

Confounding the Orient as 'the Other': A Study of Hindu World View

Dr. Nishamani Kar

CGO Group 'A', National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, Pune, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The Hindu worldview has all through been accepted as a commitment to higher possibilities like dharma, karma and moksha; a foundational orientation towards 'Brahman', who is formless, limitless, all-inclusive and eternal; a real entity that encompasses everything (seen and unseen) in the universe. From a Western lexical standpoint, Hinduism like other faiths is often referred to as a religion. But in India the term dharma (righteousness, moral law, right conduct and duty) is preferred, which is broader than the western term religion. Hindus view it as Sanatana (the eternal), which shapes the basic constitution of reality and provides the bedrock on which the adherents live and move, and have their being. Ironically enough, the Hindu viewpoint in particular and the Orient in general is viewed as otherworldly, transcendental and irrational. In this paper 'the Other' image, so stipulated, is challenged.

Key Words: Colonialism. the Other. Gnostic society. Illumination. Eternal Spirit. Hinduism

It is an accepted proposition in the academic disciplines, especially in the pedagogic and institutional circles, that the historical, cultural and political legacies of colonialism have resulted in stereotypes about the East. Evidently, the Orient has been constructed to function as a transposition of the West, representing the projection of the Other* of Western culture.¹We are equally conscious about the dominant representations of Western culture since the Enlightenment tending to subordinate the Dionysian aspects (the trends that have been conceived as poetic, mystical, irrational, uncivilized and feminine) of its own culture and traditions. But these characteristics represent precisely the qualities that have been discovered in the imaginary realm of the Orient.²AshisNandy attests thus:

It did make Western man definitionally non-Eastern and handed him a self-image and world-view which were basically responses

to the needs of colonialism. ... The 'discovery' of the Orient ... was designed to expel the other Orient, which had once been a part of medieval European consciousness as an archetype and a potentiality.³

Eventually, after all, the image of the Orient has been shaped by the colonizing power, the experience and the ideologies of the Empire.⁴We are thus aware of the Western understanding of India as the Other, particularly in relation to scholarly approaches to the study of religion and mysticism, which points at, in the words of Richard King, "the politics of representation."⁵Thus the construction of what we call Hindu and the grounding of a spiritual essence as its core is bound up with the complexities of colonial politics in 19th century India. The Western Orientalists, as it appears, took upon the a-historical yardstick of insisting on *Advaita* as the central theology and, as a result, the ancient Vedic material became the

normative paradigm for the entire Hindu tradition. Ironically enough, 19th and early 20th century Indian intelligentsia also perceived their own identity and culture through colonially crafted lenses since it suited, as it seems, their nationalist and anti-colonial stratagem.

Incidentally, Hinduism was used as a signifier of a unified, all-embracing and independent religious entity since 10th century. In this perspective, Hinduism as a phenomenon may appear macrocosmically one, but in reality it is microcosmically many – a typically polycentric construct, the boundaries and micro-centres of which merge and overlap in a complex of oscillating tensions. The dynamic polycentrism of the postulation, therefore, warrants an analysis of the basic nuances of Hindu worldview and re(visioning) of the socio-religious praxis in its proper perspective through the complex act of a historical reconstruction, which the ongoing analysis will explicate. We can limit our discussion to the poet-saint Sri Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda, in order to lend focus and proper understanding.

I

The search for a super sensible existence beyond the phantasmagoria of the senses has remained the mission of the idealistic philosophers since the days of Plato till date. Pythagoras, Plotinus, Rabbis and Dante speak of the beauty and charm of mystical insight and experience in comprehending such a world. Spinoza, St. Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, Boehme, Schopenhauer and Max Mueller also identify and endorse such a seeking. The whole exalted company of teachers in the East - the Vedic seers and saints: Janaka,

Yajnavalakya, Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Chaitanya, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath and Sri Aurobindo are the torchbearers of mystic light and truth, as all of them in their characteristically individual ways admit: "... thereby is life made radiant and rich with blessing that will attract and reward the utmost intensity of living."⁶ Evidently, the East, especially India, has been viewed as mystical, with an apparently ascetic and other-worldly orientation.

