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# Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture

by

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TO THE MEMORY OF  
MAULANA ABUL KALAM AZAD

## *Preface*

I AM grateful to the Syndicate of the University of Madras for having invited me to deliver a series of five lectures on Indo-Muslim culture under the Osman Muhammad Ismail—Osman Abdul Haque Endowment. The lectures were delivered at the University of Madras in October 1954; these were later revised and a few alterations were made here and there before sending them for publication.

In these lectures an attempt has been made to present the significant features of the process of social change and adjustment which was brought about in medieval India as a result of the Islamic impact on Indian life and thought. Stress has necessarily been laid on the interplay of forces which helped the growth of an integrated culture.

The treatment of the subject has inevitably been a work of selection; and perhaps no two persons would agree upon what to put in and what to leave out. My special object in these lectures has been to put in high relief those social processes which are of great general interest even today, and which were mainly responsible for ushering in a new outlook in the realms of intellect, emotion and culture in medieval Indian history.

My criticism has been strictly impersonal; while details about personalities have been introduced merely for the sake of giving greater clarity to the general outlook.

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## *Islam and the Cult of Bhakti*

WITH THE coming of Islam to India, the inhabitants of the sub-continent were led to establish contact with a civilization quite new to them. The two religions had no points of contact with each other. The manifold activities of the Musalmans in India, as elsewhere, were so intense that the inhabitants of the sub-continent were unable to ignore them. The principles of universal brotherhood and human equality, the bases of Islamic society, of necessity, exercised an influence on the conceptions of their neighbours. The religious conditions were favourable to an unconscious penetration of Islamic ideas into Indian society. The defeat of Buddhism had restored the original Brahman rites. It is doubtful—the learned are not at one in this matter—whether Buddhism and Brahmanism ever struggled with animosity for spiritual supremacy in India. But it is certain that for almost a thousand years many of the Hindus had a system of beliefs which, though different from the Brahmanism which it reformed, was only an emanation of Brahmanism itself. But little by little the original cult, after undergoing many modifications, regained ground. At the time when the Musalmans reached India, Brahmanism had completely triumphed over its former rival. To consolidate their influence the Brahmans made a compromise with Buddhist doctrines as well as with pre-Aryan practices. At that period, just as to-day, Hinduism presented a blending of the ritualistic religion of the Vedic age, the humanitarian principles of the Buddha, and the pre-Aryan religious forms and symbols.

Thanks to this teaching, so full and so varied, Brahmanism satisfied the mass of the people as well as those who were given to individual, independent reflection. Those who had neither the time nor the opportunity to cultivate their thought by means of the spiritual practices of meditation and contemplation, received dogmas and symbols to worship. The works known under the collective name of Tantras describe the rites and the formulas, destined for those who were incapable of appreciating the pantheistic metaphysics of Brahmanism. They believed in symbols and worshipped images, just as they do to-day. It was by maintaining this pliancy of faith for the people of different levels that Brahmanism was able to be at once an intellectual and educative force and an instrument for the propagation of ritualistic dogma and polytheism. Brahmanism had the good fortune of having as principal interpreter the famous Shankaracharya, who systematized the philosophy of the Upanishads. We are not sure of the time at which he lived. There are differences of opinion about his exact date. Certain scholars think that he lived in the ninth century A.D. He taught the absolute identity of the individual soul and Brahman, the supreme cause of all cosmic existence, the unreality of the world of the senses, and gave the most complete exposition of the doctrines of the Advaita. His interpretations, based on pantheistic doctrines, have exercised a profound influence on the religious attitude of the Hindus. He interpreted the Upanishads as teaching the immanence of all cosmic existence, the illusiveness of the phenomenal world and the exclusive reality of the Brahman, the primordial verity, creator and immanent at the same time. According to him, man, as all other phenomena, is only a manifestation of the Brahman, who is the very essence of all forms of existence. To all diversities and pluralities he gives the name of Maya.

