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“I LIVE, NOT I; IT IS CHRIST WHO LIVES IN ME” (GAL 2:20): A YOGIC INTERPRETATION OF PAUL’S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The basic and final goal of all religions is promotion of union between their devotees and the God these religions profess and proclaim. This union can have manifold articulations, either as the final union with God after the life in this world or as an experience of a divine union already during the earthly life. Here again the issues and the criteria of divine experience could be considerably different one from another, and hence it is difficult to delineate the principles and nuances of such divine-human union and its manifestations. Some writers would call it mysticism while others would give some related expressions to articulate such a profound union. The main purpose of this study is to see how Paul also had this experience of a union between himself and Christ in whom he believed, an experience which lies at the very basis of his life and mission. The purpose of this analysis is to explain this Christ mysticism of Paul from a Yogic perspective in the hope that this attempt would contribute towards an Indian interpretation of a biblical text, an exercise of biblical exegesis currently undertaken by some Indian exegetes.

The Basis of Yogic Experience

Basically *yoga* means ‘union’, related to the English word ‘yoke’ and the Latin word ‘jugum’. Hence *yoga* comes to mean a method of spiritual union of the human with the divine. Consequently, *yoga* is a method by which an individual may become united with God, the Reality who underlies this apparent, ephemeral and unreal universe. To achieve such a union with God is the perfect *yoga*, which in Christian language is often called mystic union. Many Christian saints are said to have had this profound union and their writings are studied and analysed at length all over the world.

The basic call of all humans is to reach the divine, whether it be in the Christian, Hindu or Islamic traditions. The nuances

regarding the efforts to be made to reach the divine varies from religion to religion. Although all humans have a divine element in them and hence are basically divine, there is a process which each human person has to undertake to unravel the divine in them and experience it. Whereas in Hindu religious tradition it is known as the *atman* becoming aware of the *brahman* and assimilating itself with the *brahman* beyond this world of the unreal and the transitory, the Christians speak of the human mind, will and spirit surrendering themselves to the divine Spirit in such a way that they find their ultimate joy and peace in the divine. The Hindu tradition proposes *jnana*, *bhakti*, and *karmas* as three *margas* for the attainment of this goal and the christian tradition has it as faith, love and hope as the three means of reaching the goal of human life.

The Christian tradition about salvation has two levels: one is the level of the Old Testament which the Christians share with their brothers and sisters of Judaism, and the other is the specifically Christian, namely, one in which the Christians find the realization of their religious aspirations in the person of Christ. At the same time, it is important that Christians living in the midst of other religions try to understand their religious categories within the framework of their own culture and religious climate and articulate them in a way that makes the Christian thought more tuned to their own culture and religious thinking. Hence we are trying to analyse how Paul who was a Jew and a Christian at the same time tried to reach the goal of his religious call and explain the whole process of it as a yogic experience.

Paul, the Blameless Pharisee

It was with a certain sense of pride and legitimate satisfaction that Paul in his letter to Philippians recalled his Jewish religiosity: "I was circumcised when I was a week old. I am an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure-blooded Hebrew. As far as the keeping of the Jewish law is concerned, I was a Pharisee, and I was so zealous that I persecuted the Church. As far as a person can become acceptable to God by obeying the commandments of the Law, I was without fault" (Phil 3:3-6). The Pharisees were known for their strict and scrupulous observance of the Law of Moses, known as the Torah, and they were the most religious-

minded people among the Jews. This naturally led them to consider themselves as the paragons of virtue and hence they were tending to despise others who were not so strict with regard to the observance of the Law, as is clear from the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18:9-14). The Law was supposed to be given to Israel through the mediation of Moses on the occasion of the making of the covenant on mount Sinai. Hence Covenant and Law were to be understood as closely related, the latter as the means and expression of the commitment to the former. But in course of time, especially after the Babylonian captivity, the Law was dissociated from the Covenant as well as its personalistic dimensions, and it was understood more as an area of self-effort to make oneself upright and acceptable to God. Psalm 119, written after the Babylonian captivity, gives this impression to a great extent.

