

## ***Editorial***

### **MODERN SAINTS OF BHAKTI TRADITION**

Two polar extremes are possible between the sacred and the profane: while one stresses their individualities and, hence, their irreconcilability, the other emphasises their ultimate oneness. Although it may be unwise to pass a judgment on their ontological status, an integral approach in this regard would be to initiate a perspective of reality within which nothing can be set aside merely because a logical framework does not approve of it. In fact, all through the human history systems abound: some moderate approaches, some extreme viewpoints; some positive and some negative; some creative while others quite nihilistic. All of these were built on the intellectual contributions of those stalwarts who initiated thought provoking but hair-splitting logical analyses in order to shed light into the inner recesses of reality. Apparently, they had a reasonable number of followers who invested their time and talent to promote and propagate such systems of thought; such attempts have been identified as the leaps in the history of human thought, in the human attempt to get hold of the true nature of the ultimate reality.

It is a historical fact that to this day there is no consensus as to what is the nature of reality, let alone the method to explore its depths and dimensions. However, limited human minds largely with the back up of political prowess and religious sanctions had tried their might to impose one or the other vision of either an individual or a group as the final word about reality, a rejection of which naturally having very powerful adverse consequences. Neither the might of the sword nor the censure of religion has been, however, successful in suppressing human spirit's craving for a deeper glance into or a total grasp of the ultimate reality; many a time such attempts turned out to be catalysts in enhancing human quest for the unseen and untold dimensions of reality. The explorative struggle is continuing with much vigour and enthusiasm at different areas.

While this had been, by and large, the case in the intellectual realm, other creative minds delved deep into the recesses of reality by a different method. As this approach took recourse to the emotional rather than the

intellectual, in place of the hair-splitting analyses and the resulting probabilities, reality was approached in its finality and totality, although, once again, the grasp of it had been influenced by the perspectives adopted by them. Religion was the general medium of this inquiry, the understanding of one or the other religion about the ultimate reality being the central focus. An emphasis of the emotional within the religious matrix provided the ideal set up for the flourishing of various streams of devotion, paving the way for an intimate and personal experience of the absolute, and thus the total reality.

Indian religions and spiritual traditions had a special inkling for the devotional in religious inquiry as well as in worship patterns. Unwritten oral traditions as well as the extant written records, especially the numerous sacred scriptures of different religious sects do indicate the prevalence or the emphasis of the devotional, which is largely identified as the *bhakti* tradition, all through the earlier periods in Indian religious history. The vast majority of the people – saints, rulers and the common folk – subscribe to the devotional practices rather than any other thought stream, which is indicative of the profound appeal they have for the Indian religious psyche. In fact, the mushrooming of different *bhakti* schools in the Indian subcontinent, the increasing number of votaries among the public to them and the rich and beautiful treatises on *bhakti* that have come out from some of those *bhakti* saints do reconfirm the extent, impact and reach of devotion.

*Bhakti*, according to the Indian traditions, is a loving devotion and it includes a total self-surrender: a readiness on the part of the *bhakta* to let go oneself into the bountifulness of the divine, motivated by sheer love. It is not a mere intellectual exercise to attain theoretical knowledge about the ultimate reality; far more, it is an attempt to know and experience the reality by a commitment in love, which, ultimately, turns out to be loving devotion culminating in total self-surrender. It shall not adopt a method of analysis but synthesis, not division but unity and harmony, as love and surrender cannot perpetuate divisiveness and disintegration within reality. Again, it is not a sheer attempt to spend in a 'spiritual' frenzy, as it is sometimes made out to be; far more, it aims at a transformation of the life of devotees, as the self-surrender calls for attuning the *bhakta's* life to that which is loved and worshipped. This transformation has to reach the inner recesses of the life of the devotee, although a person outside such a circle

of devotion may not necessarily understand, accept and cherish it in the same manner. However, the devotee is said to be unconcerned about such responses as he or she would be capable of transcending the limited human realms through loving devotion.

Looked at these traditions from an existentialist point of view, the fire-test for any genuine *bhakta* consists in the ability to avail oneself for the service of humanity, especially for the uplift of the downtrodden. This is said to be a necessary dimension of loving devotion and total self-surrender, as the integration resulting from such dynamics cannot segregate anyone from himself or herself. In fact, to my mind, *bhakta* is the one who is capable of approaching everyone with a profound sense of equanimity and equality.

In the modern understanding of *bhakti* tradition, persons who are committed to loving devotion and self-surrender have been making earnest attempts in this regard by retaining its kernel in terms of synthesising its traditional sense as well as the need of instilling a social and humanitarian face to religion and its related dynamics. Religion, according to the modern *bhakti* tradition, is a human reality infused with a divine spirit which is close to the life of humanity and the entire cosmos, having the inner strength for synthesis and integration. True to this spirit, we find many gifted and committed persons making their imprint in the tradition of *bhakti*, infusing it with newer dimensions and powerful dynamics, thus enriching the religious ethos of the country and the humanity at large. Some – across all religions and religious traditions that have flourished in the Indian subcontinent over millennia – had been exceptional and emphatic in immortalising the truth of religious devotion as the easiest path to understand and integrate the multi-dimensional reality to its core. Some of them were known far and wide, though some others remained in the obscurity of their own locality: but the truth is that all of them have taken us to the new heights of *bhakti*, inviting many more to follow suit in finally establishing an integrated and meaningful human existence.