It is not my intention to enlarge upon the pantheistic philosophy of Shankaracharya, but to draw attention to the fact that at the time of the arrival of the Musalmans



in India, Hindu society, comprising the followers of Saivism, Vaishnavism and the cult of Sakti, was broadly divided between those who worshipped images at home or in the temples, performed prescribed rites and offered sacrifices, and intellectuals, who had no faith in the path of action (Karma-marga). To them attainment of salvation was possible only through the path of knowledge (Jnana-marga). They disputed among themselves about the theory of metempsychosis, the law of karma and other metaphysical subtleties which had hardly any relation with the actual ethical behaviour of man, aiming at improvement of his status in life and fulfilment of his destiny on earth. Brahmanism had become an essentially intellectual doctrine. It ignored the rights of the heart. The fundamental principles which it taught were impersonal and speculative. The people, who were always in need of an ethical and emotional cult in which it was possible to find both satisfaction of the heart and moral guidance, understood nothing of it. It was in these circumstances that the movement of Bhakti, devotion blended with love of God, found a favourable atmosphere.

The chief mark of this movement is the attitude of the soul with regard to the Supreme Being. Epigraphy shows that the word *Bhakti*, as a technical term of religion, existed at the commencement of the second century before Christ, and M. Garbe has noted its existence in Pali literature. According to Buhler its mention is found in the eighth century B.C. In the religion of the Panchratras, Gopal Krishna and Vasudeva Krishna had blended into one personality, whose mention is found in the pre-Buddhist *Chhandogya Upanishad*. The mention of the word *satvat* in the meaning of *bhagvat* in the *Santiparvan* and in the *Niddesa*, one of the most important Buddhist texts, shows that the need of adoring one God existed in India before the Christian era. The Ekantika Dharma, the religion addressing itself to a single God in the *Bhagavadgita*, is but the first exposition of the doctrine of Bhakti.

Scholars have frequently discussed the origin of the ideas of Bhakti in India. According to the school represented by Weber, Bhakti, as the means and condition of spiritual salvation, was a foreign idea which came to India with Christianity and exercised a considerable influence on the Hinduism of the period of the great epics and of the Puranas. But the resemblances found between many symbols and practices of Christianity and Hinduism are too fortuitous and insufficient to allow of drawing general conclusions. The existence of small Christian communities in the south-west of India is not improbable, but it is doubtful whether these communities were ever able to exercise any deep influence on Hindu thought. The activity of Nestorian missionaries, the evangelization of India by the Apostle Thomas, and the pious interest which Pantaenus of Alexandria showed in the salvation of Hindu souls, are only legends without verifiable foundation. The teaching of the *Gita* and that of the New Testament, the doctrine of the Logos, and that of Vak, the circumstances of the nativity of Christ and of Krishna, present, indeed, striking coincidences, but these can be explained without showing reciprocal influence. Of course facts and ideas do not exist isolated in the world, but in the course of their development they are able to produce phenomena which are at once original and similar. Bhakti is a phenomenon which is universal and human; it is Semitic as well as Aryan. It is the reaction of the heart against rigid intellectualism.

Another opinion, held by Barth, maintains that the movement of Bhakti was an indigenous phenomenon which had its roots in the religious thought of the Hindus. 'We have only to ask ourselves', he says, 'whether India had to wait until the coming of Christianity in order, on the one hand, to arrive at monotheistic conceptions, and, on the other, to apply those conceptions to popular gods such as Siva and Krishna. To deny this, and we do not hesitate to do so, is to admit that Bhakti can be explained as an indigenous fact which was capable of arising in India, as elsewhere in the

religions of Osiris, Adonis, Cybele and Bacchus, at its hour and independently of all Christian influence. '(*Oeuvres*, I, p.193.) And later, speaking of the resemblances which exist between Christian and Hindu symbols, he says:

'It is not therefore against the possibility of borrowing, but against the borrowing itself, that our objections bear. The dogma of the faith is not introduced as is an ordinary doctrine or a custom; it does not allow itself to be detached from one religion and grafted at a distance upon another. In practice it is confused with the faith itself, and as this faith, it is inseparable from the God who inspires it. But M. Weber does not at all mean that in Krishna, in whom he has not traced either a dogma of the Redemption or accounts of the Passion, the true source and substance of the Christian faith, India has ever adored Jesus.'

