

THE SAGA OF INDIAN MYSTIC POETS AND MYSTICISM

Sharan S.J.

*Lecturer in English,
Bhandarkars' Arts & Science College, Kundapura-576201
Udupi-District, Karnataka, India.*

ABSTRACT

Here is an attempt to trace the trends of myth and mysticism in Contemporary Indian Poetry in English. Myth and mysticism occupies an important place, position and appears to be the core of Indian poetry in English and Contemporary Indian poetry in English is richly submerged with myth and mystic elements. Myth is a well-known story which was used in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs. But mysticism is a religious practice in which people through meditation and prayer search for truth, knowledge and closeness to God. The question of mystic is very broad we cannot define exactly maybe we can define in periphery, a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity with or absorption into the deity or the absolute, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect.

Keywords: MYTH, MYSTICISM, INDIAN POETRY, BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS, SPIRITUAL APPREHENSION.

INTRODUCTION:

Who is a Mystic?

A Mystic is one who has a fully evolved consciousness - Chith. (having absolute command over the functioning of the Mind) The person who has attained this super-state-of-consciousness will be in Joy always. This Joy is called BLISS. In VEDANTA it is called, ANANDA.

All over the world such Mystics have been living and giving expression to their bliss, only Indian Mystic poets are considered. Throughout the history of BHARATH, there has been thousands and thousands of Mystic poets among all castes, classes, gender and communities. They had given expression to their Mystic experience in poetic form of Literature. They wrote or sang them in their mother tongue. Only when they are translated in to English, the world at large can come to know about them. Just to give an idea about the wide variety of this still unexcavated treasure of Indian Mystic Literature - a few instances are given in this paper. Even we think in border sense of mystic is concerned with the soul or the spirit, rather than with material things. It is a sort of religious enquiry, monotony, inner agitation and ambivalent attitude. It is psychological, philosophical and self-explorative in nature and content. It has been defined as the direct experience or the efforts for experiencing ecstasy, intuition and the vision of the self, soul, Nature and God. Many of the great mystics of India found their way to express the inexpressible through songs or poetry. Poetry is one of the most useful expressions of a mystic's inner experiences. By nature a mystic is able to access a state of consciousness that is beyond the usual awareness of humanity. At a certain stage mystics and great seekers have said it is impossible to describe the consciousness they have attained. However through poetry it is possible for the mystic poets to give a glimpse of higher worlds, like a finger pointing to the moon there inspiring utterances offer a poetic description of their elevating experiences. From an abundance of Masters we have chosen Kabir, Meera, Surdas, Narayan Das, Tulsidas and the saint Shri Shankaracharya. I have selected parts of their poems to be shown up for the fruitful understanding of the Indian Mysticism in English translation.

SHRI GURU SHANKARACHARYA

The great Indian sage – philosopher – poet Shankaracharya, the apostle of Vedanta, the Advait or Non-Dual tradition of Hindu philosophy, in the 8th century A.D. composed many immaculate poems and chants for his disciples to recite in meditation to experience the essential truth of the inconceivable nature of the soul. The

Atma (Soul) Shatakam (a composition in six stanzas) also known as the Nirvana (enlightenment) Shatakam was one such which when recited through Vedic musical chants moved innermost being to a rare and ecstatic realization of ones deepest essence, as was intended by him for disciples, The singer Ashit Desai's rendering of the chant in his 'Himalayan Chants' is perhaps the most exquisite in conveying the full spiritual essence of the poem. Repeating the Sanskrit chant with closed eyes one gets a glimpse of what our virtually incomprehensible innermost core is...

ATMA SHATAKAM

(Song of the Self)

Mano buddhya-hankara chittani naham
Na cha shrotra jihve, na cha ghrana netre
Na cha vyoma bhumirna tejo na vayuhu
Chidananda rupah shivoham shivoham .
Not mind, intellect, memory or ego
Nor the sense of hearing, taste, smell or sight
Not the sky, the earth, wind or light, I am not these,
I am consciousness I am bliss, I am the primal eternal essence.

