the Master would salute her every morning. Grandma was a large handsome woman, but she was also old-fashioned and very shy. Even before her youngest son [Sri Ramakrishna] she would cover her face with a veil. When he came she would ask him, 'How is your stomach?' The Master would reply, 'Not very good.' Grandma would then advise him: 'Don't take the prasad of Mother Kālī. (It was very spicy food.) As long as your stomach is not all right your wife will cook plain soup and rice for you. Please eat only that.'

Sometimes the Master would get tired of eating invalid's food every day and would ask his mother to cook one or two dishes and season them as she used to do in Kamarpukur. So occasionally grandma cooked for him and the Master enjoyed it.

The Master used to encourage women to cook. 'It is a good occupation for the mind', he would say. 'Sītā was a good cook, and so were Draupadi and Pārvatī. Mother Lakṣmi [the goddess of fortune] would herself cook and feed others.'

After the death of her two older sons, grandma became somewhat passive and withdrawn. Furthermore, she would not take her lunch until she had heard the noon whistle of the Alambazar Jute Mill. As soon as it sounded she would exclaim: 'Oh! There is the whistle of heaven. That is the signal for offering food to Lakṣmi and Nārāyaṇa.' A problem would arise on Sundays, however, when the jute mill was closed; no whistle was blown at noon and consequently she would not eat. This worried the Master very much, and he would lament: 'Oh dear! My old mother will refuse her food today and she will be weak.' Brother Hriday would say to the Master: 'Don't be anxious, uncle. When grandma is hungry she will eat of her own accord.' But the Master would reply: 'Oh no. I am her son. It is my duty to look after my old mother.' With much coaxing the Master would persuade his mother to eat the prasad of Kṛṣṇa.

One day Brother Hriday made a high-pitched sound by blowing a pipe. He then said to grandma: 'There, grandma, did you hear the whistle of heaven? Now please eat your food.' But grandma laughed and said: 'Oh no. You made the sound with your pipe.' Everyone laughed.

When grandma passed away the Master wept.

One night the Master was filled with the spiritual mood of Rādhā and had so identified himself with her that he decided to go to the arbour to meet Kṛṣṇa. Coming out of his room, he entered the rose garden. He had no outward consciousness. He soon got caught in the rose bushes and was scratched all over from

the thorns, and there he stood. The night watchman found him and woke us. At once I went to the temple manager and brought him there. Many others, awakened by the noise, crowded around. Aunt also came there and burst into tears. This was the first time that she was seen in public. When the Master was carried to his room he said: 'I am going to the arbour. Why are you troubling me? Let me go.' After this, Aunt and I began to sleep in his room. A couple of days later, however, he said to us: 'Why are you suffering this way? It is so hot now. You had better sleep in the *nahabat*.' We obeyed.

In the book *Days in an Indian Monastery* Sister Devamata has recorded the following story which Lakshmi had told her:

One morning Sri Ramakrishna disappeared altogether. Holy Mother, Lakididi, his niece [Lakshmi], and another devotee went to the banyan tree to find him, but he was gone. They searched for him everywhere—in the garden, by the temple pools, in his room, in the temple, in the hut. At last Holy Mother concluded that he had gone into samādhi (deep meditation) on the Ganges side and had fallen into the water. They all began to weep bitterly. It so happened that a cow went astray that day and the gardener, unable to find it, plunged into the thorny undergrowth of the jungle in the corner of the temple compound. There near the boundary wall under a bel tree he saw Sri Ramakrishna sitting in samādhi, wholly unconscious of the grief he was causing.

The Master explained afterwards that as he sat under the banyan tree he was disturbed by the many women who on their way to their bath in the Ganges stopped to prostrate before him and beg him to bless them with a child or some worldly advantage, and so he determined to seek out a more inaccessible retreat and had found the bel tree. As he pushed his way through the thick brambles, his feet must have been scratched and torn; for when we went to the tree along a partial clearing, our feet were sore and bleeding.

Sri Ramakrishna's fascinating life and universal message have spread all over the world, but how the Master trained his disciples is not so well known. Lakshmi was among those fortunate few who were very close to the Master and free with him. As the following stories narrated by her show, he trained her with love and affection:

Once the Master asked me to eat some of Mother Kālī's prasad. I was reluctant to eat a piece of fish [generally a Hindu widow is a strict vegetarian], but the Master insisted [knowing that Lakshmi was the goddess Śītalā]. He said to me: 'It is prasad. Don't hesitate. Eat it. If you don't listen to me, you will have to be born again. You may get an ugly, fat husband who will force you to lead a worldly life against your will.' 'Well', I said, 'I certainly don't want to be involved in maya again. Perhaps it is better to eat this nonvegetarian prasad.'

The Master did not sleep much at night. When it was still dark outside he would move around the temple garden, and while passing near the *nahabat* he would call: 'O Lakshmi, O Lakshmi, Get up. Ask your aunt to get up also. How long will you sleep? It is almost dawn. The crows and cuckoos are about to sing. [This is a sign of daybreak in tropical countries.] Chant the name of the Divine Mother.'