Among others who are of the opinion of Barth, Senart is very explicit:

'Bhakti has certainly in India very deep roots. It is much less a dogma than a sentiment, whose powerful vitality is attested all along the course of history and poetry. Already in the Vedic hymns the pious enthusiasm burst into vibrant expressions of quasi-monotheism; the passionate longing of the One penetrates the oldest metaphysics; the Hindus, and even Aryans, were largely prepared to bow down before divine unities. Many superhuman personalities must have emerged from the religious fermentation which was working silently under the traditional surface and which assisted, along with the blending of races, the increase of local traditions, and raised to the highest level figures such as Vishnu, Krishna, Siva, whether entirely new or renewed by their unforeseen importance. For this there was no need of any foreign influence.' (*La Bhagavadgita*, p. 35.)

We incline to the opinion maintained by Barth and Senart. Bhakti is not at all specifically Semitic. It is a sentiment everywhere diffused. It came to birth quite naturally in India when devotion turned to a single personal God. Bhakti,

in the sense understood in India, is a devotion full of affection, and the traditions by which it is inspired belong to Aryan as much as to Semitic thought.

We do not possess sufficient data to prove whether there was, in the epic period, any exchange of ideas between the Nestorians and the Hindus. I have no intention of asserting that in its evolution Bhakti never underwent any external influence; at all events, after the arrival of Islam in India, as I shall show later, the religious point of view of the Hindus, though always based on old foundations, became considerably modified.

The movement of Bhakti may easily be divided into two distinct periods. The first was from the time of the *Bhagavad-gita* to the thirteenth century, the time when Islam penetrated into the interior of the country. The second period extends from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, an epoch of profound intellectual fermentation, the natural result of the contact of Islam and Hinduism. How and to what degree did the influence of Islam help the sentiment of Bhakti, which already existed in India, to become a doctrine and a cult? Here we have a problem of very great historical and cultural importance, the correct solution of which is necessary to the understanding of the formation of modern Indian civilization.

In its first development Bhakti was only an individual sentiment. The religion of Vasudeva was the natural expression of those who did not find spiritual and moral satisfaction in the intellectual and speculative system of the Upanishads, and whose souls were yearning for a personal God, more comprehensible than the impersonal God, without passion or moral feeling of the pantheistic philosophy of the followers of the Advaita. The doctrine of the Panchratra and of the Ekantika Dharma of the *Bhagavadgita* is based on the idea that the loving worship of God is a means of obtaining salvation; but one cannot say that there is to be found there a monotheistic system of religion. In reality, the principal problem is to liberate the soul from the low and selfish passions, and that by

the intermediary relation of Bhakti towards Vasudeva, the Supreme God. The Bhagavats later identified Vasudeva with Krishna, as their personal God. But the authors of the *Bhagavadgita*, who believed in the Brahmanic tradition, introduced into the *Bhagavadgita* the pantheistic conceptions of the theosophy of the Upanishads. We find there Narayana, the personal God, by the side of An̄taryamin, the immanent being who is the motive force of the life of the universe; also we see there traces of influence of the schools of Sankhya and of Yoga.

The teachings of the *Bhagavadgita* show that the authors of that book, in spite of a strong leaning to the adoration of a personal God, were saturated with traditions of the classic philosophy of the Upanishads; that their object was not to constitute a definite philosophical or theological system, but only to establish a compromise between the different schools of Hindu philosophy. The doctrine of Bhakti was the central point round which the different systems united to fight the Buddhist atheism. The compromise was effected in a manner which shows all the Brahmanic ingenuity. The Bhagavats adopted the philosophy of the Upanishads and the principles of Yoga; the Sankhya Yoga admitted the existence of a single God. This compromise was so much the more necessary since there existed at that time, between the different schools of philosophy, profound differences as to the explanation of Prakriti (Nature) and of Maya (Illusion).