(Shivoham Shivoham)

Na cha prana sangno na vai pancha vayuh
Na va sapta dhatur na va pancha kosha
Na vak pani padau na chopastha payoo
Chidananda rupah shivoham shivoham .(2).
Neither am I life nor breath
Nor matter nor form, organs or senses,
Not sheaths of personality, gross or subtle,
I am consciousness I am bliss, I am the primal eternal essence.

Na me dvesha ragau na me lobha mohau
Mado naiva me naiva matsarya bhavah
Na dharmo na chartho na kamo na mokshah
Chidananda rupah shivoham shivoham .(3).
Neither with likes nor aversions
Nor wants nor attachments
Nor competition or envy
Neither pursuing righteousness, nor wrong,
Neither wealth, nor passions nor even liberation
I am consciousness I am bliss, I am the primal eternal essence.

Na punyam na papam na saukhyam na dukham
Na manro na tirtham na veda na yagnaha
Aham bhojanam naiva bhojyam na bhokta
Chidananda rupah shivoham shivoham .(4)

MEERA BAI

One of the most extraordinary personalities of the age of devotional worship in 16th century India was Princess Meera Bai. Born in the royal house of Merta in 1498 and married into the exalted principality of Udaipur to the heir apparent, she was destined to be a queen. But she was the spirit of the age of devotion and had only one love, her god – the Supreme Essence incarnated as the blue Avatar, Krishna, and the voice of the Gita. This obsession earned the displeasure of her in-laws. After her husband's premature death, her growing association with seers and saints in public places, particularly the mystic cobbler Raidas, who became her mentor, aroused their unmitigated wrath. After several unsuccessful attempts to dissuade her and later to kill her with poisons and cobras, she eventually left the confines of the palace to become a wandering mendicant, singing songs of love for her beloved Lord from hamlet to hamlet across the land. Finally she disappeared without trace at a temple, according to legend merging with the god she adored. Her poems are all love songs; looking over the

ramparts of the castle for the caravan of her beloved; telling her mother that she dreamt that she had married her Lord; speaking of the cup of poison which she cheerfully drank, turning into nectar; hearing the footfalls of her Lord in the rain. Worship through love was now the new language of the mystical experience raging across the land. The ultimate path for communion between the physical self and the spirit within

TO MY HOUSE DEAR BELOVED

(Mhare Ghar Aao Preetam Pyara)
 Come to my house Dear beloved,
 Mind, body and wealth All I shall offer you
 And hymns of praise will I sing of you.
 You are perfection incarnate While I am worthless
 Full of faults But I know, in your presence
 All my failings will dissolve.
 Meera asks, when will you meet me
 For without you my heart aches, So come fill my house
 Dear beloved With your glorious presence And I promise,
 My mind, body and wealth Will all be yours.

SURDAS

Surdas the Indian mystic-poet composed volumes of verse in praise of Krishna, the incarnated blue Avatar of the Universal Essence. One of his most popular songs seeks the Lord's help and intervention in a moment of adversity. The poem seeks to recapture a popular Puranic (ancient) myth about the king of elephants, Gajendra, bathing, as elephants love to do, on the banks of the Indus River. But he is caught by a monstrous croc and slowly dragged to the depths. The elephant calls out to Lord Krishna, whose devotee he is, to come and free him from imminent death by plucking a lotus and holding it aloft as a gesture of supplication and prayer. Krishna hearing the call hastens to his devotee on a golden eagle and saves him. The story is allegorical. The river is material existence, the elephant, the individual soul and the croc. temptation dragging it under. The soul cries out for help to be liberated from the tribulations of its material incarnation and rebirth and duly receives grace. Surdas identifies with the elephant and seeks the Lord's grace to overcome his failings.

LORD SAVE ME

O Lord save me for I am sinking
 I came to these waters to quench my thirst
 On the banks of the river Indus
 But in these waters lurked a crocodile,
 My leg in its jaws it has caught,
 I thrashed out and with all my might fought
 But it has dragged me deep inside,
 I am now submerged, right upto my ears and trunk
 So I call out to you for help as life ebbs,
 Sur says O Lord I beseech you,
 Have mercy I am drowning.
 The Lord's mind then filled with the entreaty
 Of a sinking elephant's shouts,
 And he swiftly arrived on his great golden eagle
 And plucked the drowning elephant out,
 At last free of the evil entity,
 To be at liberty.