In this paper we can take an attempt at locating religio-cultural elements in the cultural, historical context of Hinduism. While pursuing such a cause, we should view seriously not only the social location of concepts under examination, but also their involvement in a wider cultural field of power relations: as a study of culturally-constructed structure of thoughts is often problematic. We should be equally conscious of the cross-cultural phenomenology of mystical experience, as we know 'the ontological structure(s) of each major mystical tradition is often different'.⁷ The pioneers of Christian mysticism seek relation with the Holy Father, may be with Christ, by being moved by the spirit or 'grace'. The *Book of Revelation* states thus. "I stand at the door and knock". Who is this 'I' and what door is this 'I' standing? Joel S. Goldsmith's answer is revealing. This 'I' is God and He stands at the door of our consciousness. This 'I' resides in each person awaiting recognition and acknowledgement. In yielding to the divine 'I' we become the vessels of God that His Will may be done".⁸ "The Jewish *Kabbalists*, on their turn, meet *Elijah*, and 'see' the *Merkabah* or God's throne. The Jewish mystics work under the forms of *Torah*, i.e. *Torah*

Power as an ontic force, seeking to purify their souls for *devikuth* (adhesion to God), not absorption with a personal God. The Buddhists reach their goal, set by their ontology of *anitya* (impermanence) and suffering, of impersonal, stateless, attribute-less *nirvana*. The Sufis are the masters of inner life and their aim is to rise to the angelic life, *Farishta Khaslat*. For them the highest of all relations-aesthetically, the most absorbing- is that of God as the Beloved. The Hindus, in contrast, assert that *Atman* is *Brahman* (i.e. the self is the Self, though this ultimate Self is non-personal), '*Aham Brahmosmi*' (I am the Brahman). Paradoxically enough, when Jesus speaks of the Father within and when Paul speaks of the Christ that dwells in him, they also speak of the 'I AM', the very 'I' that you have just announced, that is in the scope of present paper does not admit it either. Hence, in the East the ground of essence of life, mind and matter is not neutral, as in the West, but is impregnated with eternal values. Here, it is the original life and mind itself is the medium for the intercourse of the mind with itself and with the universe. The Hindu mystical consciousness, for that matter, conceives this unity which underlies matter, life and mind and the message proclaimed centuries ago is clear and outspoken: "They who see but One in all the changing manifoldness of the universe, unto them belongs Eternal Truth- unto none else, unto none else!"⁹

II

With this back ground, let us now analyse the Religious Reform Movements of the 19th century India, undertaken by Brahma Samaj, Prathana Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, which championed the Hindu View of Life and took a

revivalist turn. The pioneers of these movements like Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, Dayanand Saraswati, Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant were not necessarily mystics, rather they used mysticism as a tool to achieve the desired goal.

But the case of Sri Ramakrishna was something different. He was a man of amazing insights. "A Child of the Mother", as he was, he combined *Vedanta*, *Tantra* and the *Vaishnava* tradition in himself, and, it is said, he often interacted directly with the Mother (Goddess Kali). His disciple Swami Vivekananda (a practical *Vedantin*) was a man of action, as of contemplation. Similarly, the blend of *Vasishnavism*, the *Upanisads*, the *Baul* and the *Sahaja* presented a curious case in Rabindranath Tagore. In his poetry, we discover a typical reflection on the religion of man. The case of Sri Aurobindo was something different, he was a political activist turned *Yogi*. Beginning with the '*Vasudeva experience*' in Alipore jail to *Samadhi* in the Ashram in Pondicherry, the whole life was rather a long hymn to the mystical fire. In his *yogic* feat, he could aspire for a Gnostic society and the realization of the life divine in it.

III

Sri Ramakrishna appears before us with a phenomenal life of intense spirituality, a remarkably broad and synthetic vision of Hinduism and an extraordinarily simple and illuminating exposition of the ideas and ideals cherished by Hindu View of life. A naive priest at Dakshineswar temple (in Calcutta) wedded to *Kali*; he was a saint who had the outpouring of the spirit at the exalted moments. He was typical in the sense that he had ecstatic visions at an

early age; he had the frantic quest in youth after the super sensuous scriptural truth; he had adapted earnest and vigorous spiritual practices as prescribed by different schools of religion and, finally, he had the realization of God within a short span of time. To Vivekananda's puzzling query, he asserted, 'I have seen God face to face.' Equally baffling was his assertion, as communicated to his disciple Vivekananda through his visions that events occur in the physical world on the basis of the 'Will of the Divine Mother'. He had also assessed the truth of his beatific visions by his own observation and had found them capable of leading him to the brink of a transcendental realization of the Supreme Reality. A case in point is the seer's own confession:

One day, I was torn with intolerable anguish. My heart seemed to be wrung like a wet towel. I was racked with pain. A terrible frenzy seized me at the thought that I might never be granted the blessing of this divine vision. I thought, if that were so, then enough of this life. A sword was hanging in the sanctuary of Kali. My eyes fell upon it, and an idea flashed through my brain. The sword! It will help me to end it. I rushed up to it, and seized it like a mad man... and lo! The whole scene – doors, windows, the temple itself – vanished. It seemed as if nothing existed any more. Instead, I saw an ocean of Spirit, boundless, dazzling. In whatever direction I turned, great luminous waves were rising. They bore down upon me with a loud roar, as if to swallow me up. In an instant they were upon me. They broke over me, they engulfed me. I was

suffocated. I lost consciousness and I fell. How I passed that day and the next I know not. Round me rolled an ocean of ineffable joy. And in the depths of my being, I was conscious of the presence of the divine Mother.¹⁰