Sometimes in winter, when the Master would call, Mother, while lying under her quilt, would whisper to me: 'Keep quiet. He sleeps little. It is not the right time to get up, and the birds have not yet started singing. Don't respond.' But if the Master did not get any response, he would pour water under the doorsill, and since we slept on the floor, we had to get up without delay. Even so, sometimes our beds got wet.

Whenever there was *kīrtan* (devotional singing) in his room, the Master would ask Brother Ramlal to open the door facing the *nahabat*. He would say: 'A current of devotion and bliss will flow here. If the women do not see or hear, how will they learn?' Mother used to watch through a tiny hole in the bamboo screen, and that made her happy. Sometimes the Master would comment with a laugh, 'O Ramlal, the opening in your aunt's screen is getting bigger and bigger.'

The Master used to tell Aunt and me stories from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. such as the story of King Nala, and he would then question us to see if we had nnderstood them. He also would make me repeat them,

and afterwards he would remark with satisfaction, 'That is why I call you a *suka* [parrot].'

One night the Holy Mother and Lakshmi were softly singing a devotional song in the *nahabat*. The Master heard them, and the next morning he said to them: 'Last night you were singing with joy. That is very good.'

Sri Ramakrishna one day asked Lakshmi, 'What deity do you love most?' 'Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa', answered Lakshmi. The Master then wrote a mantra on her tongue and uttered it to her audibly. She had a rosary of tulsi (basil) beads, which the Master approved for her use. Previously Lakshmi had received initiation through a Śakti mantra from a monk named Swami Purnananda. When Holy Mother mentioned this to the Master, he said: 'It does not matter. I gave the right mantra to Lakshmi.'

On a certain occasion the Master, standing on the semi-circular verandah of his room, said that he would be born again after a hundred years. Holy Mother, however, expressed her unwillingness to come again. Lakshmi also vehemently opposed the idea. She said that she would never come again—even if she were chopped into shreds like tobacco leaves! The Master then laughed and told them: 'If I come here, where will you stay? Your hearts will pine for me. Our roots are twined together like the *kalmi* plant [a creeper that grows on the surface of a pond]—pull one stem, and the whole clump comes forward.'

In order to facilitate the Master's cancer treatment he was moved from Dakshineswar to Calcutta and then to Cossipore. The Holy Mother and Lakshmi moved with the Master to serve him. At Cossipore the Master one day worshipped Lakshmi as the goddess Śītalā. He also asked Girish Ghosh to feed her with sweets. About this same time the Master expressed a wish to give Lakshmi a pair of bangles and a necklace. But Lakshmi told him that she did not care for jewelry and that she would be happy to visit Vrindaban with that money. Later, when some of the devotees heard about the Master's wish, they had the jewelry made for her. Lakshmi put them on once and then gave them away out of renunciation.

One day the Master sent Lakshmi to beg food. (It is said that he asked Nikunja Devi, the wife of Mahendranath Gupta, the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* to accompany her.) 'Go from door to door and spread the Lord's name', he said to her. 'People may criticize you, but still their homes will get the touch of your blessed feet, and this will bring good to them.' The Master also told her to beg from the homes of the poor and not of the rich. Lakshmi was a beautiful young woman, and seeing her begging, a compassionate lady said to her: 'Why are you begging? Why don't you stay at my home as my daughter-in-law? I shall give you ornaments.' Later, when that lady found out that Lakshmi was Sri Ramakrishna's niece, she was quite embarrassed and sent vegetables and other articles to her at the Cossipore garden house.

Sri Ramakrishna blessed Lakshmi at Cossipore, saying: 'Don't worry about yourself. Many people will come to you to hear about God, and they will look after you.' Before he gave up his body the Master told the Holy Mother: 'Look after Lakshmi and keep her with you. She will manage herself and will not be a burden.'

After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away in 1886, Lakshmi travelled with Holy Mother to different holy places in India and then moved back to Kamarpukur. But sometimes she would visit Calcutta and stay at the Kankurgachi Yogodyana or with Holy Mother. Sister Nivedita met Lakshmi in 1898 at Holy Mother's Calcutta residence

and described her in *The Master as I Saw Him*:

> Sister Lucky, or Lakshmididi as is the Indian form of her name, was indeed a niece of his [Sri Ramakrishna], and is still a comparatively young woman. She is widely sought after as a religious teacher and director, and is a most gifted and delightful companion. Sometimes she will repeat page after page of some sacred dialogue, out of one of the jātrās, or religious operas, or again she will make the quiet room ring with gentle merriment, as she poses the different members of the party in gronps for religious tableaux. Now it is Kālī, and again Sarasvati; another time it will be a Jagaddhātri, or yet again, perhaps, Krishna under his kadamba tree, that she will arrange, with picturesque effect and scant dramatic material.

Lakshmi was a very talented woman and had a captivating personality. She could sing, dance, act mimic, and inspire. She was a wonderful storyteller, and her childlike simplicity deeply impressed people. Sometimes in a gathering she would dress as a *gopī* (milkmaid) and in her melodious voice would sing *kīrtan* or some devotional songs of Ramprasad. On one occasion she acted as the goddess Jagaddhātrī and had Sister Nivedita act as her carrier lion. The ladies laughed and laughed as the two moved around the room. Nivedita wrote, 'Amusements like these were much approved of, it is said, by Ramakrishna, who would sometimes himself, according to the ladies, spend hours in reciting religious plays, taking the part of each player in turns, and making all around him realize the utmost meaning of the prayers and worship uttered in the poetry.'