NARAYAN DAS

Narayan Agarwal in the tradition of the devotional movement of the 16th century calls himself Narayan Das (disciple) much as Tulsi was Tulsi Das and Sur was Surdas and Rai was Raidas. I have tried to translate his lyrics which when set to music have moved me deeply with their fire of devotion, intensity of love, and poetic beauty, stirring the soul. I cannot say I have done full justice to the poem in question, as in translation it loses its linguistic magic, yet I hope and trust that it has retained the essence and spirit of the devotional passion expressed by the poet. This being my 100th post, it is also a tribute to the Soul, the Indweller (Antaryami) within my being.

MY HEART IS A THRONE

(hriday hamara singhasan hai, Jispe Shyam biraje)

My heart is a throne
 On which my Lord sits,
 My lips are cushions
 For him to recline,
 My lashes are a swing
 On which he sways,
 His name is a song
 I can never forget
 Whose rhythms are my life,
 Thus on my heart, lips and lashes
 Back and forth as my Lord moves,
 My desire to behold him
 spreads like a fragrance
 From limb to limb
 And every pore, turn by turn begins
 To call out his name,
 My body then turns into a harp
 Whose strings hum with love
 As my Lord rests on his throne
 In my heart.



RAIDAS

Raidas was a 16th Century mystic - poet who lived in north India A Cobbler by profession, his caste was at the bottom of the hierarchy. He courageously defied the orthodox establishment to lead a reform movement to ameliorate the plight of the downtrodden classes. Many of his songs and poems therefore were incorporated in the 'Guru Granth Sahib' the holy book of the reformist faith Sikhism, in acknowledgement of their appealing message of equality, truth and devotion. Here is his popular and moving song he affirms the inseparability of God and his devotee, the unity of spirit and matter, the indivisibility of the creator and his creation, expressed through unremitting love – in essence signifying the divinity of the soul within.

YOU AND I TOGETHER

You are the paste of sandalwood, Lord
 And I am water,
 Every limb becomes fragrant
 As we mingle together.
 You are the deep and dark forest

And I am in it a dancing peacock,
 I am a love-lorn partridge looking at the moon
 And you are my moon.
 I am a wick
 On which your flame burns
 Making my lamp glow brighter every day.
 I am a thread on which you are strung
 As a pearl,
 I am a bride
 And you my golden ornament,
 You are my master
 And I your loving devotee
 Such indeed is the devotion
 Which Raidas feels for you
 Each day.

TULSIDAS

Tulsidas is easily the foremost among the mystic poets of India, a veritable Indian Milton. His remarkable achievement was rendering the epic Ramayan into verse, a feat which elsewhere only a Shakespeare could match in the volume and excellence of his verse. The Ramayan is the story of Ram an epic hero and Avatar (human incarnation of the Divine Essence – God), incarnated to save the world from ever-growing perils of evil. Tulsidas became such a fountainhead of spontaneous inspiration that people averred that it could only have come to him directly from the great Indian god of literature and learning, Lord Ganesh. Indeed in his opening verses he attributes his voluminous epic poem entirely to divine inspiration if not intervention. This prodigious work became all the more extraordinary as heretofore the epic could only be read in Sanskrit, thus debarring the masses from access. Now composed in Avadhi the language of the ordinary folk, suddenly the epic came alive in every humble home, reinvigorating faith as never before, much as Dante's Divine Comedy made Heaven, Hell and Purgatory real for medieval Europe. Today Tulsidas' melodious verse is sung or chanted daily, virtually in every Hindu home, acquiring the stature of a scripture. His 'Ramcharitmanas (The Holy Lake of Lord Ram's Character and Career) has become gospel for the common man, the most quoted of Indian religious texts. Tulsi's love and adoration of Ram knew no bounds and he sang with ardour of his life of sacrifice, renunciation and tragedy making every eye in the land fill and flow with tears and in every heart arose a conviction that if God incarnate could thus experience and endure a life of earthly trial and travail, so could they. Tulsi became India's greatest poet, saint and healer. His verse thus overtook all the wisdom and metaphysics of the Vedas and scriptures, transferring them from the mind and intellect to the heart.