As such there was nothing wrong about one obeying the law and hence Paul could call himself a blameless Pharisee. But the basic theological problem in it was that it was basically a denial of God's grace and dependence on God. A person committed to such a philosophy of life could hardly depend on God and such persons would consider themselves as ideals for others to follow. Moreover, they would be obstinate in their convictions and would not enter into any compromise with others. In fact, Paul also was so sure of his religious excellence that he would not give in to any other teaching and practice besides his own religious convictions. Hence he had concluded on the basis of Dt 21:23 that Jesus of Nazareth was a cursed one because he was hanged on a tree (Gal 3:13). That conviction gave him the impetus and the urge to destroy the religious movement Jesus of Nazareth had inaugurated, which only gained strength and enthusiasm among his followers after he had been crucified (Acts 9:1-2). Hence Paul wanted to destroy this new religious movement by all means. He did his best to persecute the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and then set out for Damascus with the authorization of the High Priest.

The Damascus Experience

The Acts of the Apostles narrates the event of Paul's encounter with Jesus of Nazareth near Damascus in a very remarkable manner. As Paul was proceeding to Damascus to arrest men and women who were following Jesus, for which he had the official and written authorization of the High Priest from Jerusalem, he was confronted

by a very strange question: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). To the question of Paul as to who it was who asked him the answer was simple enough: "I am Jesus whom you persecute" (Acts 9:5). Paul had heard about Jesus of Nazareth; he may have even met him somewhere during his stay in Jerusalem in the School of Gamaliel. But he never thought that this Jesus who was already crucified had an authority and a challenge about his person to confront such a respectable Rabbi like Paul. In fact, Paul was asked to get up and go into the city, where he would be told what he has to do (Acts 9:6).

In his letter to the Galatians Paul narrates this event as a "revelation of God's Son" to him and he explains in no unclear terms the change which underwent him, a change about which he did not want to consult any human agency. Rather he went all the way to Arabia to think and reflect on the meaning of what happened to him. Paul was always a committed person. As a Jew he was fully committed to the convictions and practices of Judaism, which gave him the urge and the persuasion to destroy a splinter group of Jews who claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and Lord. The life-style of these followers of Jesus was all the more repugnant to Paul because in all other matters these followers of Jesus lived a Jewish way of life and consequently it was an affront to his own religion to have to tolerate such a heretical group. But then came the revelation to him on the way to Damascus that the whole issue was different from what he thought. Jesus the crucified one was alive and he was one with his followers whom he was persecuting so much so that persecuting his followers was tantamount to persecuting Jesus himself. At last Paul had to change his convictions; he had to make a new commitment, a total commitment to Jesus of Nazareth.

From Torah-Centrism to Christo-Centrism

From his being a blameless Pharisee Paul started to live the life of a follower of Jesus. The basic difference between these two modes of existence was very conspicuous. The central focus of Paul's Jewish life was his conformity to the Torah and its various demands. With all the excellence and sublimity this Torah had, it was still a written code of dead letters. There was no personalism involved in following the prescriptions of the Torah. It brought about only a personal satisfaction and complacency for those who observed the

Torah that they were good persons before God and the people. It was more a question of not violating the prescriptions of the written law because the general tendency of everyone confronted by a law is to violate it. The law gives directives from outside about what is to be done or not to be done; but it never gives the inner energy and power to observe the demands of the law.

Paul was a prisoner of this vicious circle. He wanted to excel all others in his devotion to the Torah and he did succeed in it to a great extent, as we have seen above. At the same time, he could not tolerate anyone who did not correspond to the kind of spirituality he owned for himself. He was zealous and at the same time intolerant. He was a martyr for the sake of the Torah. Since the Torah was dissociated from the reality of the covenant, especially from the time of the Babylonian captivity, Paul had not experienced any personal fulfilment in his blind following of the Torah. It was all a duty he had to fulfil, a burden placed on him for the simple reason of his being a Pharisee. His life was centred on the Torah and he would die for it and he would also make others die for the sake of the Torah.