One day in Kamarpukur nearly forty village women gathered together on the Lahas' house to listen as Lakshmi sang *kīrtan*. After a while the women became so absorbed in the devotional mood that they forgot what time it was and where they were. Their husbands and relatives called to them from downstairs but did not get any response. In order to give the women a good lesson, the men locked the door of the stairway and left. When the singing was over the ladies tried to go downstairs, but finding the door locked, they understood that men had played a prank on them. They then climbed down to the adjoining low roof over the kitchen and from there jumped on to some heaps of ashes on the ground, thus spoiling the men's mischievous plot.

When Ramlal lost his wife in 1905 he asked his sister, Lakshmi, to come back to Dakshineswar. She stayed with him there for ten years. Gradually she began initiating people and formed a group of disciples who helped build a house for her. From the roof of this house she could see the Ganga, and it was close to the temple garden of Dakshineswar.

Lakshmi was very sweet and kind but at the same time very strong and powerful. Once she went to Varanasi on a pilgrimage with some devotees. She was then forty years old. One evening, while she was attending the vesper service of Kedārnāth Śiva, a young man touched her. At first she thought he was a pickpocket, so she simply pushed his hand away. But when he again touched her, she nnderstood his motive. Grabbing his hair with her left hand, she started hitting him hard with her right hand. The vesper service immediately stopped. The priests came to her with folded hands and said: 'Mother, you have given the right punishment. That rascal always disturbs the women in the temple. Today Lord Kedārnāth has given him a good lesson.'

A certain monk was very devoted to Lakshmi and served her like a disciple. She was also very fond of him. After a while, however, she noticed that he was becoming too free and friendly with women, and that he had begun to attend marriage ceremonies. Such behaviour did not suit

a monk, and she was concerned about him. One day Lakshmi said to him: 'Brother, you are supposed to be like a lion, but you are behaving like a jackal. Shame on you! You are always around women. As a monk you must stay away from women. Being a child of Sri Ramakrishna, how could you forget his teachings?' The monk became indignant, and after some time he left. But Lakshmi was not offended. She prayed to the Master for his welfare.

Lakshmi visited many holy places of India, such as Gaya, Varanasi, Prayag, Vrindaban, Navadwip and Gangasagar, but she was particularly fascinated by Puri. Knowing this, some devotees built a house for her near the seashore and named it 'Lakshmi Niketan' (the abode of Lakshmi). In February 1924 she moved to Puri.

Lakshmi's daily routine was very simple. She got up at three o' clock in the morning and after washing sat for meditation and *japa*. Afterwards she ate a little prasad, and at ten o' clock went for her bath. Then she again repeated her mantra until noon, when she took her lunch. At three o' clork, after resting, she either talked to the devotees about the Master or practised *japa*. From six to eight in the evening she repeated her mantra, and then the devotees sang *kīrtan* and read a chapter from the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*. After taking some prasad and milk for supper she went to bed at ten o' clock.

Frequently Lakshmi experienced *bhāva samādhi* and had visions of different gods and goddesses. Once she had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna on the altar of the Jagannath temple. She was convinced after that the Master and Jagannath were the same. One day she went alone to bathe in the ocean, near Sargadwara, but was suddenly carried away by the strong undertow. About a mile away, near Chakratirtha, a cowherd boy rescued her and then disappeared. After returning home, Lakshmi went to see Lord Jagannath in the temple. She was amazed when she saw on the image of Balaram the smiling face of that cowherd boy. She realized then that it was Lord Balaram who had saved her life.

The Master had once told Lakshmi: 'If you cannot remember God, think of me. That will do.' This great assurance remained in Lakshmi's mind the rest of her life. Her love and devotion for Sri Ramakrishna were deep and unfathomable, and she was never tired of telling others about the divine play which she had witnessed. In her own unique way she spread the Master's message and inspired many souls. The other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna greatly loved and respected Lakshmi, but Holy Mother especially had much affection for her.

In Puri, even though Lakshmi's health began failing day by day, she continued to go into ecstasy. But despite the excellent care given by her disciples, she passed away on 14 February 1926, at the age of sixty-two. Once, before she passed away, she described to Swami Saradananda a vision she had had:

> I saw a mountain of dazzling mica. On one side of that mountain were Lakṣmi and Nārāyaṇa, and on the other side was Sri Ramakrishna. I saw that the Master was surrounded by Holy Mother, Swamiji, Rakhal Maharaj, and others. Then I saw Yogin-didi and Golap-didi, and they told me: 'O Lakshmi, here there is no problem of food and sleep or disease and grief. Living with the Master gives us uninterrupted bliss.'