In this volume, *Journal of Dharma* makes an attempt – without any claim for exhaustiveness – to recapture the contributions of some stalwarts of the *bhakti* tradition by presenting their personalities and achievements in this regard. The contributors to this issue have tried to present their considered views about various *bhakti* saints of the modern era, covering almost a period of 500 years reaching up to the present times. In the first

entry on Mirabai, Rashmi Manavalan presents a realist portrayal of a 16<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary woman *bhakta*, who dared to challenge the *status quo* relinquishing all comforts of life, motivated by her sole and strong loving devotion to Kṛṣṇa. In fact, Mirabai is presented as a role model for women of all times and cultures to fight for human respect and justice: she is an evocative symbol of subaltern dynamics yearning for ultimate liberation from the clutches of social and religious oppression.

Paul Kalluveetil, in his portrayal of a Christian *bhakta*, analyses the devout life of a pioneering Christian religious priest from the 18<sup>th</sup> century background of Kerala, the southern most state of India. Brilliantly recapturing the life of Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara as one of *yogic synthesis* – of *jñāna*, *karma* and *bhakti margas* – Kalluveetil presents him in this article primarily as a *bhakta yōgi* of Christian tradition. The author succeeds in portraying the devout life of Chavara as the source and inspiration of all his prophetic endeavours, culminating in the mystic union with the divine as well as social communion with those who were assigned to his pastoral care and the downtrodden in the society, without differentiating along the lines of caste, colour or creed.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is a contemporary personage among the New Age spiritual movements, trying to rekindle the Vedic spirit without rejecting the findings of modern sciences. Alexis Avdeeff, a devotee of Ravi Shankar himself, makes a thorough analysis of his personality and teachings along with the Art of Living Foundation he has founded to propagate his teachings. Although the author approves of the movement in offering courses of yoga and meditation worldwide, sharing “its precious wisdom with the widest public, regardless of walks of life, religions, societies and cultures of the aspirants” he is cautious about Ravi Shankar’s attempts to “globalise the [vedic] wisdom,” which may have ulterior motives other than religious and devotional.

The life of another New Age saint, Mata Amritanandamayi, is presented by Joshy Paramthottu. Although the author claims that “sanctity and divinity cannot be put into logical scrutiny to get perfect clarity of notions,” he makes a thorough attempt to analyse and critically evaluate the person of *Amma* and the movements centred around her personality. In an attempt to evaluate the claims made by the devotees of Amritanandamayi the author makes the following pertinent and equally cautionary comment: “Seemingly, this movement enjoys also political

patronage from prominent Hindu political parties and their leaders, which, given the unhealthy tendency of mixing up religion and politics to the highest extremes in the contemporary India, may tend to question the credibility of the movement and its spiritual motives." Thus, according to him, "her new method in integrating *bhakti* and *karma sādhanas* is an inspiration to the modern world, though the claims for divinity and Godhood seem to be far removed from reality."

In an article "Mystic Poets of *Bhakti* Tradition," James Muttickal presents us a well-articulated general understanding of the historical developments and the general characteristics of *bhakti* as it is being practised within Hindi devotional literary tradition. Concentrating on the mystic poems that have enriched the *bhakti* tradition over a period of centuries, the author rightly claims that it has left very profound impact on the religious and cultural life of Indians, by providing effective paradigms in initiating religious harmony, social integration and cultural transformation in India.

In an attempt to capture an essential dimension of the *bhakti* tradition, Sheila Kannath, in her article "Mystical Consciousness as Culmination of *Bhakti* in Tagore," examines the poetic writings of Rabindranath Tagore and comes out with the valid finding that a *bhakta* cannot but be a mystic who loves and personally relishes the experience of God, the fellow beings and the entire cosmos without any hurdle or hindrance. According to her, the world-renowned classic "*Gitanjali*," which she analyses in detail, "is an impassioned expression of this deep and intense aspiration for union with his Lover."

The final article, a survey on *Suddhadvaita* by Radharani, proposes the path open by Vaiṣṇava āchāryas like Rāmānuja, Mādhva, Vallabha and Nimbārka to synthesise the upaniṣādic Brahman with the theistic God (Viṣṇu) and, thus, to practise devotion to a personal deity with auspicious attributes as the best means to attain salvation. In fact, *Suddhadvaita* is presented as a quest for discovering the unity of all existence in the ultimate reality; it provides a beautiful blending of the monistic philosophy of Śaṅkarāchārya with the principles of *bhakti mārga*. This doctrine upholds the exclusive position of devotion (applicable to all) and maintains that the divine grace is the only means to overcome the fetters of *karma* on the *jīva*, to attain salvation.

The contemporary trend is, by and large, consumerist and utilitarian in nature, although the vacuum created by such trends has also given rise to many New Age Movements, both within India and in the other parts of the globe. The relevance and value of *bhakti* tradition have in no way been deteriorated even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it can certainly be augmented by revitalising its inner devotional dynamics to address the existential needs of human existence in relation to the cosmic reality. A critical as well as creative approach to the prevalent *bhakti* schools and their proponents would provide a meaningful paradigm for religious practices with a devotional thrust oriented towards holistic individual growth and healthy social transformation. *Bhakti* shall not be a vacuous love, devotion or surrender to a shadow of the divine removed from the reality coexisting with the *bhakta*; instead, it has to be an all-encompassing love, resulting in self-surrender leading to a commitment to the immediate and the imminent that surround the life of the individual *bhakta* in relation to the human as well as the cosmic community.

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