The vision, as narrated here, is naturally a source of joy, purity, strength and illumination. The experience is not of a personal self at the disposal of time and space, nor is it of the past self, lost and irrevocable. It is rather of an essential self, liberated from time and contingency, where everything happened here and now, at once in some telescoped timeless moment. It is an encounter with the nameless and formless Reality in a moment of exaltation. Of course, at this point the cause of sense-impressions and the workings of the faculty of reasoning are foiled. Sri Ramakrishna's assertion is further revealing here. "You have to draw out a thorn with another, and then reject them both", he states. Eventually, with the visions wrought by *Vidya-maya* or spiritual intuition, one has to free oneself from the tyranny of sense impressions and reasoning and then one has to leave aside even the spiritual intuition and transcend the plane of mystic visions before the individual soul is able to realize its identity with the Eternal Spirit. In Sri Ramakrishna, we find an unsurpassed record of God-intoxication, realized through spotless purity and surging love for humanity. If his life and attainment is the book of revelations, its appropriate commentary and a compendious guide book for practical application is the life and attainment of his disciple Swami Vivekananda. Seized by a frenzy of spiritual fervour, Swami Vivekananda

devoted himself thoroughly to the quest of spiritual truth through meditation and contemplation. We can have a glimpse of his mental equipoise in his poem 'The Song of *Sanyasin*' composed at 1892; a stanza from which will serve our purpose here:

Heed then no more how body lives
or goes,

Its task is done, Let Karma float it
down;

Let one put garlands on, another kick
This frame; say naught. No praise or
blame can be

Where praiser, praised, and blamer,
blamed are one

Thus be thou calm. *Sanyasin* bold!
Say Om tat sat, Om.

('The Song of *Sanyasin*')

In fact, Vivekananda was a practical *Vedantin*. The wandering minstrel, as he was, he taught the whole world the art of right living for a just and meaningful cause. In a letter written to one of his disciples on 17Feb, 1896; he gave vent to his life's mission:

To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer, startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds, is a task which only those can understand who have attempted it. The abstract *Advaita* must become living – poetic – in everyday life; and out of bewildering yogism must come the most scientific and practical psychology and all this

must be put into such a form that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work. The Lord only knows how far I shall succeed. To work we have the right, not to the fruits thereof.¹¹

Truly speaking, Vivekananda not only succeeded in his mission, he also gave articulation and voice to the eternal spirit of India. In the 'Parliament of Religions' at Chicago in September, 1893 his inspired utterances about the ideas and ideals of Hinduism and his strong plea for 'Universal Religion', for 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension' inspired the whole world to champion the cause of a lofty and sublime inner life. However, while discovering the spirit of Catholicism within the sealed bosom of Hinduism and releasing it to spread all over the globe through his own realization, Vivekananda and his master Sri Ramakrishna took a meaningful effort to liberalize all communal and sectarian views.

Notes:

* The self/other is a binary ideological, linguistic, philosophical, psychoanalytic and social construction that posits a state of ideal existence against one of non-existence. Since the rise of postmodernity, self/other has overwhelmingly represented the exclusionary relationship between subjects who occupy opposite positions on the centre/margin models of race, gender and otherwise political power relations. The binary relationship between self and other suggests that the 'I' of the self cannot exist without the 'non-I' or the non-entity of the other. The self, in effect, creates the other to ensure its existence and vice versa. Proponents of feminist, Marxist, postcolonial and race theory view the relationship of self to other as one of

domination and exclusion that maintains unequal power relations in support of

patriarchal, imperialistic, racist and other ideologically oppressive conditions.

References:

1. See Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray, 'Introduction', *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations* (Macmillan, 2000), pp. 1-17.
2. *Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (OUP, 1999), p. 3.
3. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: OUP, 1983), p. 71.
4. See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Gouri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990); Homi K Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989).
5. See Richard King, *op.cit.* pp. 96-142.
6. Mahendranath Sircar, *Hindu Mysticism (According to Upanisads)* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Co-operation, 1974), p. 9.
7. Steven T Katz, 'The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience', *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (ed.) Steven T Katz (OUP, 1983), p. 40.
8. Joel S Goldsmith, *The Mystical 'I'* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972), p. 4.
9. H.V. Sheshadri, <http://samvada.org>, March 30, 2011.
10. As quoted by Swami Nirvedananda in 'Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance', *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. IV, (ed.) Haridas Bhattacharya (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Reprint 1993), p. 662.
11. Quoted by Swami Nikhilananda in *Vivekananda: A Biography* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 3rd edn., 1975), p.186.