HINDU POLITY

(*A Review-Article*)

[HINDU POLITY: POSITIVE AND PERVERTED. By NITYA NARAYAN BANERJEE. Published by Hindutva Publications, U-36, Green Park, New Delhi 110 016. 1985. Pp. ix + 316. Rs. 40]

Before beginning our review of this book it is imperative to introduce its author, Sri Nitya Narayan Banerjee, to the readers. Born in July 1911 in the village Labpur of district Birbhum in West Bengal, Sri Banerjee joined politics, though of the terrorist brand, through his membership of the Yugantar party at the tender age of fifteen. Probably not willing to let politics interfere with his studies, his family sent him to England in 1932 where he did his higher studies in agriculture. Subsequent to his return to India, he joined the Indian National Congress and was with it till, not being able to agree with its policy of appeasement of Muslim, he joined the Hindu Mahasabha in 1944, then under the Presidentship of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. He rose gradually to be elected the President of the All India Hindu Mahasabha consecutively from 1964 to 1972, with the exception of the year 1971. Among his crowning achievements as the President of the Mahasabha was the organizing in December 1965 of the Viswa Hindu Dharma Sammelan in Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, in which he was able to secure the attendance not only of Indian and foreign Hindu delegates but also of dignitaries such as President Radhakrishnan and Shankaracharyas of three Pīṭhas. It was a measure of his organizing capacity that he got Master Tara Singh and the representatives of the Dalai Lama and the Mahabodhi Society as well to grace the occasion. It is in the fitness of things that this first-ever attempt in India to form a world Hindu forum was duly registered afterwards as a society under his chairmanship.

Author of no less than eighteen books to date, this prlific weilder of pen edited the English monthly journal *Hindutva* from 1970 to 1981. Numerous articles that he contributed in that and other journals and the presidential speeches that he delivered at different all-India conferences have been compiled in this book, titled significantly as *Hindu Polity*: *Positive and Perverted*. The title means to say that while the Hindu polity of olden times was positive, the Hindu polity of the present time is perverted. The author's logic in characterizing the present Indian polity as Hindu polity is that democracy means rule by the majority and, since eighty-six per cent of the people of India are Hindus, the present Indian polity may as well be called the Hindu polity. The title conveys neatly the central purpose of the book. To express it in the words of the author himself: 'I have attempted to explain, in this book, the *true spirit* of Hindu polity and its *perverted concept* now being followed in Indian politics, with the hope that the Government and the people of India will realise the reality and take political steps to bring the Hindu Polity of present India back on the rail.'

The Hindu polity of olden times which governed India for three thousand years was positive because it was based on Dharma which enjoined all Hindus to engage only in those practices, activities and conduct which helped them transcend narrowness of all types and realize the

spiritual oneness of all human beings, indeed, all creation, in the sense of their being the manifestation of the same eternal Cosmic Spirit. The democratic attitude underlying such a perception of spirituality is to be noted here. Since all were equally governed by Dharma, the king as the ruler of the polity was a mere instrument for the execution of laws in a righteous way. The real sovereign in the Hindu polity, so to say, was Dharma. As *Manu-smṛti* (which along with the other *Smṛtis*, the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas* constitute the basic books on Hindu polity) states: 'The creator created from himself the *daṇḍa* (spectre), the symbol of Dharma for the use of kings, with a view to protecting all beings.' (Ch. VII sl. 14-15). 'In fact the Law is the king, the Law is the only Puruṣa (as all others are subordinate to it), the leader and administrator of the country' (Ch. VII, sl. 16-17).

The quote from the *Manu-smṛti* shows two things: that the concept of the rule of law was prevalent in the ancient Hindu polity thousands of years before Dicey thought of it in modern times; and that the Hindu polity of yore differed from the Graeco-Roman political systems of the West in that in such polity the king could not be a despot like Julius Caesar of Rome, or a ruthless invader like Alexander of Greece. Rāja-dharma in the Hindu polity implied ruling through renunciation, that is to say, the king was to rule as a selfless trustee rather than as a perverse tyrant craving for power and pelf. As the *Mahābhārata* says: 'In Rāja-dharma are realized all forms of renunciation' (Śānti-parva). In the poetic expression of Tagore, this meant *'rājya laye rabe rājyahīn'*. If *rāja-dharma* basically meant a spiritual trust, *prajā-dharma*, or the duty of the common man towards the State, was the appreciation of such spiritual trust with a sense of devotion.

The point is that all Hindus, be they kings or subjects, had to give spiritual significance to all their activities. They had to follow spiritual culture which meant applying spirituality in life. The obligation to *apply spirituality in life* was not mere woolly words to Hindus, as the so called modernists are prone to say. It was a very real thing for a Hindu, as his life was divided into four *āśramas*, namely, studenthood, family life, retirement and ascetic life. Every Hindu was to pursue four objects as the goals of life, namely, *dharma, artha, kāma* and *mokṣa*. Dharma provided the bedrock or the basic foundation on which rested the other three goals of life. *Mokṣa* was, no doubt, the supreme goal. But the goals of *artha* (wealth) and *kāma* (enjoyment) were not discounted in the life of a Hindu. However, they were to be pursued within the limits of Dharma (Manu Ch. IV sl. 172-176). It was necessary for a *gṛhi* (householder) to ensure material prosperity. But the pursuit of such prosperity was not the summum bonum of his life, because he knew that at a certain stage of his life he had to retire from family life and take to the life of *vānaprastha*. He was, therefore, to be Dharma-oriented, ensuring material welfare and spiritual liberation at the same time. It is not at all difficult for the perceptive ones to appreciate that this Hindu approach to life is most conducive to the sustenance of the world order and is the surest corrective to the turmoil and unrest in which the human society finds itself in the world of today. Thus viewed, those who say that the Hindu concept of spirituality is dated and has no use for the present world merely betray their ignorance of the true significance of the Hindu perspective.