It is from the Torah-centred religion that Paul made a radical shift to a person-centred religion. Now that he realized the fact of Jesus of Nazareth as risen from the dead, and owing to the fact of his readiness to believe in the resurrection as something in tune with his Pharisaic background, it made a real change in his understanding of religion. It is true Paul never regretted his being a Pharisee; but his commitment to the Torah may not have given him his ultimate sense of fulfilment. Conformity to a written law can never give a sense of personal fulfilment. It is only a question of accommodating to a norm of life. Once that goal is reached, there remains nothing to be further added. This is not the case when a person becomes the controlling power of one's religious experience. As one tries to understand a person, his or her personality is challenged by the one who wants to be in communion with him or her. It is all the more so when it is question of a divine person. In his Damascus encounter Paul had come to understand that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God and further it is said that he went straight to the synagogues and began to preach that Jesus was the Son of God (Acts 9:20). This new commitment to the person of Son of God would mean that Paul would never come to a stage where he would have reached the goal of his new religious commitment.

One can never exhaust knowing and loving a person. The more Paul knew the mystery of Jesus, the more he realised that he is far removed from that goal.

Paul's Jnana and Bhakti Marga According to Phil 3:5-14

It is this new centre of gravity fixed on the person of Christ that we read in Phil 3:5-14, an auto-biographic passage in which Paul describes what had happened to him in his encounter with the risen Christ on the way to Damascus. After having explained his excellence as a Jew and Pharisee (Phil 3:5-6), Paul went on to say that all that excellence he now considered as a loss for the sake of Christ. His *dharmā* according to the Torah gave way to a new *dharmā* based on faith in Jesus Christ. Consequently, he reckoned everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, namely, the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whom he had accepted as his Lord. For the sake of this Christ Paul threw everything away and considered all things as mere refuse.

As a Jew, Paul never had to know the Torah; he knew it thoroughly well. His learning it in the school of Gamaliel gave him ample opportunity to know the details of the Torah and teach it to others. But now, as one who believes in Christ, it is a question of gaining the knowledge about the whole mystery of Christ. From his being an ordinary person walking thorough Palestine to the time he was considered a culprit and was crucified and then the unheard of things that he rose to a new life and continues to be one with his followers - all these meant a lot for Paul to know about Jesus. Consequently, he undertook a process of knowing and devoting - *jnana* and *bhakti* - of knowing Christ and knowing the power of his resurrection, of sharing in his sufferings and of becoming like him in his death in the hope that one day he would also be raised from death to life. This *jnana* of Christ naturally leads to a *bhakti* towards Christ, to an unconditional commitment to Christ, to an absolute devotedness to the person of Christ. It is a whole process of entering into the mystery of Christ, the mystery of his life, death and resurrection. It is a process of knowing and committing oneself to the object of one's knowledge.

Paul was aware of the magnitude of this effort to reach the goal of his new religious commitment. Hence he wrote: "I do not

claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself. I really do not think that I have already won it. The one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call in Christ Jesus to the life above' (Phil 3:12-14). Paul uses an athletic language to describe his efforts to reach the goal of his call. Basically it is his commitment and dedication to the person of Christ which prompted him to forget the past and run towards the goal. The goal is the perfect union with Christ in the mystery of his life, death and resurrection.

Paul's Karma Marga According to 1 Cor 9:19-23

Paul was no academician. Nor was he a silent mystic. His training in Judaism, through which he was made a Rabbi, did not prevent him from being a person committed to the society. That is the reason why he not only opposed the new religious movement started by Jesus but also did everything in his power to destroy it, not only in Jerusalem but also in the far-off Damascus where he knew the followers of Jesus had gone for fear of him. He was a witness to the stoning of Stephen and he it was who took care of the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen, meaning thereby that he had a direct role to play in the execution of Stephen. It was part of his convictions about his faith and his commitment to his religion.