The hymn below is one of his most popular expressions of his love for Ram and concludes by asserting that he resides in his heart and is his true essence. The message of the divinity of the soul, this time as the resident Lord Ram, comes through again as with all mystic poets of the age – internalizing the experience of external divinity, turning the objective divinity into a subjective one.

O MY MIND SING OF RAM

(Shri Ram Chandra Kripalu Bhaj Mana....)
 O my mind, sing praise of gracious Ram
 Who overcomes our every fear of life and death and harm
 Whose every aspect charms
 Like a new blue lotus in heady bloom,
 The perfection of his dark strong form
 With limbs long,

In a yellow robe worn
 Like blue thunderclouds
 With lightening's garb adorned,
 Even the beauty of a cupid
 In comparison deforms –
 To such a glorious vision of him
 With my heart so full, I bow.
 My mind sing, sing praise of Ram
 Resplendant like a sun,
 Humble friend of the poor and downtrodden,
 This son of the solar race of Kings,
 This bliss for his parents born,
 This virtuous Sita's spouse
 I see him adorned with a golden crown,
 And ear drops,
 And on his forehead the sacred mark,
 Holding aloft a bow and arrow,
 Forever all evil to overcome.
 Such a Ram, the beloved of angels and saints
 Tulsi declares resides in his heart
 Arisen like a lotus (in muddy waters)
 All evil desires there, to graciously thwart.

KABIR

Kabir was one of India's most renowned mystic-poets who lived in the 16th century and was a humble weaver by profession. According to one tradition he was the son of a Brahmin widow who abandoned him and he was brought up by a humble family of Muslim weavers. He imbibed the great Hindu and Muslim Sufi mystical traditions to create soul stirring verse and song which are to this day popular across the land. In the following song he speaks of the divinity of the soul. In translation from the original it loses much of its magic and authenticity, yet conveys the force of the message.

Ram taju pai Guru na bisaru. Guru ke sam hari ko na niharu
 I may abandon Ram (God), but I can never forget my Guru
 I do not see God with the same sense of gratitude as I do my Guru
 Hari ne janm diyo jag maanhi. Guru ne awagaman chhutaahi
 God sent me into this world
 But my Guru rid me of the vicious cycle of birth and death
 Hari ne paanch chor diye saatha. Guru ne lai chhuraye anatha
 God sent five thieves (the five senses) to me
 My Guru rescued me from their captivity.
 WHERE O WHERE ARE YOU LOOKING FOR ME MY FRIEND?
 O seeker,
 Where are you vainly looking for me,
 For I am neither in your pilgrimage nor in your idols,
 Not in your temples, not in your mosques,
 Not on the holy river banks at Kasi,
 Nor in silent lonely spots in the Himalayas,
 Not in penances nor the routine of prayers,
 I am not in fasts, nor in rituals,
 Nor in renunciation even can I be found
 Do you not see my friend
 Who seeks me so earnestly, far and wide,
 That I am here, beside you,

Where are you vainly looking for me
Who am here, close at hand
Right within you,
To be found in no more than a moment,
If you ever care to believe,
Ever care to look.

Conclusion:

Therefore Mysticism, which is a branch of theological and philosophical knowledge, can be a kind of religious experience. Critics think that it is the history of the spirit of man. W.R. Inge observes: 'Mysticism is the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God; therefore, but the fundamental feeling of religion, the religious life at its very heart and centre. But what makes the mystical of the life in God as such, as abstracted from all intervening helps and channels whatever, and find a permanent abode in the abstract inwardness of a life of pious feeling'.

Bibliography:

1. Poems to Siva: the hymns of the Tamil, Princeton University Press, 2014.
2. Rabindranath Tagore, The Mystic Poets, Skylights Paths Publication, translated from Bengali into English prefaced by Swami Adiswarananda, 2004.
3. Saints Mizra, Gail and H. A. Mirza, Rabindranath Tagore Poems in Reference Guide to English Literature, Vol. 2, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick, St. James Press, 1991.
4. Tagore, Rabindranath. The Religion of Man. London: Macmillan Company, 1931.
5. Yeats, WB. Introduction to Gitanjali, the English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol-1, Sahitya Akademi, 1994.
6. Ravindranath Tagore: Poems of Kabir. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd. 2007.
7. Ramanujan, A. K., Speaking of Siva. New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 1973.