The suspecting ones might raise questions about untouchability. Is not that a blot on the Hindu society and polity ?

The answer is that the untouchability which is an offshoot of the caste system is a perversion of a positive thing. The division of the Hindu society into four main groups, namely, Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra, was originally based on the four *guṇas* or qualities inherent in all human beings. Those who possessed predominantly the *sattva guṇa* were called Brāhmaṇas, while the persons with *rajoguṇa* (martial and acquisitive qualities) were called Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas, respectively, and those doing physical labour only for the satisfaction of mundane appetites in consequence of the possession of *tamoguṇa* were called Śūdras. This classification was not rigid. Inter-class mobility was permissible: the fulfilment of qualities was the main thing. Thus the king Viśvāmitra, a Kṣatriya, could elevate himself to the status of a Brāhmaṇa by acquiring spiritual knowledge through austerities. The deviation from the original caste system as a quality-based institution started at a certain stage of history when, in response to the demand for specialization based on division of labour, this noble institution was turned into a hereditary one. The present institution of caste system, especially untouchability, is an untenable one in view of the fact that the pivot of Hindu society and polity is spirituality. The fundamental stress of Hindu social and political theory was on the building up of individual character based on mental discipline. That was also the main point of Hindu social education. Spirituality, devotion to duty, self-discipline and morality—the cardinal values emphasized in the Hindu social theory of education—have no place in the modern system of education. The consequence is for us all to see. It can be said with a certain amount of assertiveness that the roots of the present unrest and turmoil in the society can be traced to the lack of emphasis on these values in the modern education system.

The caste and education systems apart, the deviation from the original norms, if not perversion therefrom, is manifest in many other spheres. The historical roots of the malaise must be traced to the Islamic canquest of India. The political onslaughts of Islam led Hinduism to retreat into a shell. It imposed many rigidities and restrictions upon its society which was the result of its fear of being hurt by the aggressive Islam. When political control was lost to foreign conquerors, the Hindu society was anxious to preserve the sanctity of its way of life against that of Islam. It must be said to the credit of Hinduism that while Arabia and many other parts of Asia, Africa and Europe were lost to Islam, the 'Hindu' India held its own against Islam. But this was not without a price. The price was in the form of inflexibility in certain spheres of Hindu life and activities—an inflexibilty which, in psychological terms, should be described as a defence mechanism.

Hindu values started eroding seriously in the national life with the British conquest of India. The British system of education was the main culprit. Materialistic in ideology, the British Policy of education covertly aimed to de-Hinduize the Hindus. As Macaulay confided in a letter to his father, 'No Hindu, who has received English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion'. True that there was no conversion to Christianity en masse, but Macaulay's dream came true in the sense that a lot of Hindu youths lost their sense of pride in the glory that was Hindnism and gloated in the slavish imitation of the ideas and forms of the West.

But for the renaissance in Bengal in the nineteenth century and the services of the illustrious sons of Mother India such

as Raja Rammohan, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda and others, the denationalizing and de-Hinduizing process set in motion by the British might have caused more damage to India than it was able to. The wave was held in check, but that the Indian mind could not be completely disabused of the British influence can be seen from the various policies and activities of leaders in the post-independent India. Otherwise, contrary to the Hindu practice of worshipping the country as the Mother, they would not have agreed to the vivisection of the Motherland, agreeing in the process to give away 27.5% of the territory of India to accommodate 24.3% of Muslims in the new state of Pakistan; they would not have agreed to the banning of religious education in India; they would not have agreed to the downgrading of the Sanskrit language—a language which is not only the mother of most Indian languages but also the treasure-chest of Hindu heritage; in their misconceived notion of secularism they would not have given in to the policy of constant appeasement of Muslims.

The chief aim of politics that is followed in India today being the capture of power and pelf by hook or by crook, such politics represents a deviation, if not an anti-thesis of the basic norms, values and characteristics of the classical Hindu polity. Yet if it is still a Hindu polity in the sense that the overwhelming majority of the people and leaders in it are Hindus, it is only a *perverted* one at that.

The time has come for us all to realize that the main problems of India are neither economic, nor social, nor political. We can solve all our economic, social and political problems only if our lifeblood, that is spirituality, flows clear. As Swami Vivekananda said, 'The only *ism* that we require now is the wonderful idea of the soul—its eternal might, its eternal strength, its eternal purity, and its eternal perfection.' If we keep that in mind, we will not have any hesitation in acknowledging, in Swami Vivekananda's terms, that 'a nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune'.