Paul's acceptance of Christ as the new principle of life only deepened his commitment to work for him. His *jnana* of, and *bhakti* to Christ invited him to a way of action, a *karma marga*, the proof of which are the three missionary journeys he undertook during the ten years of his active apostolic life. At the end of all these he planned to go to Spain because he had no more place to work in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (Rom 15:23-24). He was a tent-maker by profession (Acts 18:1-2) and he worked hard night and day to take care of his needs and those of his companions (1 Thes 2:9; 1 Cor 9:6). In his Farewell Speech to the Elders at Ephesus Paul explained the reason why he worked so hard for himself and his companions: By working hard one must help the weak, remembering the words that the Lord Jesus himself said: "There is more happiness in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:34-35).

The underlying principle of this altruism of Paul is beautifully explained in his letter to the first Corinthians (I Cor 9:19-23). On the one hand, he was aware of the meaning and importance of being a free person, and he did not want to be anybody's slave, meaning thereby a person with a slavish attitude to others. At the same time, Paul decided to make himself everybody's slave in order to win over to Christ as many people as possible. His work for Christ was not a strategy, much less a spiritual conquest. It was more a question of availability to others by which he could be at home with the Jews and the Greeks, with the strong and the weak. For Paul, it was all a matter of accommodating himself to others, always aware of the fact of his being under Christ's law of love (Gal 6:2). He was conscious of his being free from the law of Moses, but he did not hate those who found satisfaction in being subject to that law. He could very well be like a Gentile who did not have anything to do with the Jewish law, and this was one way of winning them over to Christ. It was not any kind of diplomacy, but his ability to adapt himself to others, his readiness to make a compromise in secondary matters and, above all, his love for Christ and his yearning to make Christ known and experienced by others as well.

Paul's Yogic Experience Summarized in Gal 2:20-21

It is in the light of the above reflections on Paul's encounter with Christ and his total commitment to the cause of Christ that we have to analyse the classical passage about Paul's Christ experience presented in a yogic perspective. After having explained his total independence from all human agencies for the quality of his faith commitment to Christ and to his gospel (Gal 2:1-14), Paul summarizes the content of his gospel, stating that a person receives divine acceptance only through faith in Jesus Christ and not by obeying the Torah. Paul says that he himself took this courageous step, which for the average Jews would have been impossible. For such Jews, Paul was a renegade, one who denied the Torah and became a sinner and started favouring the cause of sin. But Paul admits that, as far as the Torah is concerned, he is dead to it, killed by the Torah itself, in order that he might live for God. His being killed by the Torah is nothing but his dying with Christ on his cross in order that he might start a new life with Christ for God.

It is in this context of Paul's reflection on death and life together with Christ that he gave expression to that unique reference about his religious experience: "It is no longer I who live; it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). The encounter which Paul had with the risen Jesus on the way to Damascus did not remain an isolated event in his life; rather it made a real metamorphosis in his person and life in such a way that he could conclude therefrom that he ceased to live, while Christ started living in him fully and totally. It would be impossible for us to fathom the profound implications of this statement of Paul. To be sure, it was not that Paul ceased to live his life. He had a life of his own, but it was totally and definitively transformed by the person of Christ. Consequently, the life which he continued to live was a life of "faith in the Son of God, who loved Paul and gave his life for him" (Gal 2:20). The entire life and activities of Paul, as we know it from his letters and the Acts of the Apostles, were an articulation of his commitment to Christ, his *karma*, *jnana* and *bhakti* were fused into a new relationship with Christ through which he allowed Christ to live in him. It was a *yogic* experience for Paul.