In spite of the elevation of the monotheistic sentiment which it expresses, the *Bhagavadgita* inclines towards pantheism. In many places it borrows not only the ideas, but even the phraseology of the Upanishads. But it introduces the warmth of Bhakti and attaches great value to the moral purpose of life. Narayana and Vasudeva, the only gods of the Bhagavats, often seem to disappear before the Brahman, the abstract and supreme deity of the Vedanta. Moreover the *Bhagavadgita*, far from showing itself hostile to the Vedas, so violently criticized by the Bhagavats of the Middle Ages,

enjoined respect for them. It recognizes the *Bhakti-marga*, the way of devotion, and the *Jnana-marga*, the way of knowledge, as two means of obtaining salvation. It is an exposition at once theist, pantheist, emotional and speculative.

Later, in the *Bhagavatapurana* and in the aphorisms of Sandilya, two books which contain the teachings of the school of Bhakti, the attempt was made to introduce some emotion to lighten the heavy burden of ritual and dogma. As in the *Bhagavadgita*, we find in these books tendencies at once pantheist and theist; however, the pantheist conception of life and the faith in the Vedas are without doubt the most conspicuous traits of these works, which were written, as was the *Gita*, by authors who never deviated from the Brahmanic tradition. 'Every time that the old way of the Veda proclaimed by Thee, for the good of the world, is obstructed by the bad ways of heresy, then dost Thou assume the quality of goodness', says the *Bhagavatapurana*. And, with reference to Maya: 'This world, which is illusion, an unceasing course of the qualities and ignorance, has no reality for Thee.' (Burnouf, *Bhagavatapurana*, p. 240.)

The aphorisms of Sandilya, which expound the doctrine of Bhakti under its various aspects, admit Maya and approve of the worship of images, those two essential principles of Brahmanism, the one destined for the intellectuals and the other for the mass of the people.

So what strikes one in the first period of Bhakti is that we do not find there any heterodox teaching about the infallibility of the Vedas. The *Bhagavadgita* recognizes the social system of castes.<sup>1</sup> From the completion of the great epics to the arrival of Islam in India the religion of the Hindus remained a blending of the two different tendencies, the pantheism of the intellectuals and the deistic polytheism of the masses. We shall try to show how the deistic tendencies of Hinduism ended in

<sup>1</sup> Telang: *Bhagavadgita*, p. 22 (Introduction). *Bhagavadgita*, ch. IV. 13. 'I have created the division into four classes which distinguish the gunas and the duties which are peculiar to them.' E. Senart.

monotheism, thanks to contact with Islam, a religion having as its basis the principle of the unity of God.

It was in the twelfth century that Ramanuja gave a philosophic basis to the teachings of Vaishnavism. He represents the reaction against the Advaita philosophy of Shankaracharya, of which the commentary on the Brahmasutras had seduced the thought of all India. Ramanuja made in his turn a commentary on the Brahmasutras, refuted Shankara, and offered his own interpretation based on the theistic idea. He systematized the emotional and theistic tendencies of Bhakti and determined the philosophy of Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism, at once a philosophy and cult, underwent variations in the course of time. Nimbarka, who was the founder of a new school of thought, conceived the human spirit as distinct from the divine spirit, of which, however, it is a part. This theory was called Dvaitadvaitavada, or dual unity. According to Ramanuja, the supreme spirit, or Vishnu, allows of two aspects: the Paramatma, which is the cause of all existence, and the Vishesha, the attributes. There is only one existence, that of Narayana, the rest consists of His attributes, and they are real and permanent. In *Vedārtha-Samgraha* he refuted the Advaitic meaning of Tattvamasi as well as the doctrine of Maya laid down by Shankara. His chief work was *Shri Bhashya* on the Vedānta Sūtras in which he advocated the worship of a personal deity who would reward the worshipper for his single-minded devotion. According to him this is the only way to achieve salvation. But even Ramanuja prescribed the path of Bhakti for the high castes, the Sudra was expected to remain content with the Prapattimarga, i.e. dependence on God.