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SISTER NIVEDITA ON THE EDUCATION OF INDIAN WOMEN

MAMATA RAY

Writing of her first meetings with Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895-96, Sister Nivedita observed, 'I had recognised the heroic fibre of the man, and desired to make myself the servant of his love for his own people'.[1] She was eager to come to India, but had to wait till 1897 when Swami Vivekananda's consent came in the form of a letter: 'Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man but a woman; a real lioness to work for the Indians, women specially'.[2] Nivedita came to India in

1. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1982) Vol. 1, p. 22.

2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972)

January, 1898 and settled herself in a house in the Baghbazar locality of Calcutta. Swami Vivekananda himself had chosen the direction and field of work for her. 'Never forget! The word is "Women and the People" ', said Swamiji to her. 'There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness.'[3] The uplift of the masses and women topped the list of priorities in Swamiji's plan of work for India, and he assigned to Nivedita the great responsibility of raising Indian womanhood. To the question how he would raise the women, Swamiji's answer was: 'Of course, they have many and grave problems, but none that are not to be solved by that magic word education'.[4] Sister Nivedita's own work on Indian women and their education bore the stamp of such thoughts of Swami Vivekananda.

In Nivedita's scheme of things education for Indian women meant their development on national lines. At the centre of this development on national lines was the thought of India, love for the country and the service to its people, which found the best possible expression in the words of her Master, Swami Vivekananda:

> Thou brave one, be bold, take courage, be proud that thou art an Indian, and proudly proclaim, 'I am an Indian, every Indian is my brother.'... the Indian is my life, India's gods and goddesses are my God. India's society is the cradle of my infancy, the pleasure-garden of my youth, the sacred heaven, the Varanasi of my old age.[5]

Nivedita asks: What was the idea that caught Vivekananda? Answering that question herself, Nivedita observes:

> He (Swami Vivekananda) saw before him a great Indian nationality, young, vigorous, fully the equal of any nationality on the face of the earth. To him, this common nationality—conscious of its own powers, and forcing their recognition on others, moving freely forward to its own goal in all worlds, intellectual, material, social, occupational—was that 'firm establishment of the national righteousness (*dharma*)' for which those who love him believe undoubtingly that he was born.[6]

Having imbibed Swamiji's thoughts on Indian women and their education, Nivedita outlined her own concept of the 'great' purpose of education for Indian women as follows:

> To work, to suffer, and to love in the highest sphere; to transcend limits; to be sensitive to great causes; to stand transfigured by national righteousness; this is the true emancipation of women, and this is the key to her efficient education.[7]

Since she wanted to impart a sense of nationality to Indian women and develop their national consciousness, she was never tired of saying that the purpose of the whole educational exercise was to nurture the women's sense of dedication to the country, the people and the national ideal.

Vol. 7, p. 511. 'I have plans for the women of my own country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me', said Swamiji to Nivedita. Nivedita observes, 'I knew that I had heard a call which would change my life'. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita,* Vol. 1, p. 35. Elaborating the summons, Nivedita observes, 'It had been taken for granted from the first, that at the earliest opportunity I would open a girls' school in Calcutta'. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita,* Vol. 1, p. 101.

3. Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1961) p. 85.

4. Ibid, p. 86.

5. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1978) Vol. 4, p. 480.

6. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita,* 1982. Vol. 4, p. 385

7. *Sister Nivedita's Lectures and Writings* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1975) p. 27.

In words almost similar to those of her Master, she wrote that all Indians must be surrounded with the thought of their nation and their country:

> The centre of gravity mnst lie, for them, outside the family. We must demand from them sacrifices for India, Bhakti for India, learning for India. The ideal for its own sake. India for the sake of India. This must be as the breath of life to them. We must teach them about India in school and at home. Some lessons must fill out the conception, others must build up the sense of contrast. Burning love, love without a limit. Love that seeks only the good of the beloved, and has no thought of self, this is the passion that we must demand of them.[8]

Nivedita took an organic view of the relation between the individual and the society. As an organic part of the whole, the individual must try to lift the whole. She pointed out that this was in line with the thinking of our forefathers. In bidding us worship the waters of the seven sacred rivers or the earth of the holy places, the feet of one's Guru or of one's mother, our forefathers taught us to dedicate ourselves to the *jana-deśa-dharma*, the ethos of our people. Swami Vivekananda said, 'They alone live who live for others'. 'In proportion as we realise this', observed Nivedita, 'can be the greatness of our living. In proportion as it is our motive, will be *the reality of our education*'[9] (Emphasis added).