There are scholars who try to analyse the moment which prompted Paul to articulate this mystical union with Christ, this perfect *yoga* with Christ, and some are of the view that it is Paul's way of understanding his baptismal experience when he received baptism at the hands of Ananias (Acts 9:18). It might appear that here we are reading too much into a text of Paul. But when we analyse the Pauline teaching on baptism in Rom 6:3-11 and Gal 3:26-29, which are Paul's own reflection about the meaning of baptism, we can see how they are both a sharing of his own experience which he gives to his readers. In Rom 6:3-11 Paul understands baptism as a dying and rising with Christ, a death to sin and a new life with Christ. Baptism, for Paul, is an entering into the very mystery of Christ. He writes: "By our baptism we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life" (Rom 6:4). Paul understands baptism as becoming one with Christ in his dying and in his being raised to a new life. The old being is put to death with Christ on his cross in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed and a new life be inaugurated. The same can be said about Gal 3:26-29 where

again Paul speaks about the effect of baptism as a "putting on Christ" (Gal 3:27), as a result of which all discriminations, such as religious, racial and sexual, are removed and all become one new humanity in Christ: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

As we have seen above, the person of Christ totally captivated Paul and his name had become almost a *mantram* for Paul. Christ permeated Paul's life and action, his theology and world-vision. Prov 18:10 speaks about the name of Yahweh as a strong tower. For Paul, this was true about the name of Christ and he saw Christ more real to himself than all others, including himself. Christ was the *OM (AUM)* for Paul, the beginning of everything (Eph 1:3-4) as well as the goal of everything (Eph 1:10). We may call it the Christ-mysticism of Paul; but more than the name it was all a case of profound life-experience. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians holds good for the experience of every Christian: "All things are yours, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor 3:21). Paul realised that he did not belong to himself, but to Christ and this explains how he could speak about a termination of his own life when he fully committed himself to Christ.

The Vine and Branches : A Paradigm of Yogic Experience (Jn 15:1-11)

What we have analysed above as Paul's mystical and *yogic* experience is clearly illustrated by the evangelist John in the allegory of 'the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1-11). A branch is united to the stem of the vine in such a way that at any given moment a branch can say: 'I live not I, the stem lives in me; the life that I live now is the life that is transmitted to me by the stem'. The branches cannot live without the stem and the stem operates itself through the branches. In a certain sense, we can say that the stem needs the branches to reveal its creative power. But this does not in any way cause the branches to forget their dependence on and the need of the stem. The stem without the branches lacks its perfection and the branches without the stem lack their vitality and life. The branches need pruning to be meaningfully united to the stem, especially to bear fruit. The branches which wither away are cut off and thrown away. Paul as

a branch bearing much fruit was pruned in different ways as we know from his letters.

Through his letters Paul gives to his readers two types of theological information: one of his own profound theological reflection and the other of his sharing of his own religious experience with his readers. Whereas the former has a ring of authority about it in so far as it is the result of his meditation and reflection on the meaning of the Christ event and Christian life, the latter is Paul sharing with his readers the inner insights of his own religious experience, and consequently it has its own power of persuasion about it. The core of this experience was Paul's life in Christ, a life which he began in his encounter with the risen Lord on the way to Damascus. It was this life which he treasured as his most cherished reality and it gave him the impetus to face the challenges of life. So he could write: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10), meaning thereby that he could do everything with the power of Christ who strengthened him (cf. Phil 4:13). It is this same conviction of abiding union with Christ which prompted him to challenge all the enemies of Christian life and ask the readers: "Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom 8:35).

The above analysis of the close union Paul had with Christ shows us that it is a relationship anyone can have in his or her life. It is not the unusual or the impossible. What is required is one's total commitment to Christ, a commitment that prompts the believers to break away from all other commitments. As a Jew, Paul had his total commitment to the Torah. When he realised that there is a greater and better way of religious commitment, he gave up his loyalty to the Torah and surrendered himself to Christ. This commitment was radical and definitive for Paul throughout his apostolic career and it enabled him to face all the challenges of his apostolic life. Consequently, Paul is a model for everyone who wants to get into a close relationship with Christ and he invites everyone to have this experience of oneness and togetherness with Christ, which we can call a *yogic* experience.