Ramanuja is a monist but, contrary to Shankara and his school, he does not believe that the Supreme God may be exempt from form and qualities. His doctrine of qualified monism, or Visishtadvaita, established the unity of God, possessing attributes. According to him, there is no contradiction in the unity manifesting itself in external pluralities. He does not regard the cosmic appearances as false, but as an

aspect, *prakara*, of God. The relation between God and the cosmos appears to him as that of the light and the objects illuminated.

Ramanuja, an orthodox Hindu, performing all the rites enjoined, did not resemble certain reformers who came after him and who were influenced by Islam. Contrary to Kabir and his school, he never preached any heterodox doctrine implying disavowal of the authority of the Vedas and of Brahmanic traditions. The important thing, according to him, is meditation on God. The people attain this by worshipping the images, and those who have no need of any intermediary by the inner concentration called *antaryamin*. He attaches much importance to the observation of religious ritual. The followers of Ramanuja very scrupulously observed the rites of repast and the rules of caste. Their official language was Sanskrit, and the teaching was strictly confined to the higher classes of Hindu society. The Sudras had no access to their order. Only the Brahmans could be initiated. The success which this teaching had in India was of advantage to the later schools of Bhakti. As so often happens in history, Ramanuja, in spite of his conservatism, involuntarily prepared the way for the reformers who came after him.

The *Bhakti-marga* was divided into four Sampradayas or schools, all of which attached much importance to the observation of religious ritual. These four schools were: (1) the Shri-Sampradaya founded by Ramanuja, (2) the Brahma-Sampradaya founded by Madhava, (3) the Rudra-Sampradaya founded by Vishnuswami and (4) the Sanakadi-Sampradaya founded by Nimbadiya. The differences among these schools consist in the attitude which they assume towards the Vedanta philosophy of Shankara. Madhava's teaching is frankly dualistic. His followers describe Shankara's Vedanta as disguised Buddhism. A common feature of their teachings is a compromise between monotheism and polytheism.

Whether Ramanuja came under outside influence or not has been much discussed. Sir George Grierson believes that



his monotheistic tendencies were borrowed from Christianity. The conception of an eternal life, such as we find in Ramanuja, was, according to this scholar, a Christian idea. He thinks, besides, that Ramanuja must have made the acquaintance of the Christian monks at Mylapore, where there was a Syrian Christian Church, and that all his ideas show the effect of this. This opinion does not rest on sufficiently sure data. It is true that Ramanuja was at first an adherent of the Advaita school of Shankara and that he left it later; there is nothing to prove, however, that this change was determined by Christian influence. Besides, the Christian communities were insignificant and did not play any marked role in Hindu social life. It is very doubtful whether there was ever any real contact between the Hindus and the Christians in medieval India. But there are other circumstances which must not be neglected. Already the Vaishnavite Alvares and the Shaivaite Adyars (Hindu mystics of the South in the tenth century) had composed popular hymns (prabandha) marked by strong religious emotion. They attached importance to the love of God as the means of salvation. They succeeded in weaning the people away from Buddhism and Jainism, and thus revived Hinduism in the south of India. It was from these mystic poets of the South that Ramanuja must have taken his cue. At the same time we must not neglect the increasing influence of Islam in Malabar, Gujarat and even on the Coromandel Coast, which is mentioned as the Ma'bar (passage) by the Muslim traders and travellers of the time. Their missionaries and their Sufis had converted to Islam many low-caste Hindus. The commerce of the Arabian Sea, which before the arrival of the Portuguese was in the hands of the Arabs, was one of the principal causes of the Musalman immigration on the coast of Malabar. The Arab traders had established very good and cordial relations with the people of the country. They intermarried with the local women and established themselves on the coast of western India. The Moplahs of our time are the descendants of those Arab merchants who