Nivedita believed that education in India had to be not only national, but also nation-making. By national education she meant that education which had a strong colour of its own and, being rooted in the culture and traditions of the home and the country, enabled one to *feel* intensely for one's country and to work sincerely for the good of one's country:

> Hunger for the good of others, as an end in itself, the infinite pity that wakes in the heart of an Avatara, at the sight of the suffering of humanity, these are the seed and root of nation-making. We are a nation, when everyman is an organ of the whole, when every part of the whole is precious to us; when the family weighs nothing, in comparison with the people.[10]

A national education, by its very definition, must be made up of indigenous elements. It must be based on our own heroic literature and our history. Geographical identity and sense of historic sequence must be inculcated through the ideals of India. Once the knowledge of the trainee is firmly rooted in the love for mother and motherland, for the people and culture of the country, it will not be difficult for him to move from all that is known and familiar to all that is true, cosmopolitan and universal.[11]

In other words, girls, as others, must begin with a loyal acceptance of the standards of society. As they advance in achievement, they would learn to understand both the imperatives and opportunities of national life. Finally, by fulfilling these demands, and availing themselves to the full of their opportunities, they wonld grow more Indian than ever before.[12]

Nivedita held that only when the womanhood of India knew about and was able to worship the altar fire of nationality would the temple of Mother India be lit up. In order to impart the sense of nationality to Indian women, she would

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8. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1982, Vol. 4, p. 348-49
9. Ibid, p. 346,
10. Ibid, p. 348
11. 'The whole body of foreign knowledge can be assimilated easily by one thus rooted and grounded in his relation to his own country.' *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1982 Vol. 4, p. 360.
12. This is how Sister Nivedita interprets Swami Vivekananda's ideas on the education of women in India. See 'The Master as I Saw Him' in *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol. 1, p. 196.

turn to Indian history and literature which abounded in examples of exalted womanhood. If one was looking for the strong, resourceful, inspired and crisis-fighting type, one had her in Padmini of Chitor, Chand Bibi and the Rani of Jhansi. Meera Bai represented the saintly, mystic and poetic type. Rani Bhawani, Ahalya Bai, Janhabi of Mymensingh were great in administration. Satī, Sāvitrī and Sītā were the best examples of marital fidelity, while Umā was that of maidenhood. Among the women of the world it was difficult to find another who could rival Gāndhārī in her sense of righteousness. What these women represented were not so much fame and glory as holiness, simplicity, sincerity, in a word, their character. Their ideals were, therefore, constructive. Indian women must be trained in these ideals. As Nivedita succinctly observes, 'There can never be any sound education of the Indian woman, which does not begin and end in exaltation of the national ideals of womanhood, as embodied in her own history and heroic literature.'[13]

Nivedita fervently hoped that the national ideals of womanhood and historical awareness 'would indeed stir effectively in the minds and hearts of those who are called of the Mother's voice to make themselves once more a mighty nation. For in order that nationality may become a reality, it is essential that the history of the country should become a direct mode of consciousness with all her children.'[14]

In a word, education guided by the prime impulse of national reconstruction was the educational vision that Nivedita had for Indian women, nay, for all Indians. She wanted to awaken the Indians' national consciousness and develop their sense of national identity. To quote the beautiful words in which she expressed her aim of education:

> The Samaj is the strength of the family; the home is behind the civic life; and the civic life sustains the nationality. This is the formula of human combination. The essentials of all four elements we have amongst us. We have inherited all that India needs, in our ancient Dharma. But we have allowed much of their consciousness to sleep. We have again to *realize* the meaning of our own treasures.[15]

The only means for such realization that she suggested was the awakening of a sense of service to the country. 'How can I serve my country ?'—should be the cry of every educated woman's and man's heart, and her or his central concern. In the inimitable words of Sister Nivedita, 'The meaning of the word *India* and the place of India in the world together with a burning desire to *serve India,* the *soil and the people,* are the things that are to be recognised as Education for women. These things are the centre'.[16]

This is a message which never sounded more relevant than it does for the India of today, faced as she is with the highly complex problems of national unity and integration. In the wake of the recent debates over the national educational policy and the Central Government's own efforts to evolve a national system of education, we would be well-advised to try an application of Sister Nivedita's educational ideas, in conjunction with those of the great patriot-saint Swami Vivekananda from whom she drew her inspiration.

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13. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita,* 1982, Vol. 4, p. 364
14. *Sister Nivedita's Lectures and Writings,* p. 21
15. Ibid, p. 24
16. Sankari Prasad Basu (ed.), *Letters of Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1982). Vol. 2, p. 1056.

REVIEWS AND NOTICES

THE RAMANA WAY IN SEARCH OF SELF: BY KUMARI SARADA. Published by Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning, 40/41, 2nd Cross, Lower Palace Orchards, Bangalore 560 003. 1985. Pp. 34. Price not stated.

This small book, neatly printed in an attractive format, is a collection of reflections on the technique of Self-enquiry. They have been compiled from the editorials of *Ramana,* the monthly bulletin of the Ramana Maharshi Centre of Learning, Bangalore, which has introduced an unprecedented dynamism into Ramana Movement.

Apart from being one of the streams in the spiritnal renaissance of India in modern times, the Sage of Arunachala made a distinct, important and enduring contribntion to Vedantic thonght through his teaching of the 'Who-am-I ?' technique as a direct path to the transcendental experience of Atman. 'How to know the knower ?' (*vijñātāram are kena vijānīyāt*) asks the *Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upaniṣad.* Nowhere in the vast literature of the ancient tradition of Advaita Vedanta can a categorical and clear answer to this question in the form of a practicable technique, be found. It was Sri Ramana Maharshi who finally supplied this need.

The reflections garnered here are evidently a prodnct of the author's own daily practice of this technique of enquiry. Purity and discipline have imparted to her ideas a rare vigour, clarity and artlessness, which beginners on the path will find stimulating and reassuring. The anthor of these thoughts has hardly entered the threshold of youth, and such wisdom from so young a person is remarkable indeed.

S.B.

NEWS AND REPORTS

MAYAVATI CHARITABLE HOSPITAL

REPORT FOR APRIL 1985 to MARCH 1986

Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, was started on 19 March 1899 under the inspiration of Swami Vivekananda on the Kumaon hills of the Himalayas. In 1903 a small dispensary was started by the Ashrama in response to the dire needs of the sick people of the local villages. Since that time the dispensary has developed into a fairly well-equipped, small, rural hospital. The hospital stands within the precincts of the Ashrama, and is under the charge of a monastic member. A resident allopathic doctor treats the patients with the help of his assistants, and earnest efforts are made to maintain a high standard of efficiency in service. All patients receive prompt and sympathetic treatment completely free of charge.

The hospital has 25 beds in the Indoor Department, but sometimes arrangements have to be made for more. There is also a small operation theatre. A dental chair and a pathological laboratory provide additional help in the treatment of the patients. The total number of patients treated during the year in the Indoor Department was 438, of which 394 were cured and discharged, 23 were relieved, 19 were discharged otherwise or left, and 2 died. In the Outdoor Department, the total number of patients treated was 33,074, of which 7,271 were new cases. The resources of the hospital are meagre. A well-established human-service institution requires constant help and cooperation from charitably disposed individuals and philanthropic institutions, year after year. As the public are aware, the cost of medicines is mounting higher as days pass by, rendering it difficult for the Ashrama to maintain the same standard of treatment of patients, both qualitatively and quantitatively. As such, there is a great need to build up a Permanent Fund invested in Long Term Fixed Deposits, the annual interest from which cau be used for the purchase of medicines.

Immediate needs of the hospital:

1. Providing all the beds with new coir mattresses, bed sheets, pillows with covers, and woollen blankets (25 sets) ... Rs. 25,000.00
2. Autoclave (Sterilizer) ... Rs. 2,000.00
3. Funds for the purchase of medicines and dressing materials for the whole year. ... Rs. 60,000.00

Crossed Account Payee cheques and drafts may be drawn in favour of *Mayavati Charitable Hospital* and sent by Registered Post to the President, Advaita Ashrama, P.O. Mayavati, via Lohaghat, Pithoragarh District, Uttar Pradesh, Pin: 262 524, India. Donors in India can claim Iucome-tax exemption under Section 80G of the Income-tax Act, 1961.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Universalization of Education

Article 45 of the Indian Constitution stipulates that 'the state shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this constitution for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years'. Had this directive principle been actualized, every adult Indian should have by now received education for at least eight years and every Indian child would be studying in some school. But literacy in this country is now hardly 36 per cent. The World Bank estimates that if the rates of growth of literacy and population remain what they are now, 54 per cent of the world's illiterates in the age-group 15-19 years would be in India by 2000 A.D. Out of 100 children who enter standard I as many as 77 drop out before they reach standard VIII. It is claimed that the number of educational institutions increased from 2.3 lakh in 1950 to 6.9 lakh in 1980, and the number of teachers in elementary and secondary schools increased from 7.5 to 32 lakh. But 40 per cent of schools do not have a pucca building, 35 per cent have only one teacher, 60 per cent have no drinking water and 40 per cent have no blackboard! The expenditure on education currently is about 3 per cent of our GNP, whereas it is at least 6 to 8 per cent in most other countries. 72 per cent of the population live in rural areas but only 44 per cent of the total expenditure on education reach the villages. About one-fifth of the total number of villages do not have even a one-room school. Of the 64 million children who will fall in the 6-11 age-group during the coming five years, not more than 25 million can be given school education with the existing facilities. The rest have to be given non-formal education or nothing at all.

India cannot tolerate this sorry state of affairs for too long. Something has to be done most urgently about it. The first step should be to raise the financial investment on education to at least 6 per cent of GNP, and improve and increase the existing facilities for education. This should be followed by a massive drive to make literacy universal. There is no real substitute for formal education, and the so-called non-formal education becomes effective only when a person can at least read and write. It is clear that under the existing conditions the government alone is not able to make literacy universal without the large-scale support of voluntary agencies. Perhaps the only viable course is to motivate the entire student community and keep them at the vanguard of the literacy drive. A few months ago the Association of Indian Universities evolved a plan to make it compulsory for post-graduate students of every college to adopt a village and impart education to the rural folk. This can be done even at the graduate level.

In its document on 'National Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Education', the NCERT has advocated the need for relating the curriculum at the primary stage to the children's environment. This is a good idea. A sound grasp of the basic principles of different subjects, character development and self-reliance—the cultivation of these is far more important than vocationalization. The chief cause of poverty in India is not lack of resources or education but wrong attitudes towards life. No amount of training and teaching will be of avail unless the basic attitude of the students towards life changes. This change is essentially an inner awakening, but the guidance of a wise teacher can greatly facilitate it. What India now needs most is a new generation of teachers who can awaken the minds of students to a larger, nobler life.

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