

# HINDU RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

By SARA GRANT

*When it is known through every state of cognition, it is rightly known, for by such knowledge one attains life eternal.<sup>1</sup>*

THE VARIETIES of hindu religious experience are so splendidly manifold that at first sight they challenge every attempt to reduce them to unity: and yet, underlying all the apparently inconsistent pluriformity of pilgrimage, fast and ritual gesture, ceaseless chanting of the names of God and perpetual silence, holy men who live in solitude and holy men who draw thousands to listen to their words and receive the grace of their blessing, there is one fundamental intuition that sets an indefinable stamp on the religious experience of every Hindu. As an old guru who certainly knew what he was talking about once said to a friend of mine: 'Hinduism looked at from the outside is just a mixed bag of superstitions and money-making. Each one deceives his neighbour to his own advantage. *Yet there is in the hindu religion something which one would seek in vain anywhere else – the knowledge of Brahman, the vision of the Atman, true wisdom*'.<sup>2</sup>

One of the earliest and most powerful expressions of this intuition is to be found in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*, though it can be traced even further back in time:

Truly he is in the great unborn Self who is this person consisting of knowledge among the senses. In the space within the heart lies the controller of all, the lord of all, the ruler of all. He does not become greater by good works, nor smaller by evil works. He is the bridge that serves as a boundary to keep the different worlds apart. Him the Brahmanas seek to know by the study of the Veda, by sacrifices, by gifts, by penance, by fasting. On knowing him, in truth, one becomes an ascetic. Desiring him only as their worlds, monks wandered

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<sup>1</sup> *Kena Upanishad*, 2, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Let it be said here once and for all that this paper is necessarily selective. It is impossible to do justice to the full range of hindu experience in a short space. I have therefore confined myself to the aspect that seems to me to be of greatest significance today, and dealt with it as a phenomenon of religious life today, not as a theological problem.

forth. Truly, because they knew this, the ancient sages did not wish for offspring. What shall we do with offspring, they said, we who have known this Self, this world? Having risen above the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, the desire for worlds, they led the life of a mendicant. For the desire for sons is the desire for wealth, and the desire for wealth is the desire for worlds: both these are indeed desires only. This Self is that which has been described as Not this, not this. He is incomprehensible, for he is never comprehended. He is indestructible, for he cannot be destroyed. He is unattached, for he does not attach himself. He is unfettered, he does not suffer, he is not injured. Him (who knows this) these two thoughts do not overcome: for some reason he has done evil, or for some reason he has done good. He overcomes both. What he has done or what he has not done does not affect him . . . One should know the nature of That alone. Having found That, one is not tainted by evil action. Therefore he who knows it as such, having become calm, self-controlled, withdrawn, patient and collected, *sees the Self in himself, sees all in the Self*. Evil does not overcome him, he overcomes evil; free from taint, free from doubt, he becomes a knower of Brahman. (4, 4, 22)

Well before the end of the first millenium before Christ, hindu tradition explicitly acknowledged three *margas* or 'ways' to the supreme goal of human existence, corresponding to three basic temperamental types.<sup>3</sup> These are the 'ways' of *jnana* or knowledge, *bhakti*, or devotion, and *karma*, ritual activity or 'action' in the form of service. Since these categories are distinguished on the basis of the relative preponderance of one or other of the three essential elements in human nature, namely intelligence, affectivity and volitional energy, religious experience in every culture will obviously be diversified on the same principles, as William James was well aware. Nevertheless, there is in the religious experience of each of these types as they appear in Hinduism a common trait which seems to differentiate them from their counterparts elsewhere, which may perhaps be described as a sense of being, not in face of, but within and penetrated by the Mystery they know or worship or serve. This sense of 'within-ness' can be traced back to the very origins of Hinduism so far as we can discover them.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Bhagavad Gita* (c. 200 B.C.) takes them for granted, and both brings out their complementarity and co-existence in every individual to some extent, and gives a marvellous solution in the light of the *bhakti* tradition to the problem of the endless chain of *karma* (in the sense of actions entailing consequence) by its doctrine of disinterested action done purely for the Lord, which entails no 'fruits'.

*The vedic period*

The 'liturgical' or *karma* spirituality of vedic times has sometimes been written off as a polytheistic ritualism or nature worship resembling that of the Greeks or Romans. This is a potentially misleading over-simplification. Vedic religion at its best was founded on a deeply contemplative awareness of a Presence manifested in and through the cosmic harmony, and on a deep sense of man's awe-inspiring responsibility for maintaining that harmony by the regular offering of ritually flawless sacrifice. For purposes of worship, the Presence was certainly personified in the *devas*, or cosmic powers controlling the natural forces both in the external world and within man himself; but even if the popular mind conferred upon some of them distinct personalities of their own, awareness of their purely representative character was too near the surface to justify the use of the term 'polytheism' for vedic religion in any absolute sense. Even towards the end of the period, when liturgy had degenerated into a mixture of magic and ritualism, the sense of the underlying Mystery was still alive in some minds, as this protest from the Rg Veda bears witness :

The father of the eye – for wise is he –  
 Begat these twain (heaven and earth) like sacrificial ghee,<sup>4</sup>  
 And they bowed to him in worship.  
 Not till the ancient [or eastern] bounds were firmly fixed  
 Were heaven and earth extended.

He is our father, he begat us,  
 He the ordainer, he all dwellings knows,  
 All worlds he knows; the gods (*devas*) he named,  
 Himself one only; all other beings go to question him . . . .

He was the first embryo the waters bore  
 In whom all gods together came,  
 The One implanted in the unborn's navel,  
 In which all the worlds abode.

You will not find him who all these begat:  
 Some other thing has stepped between you.  
 Blinded by fog and ritual mutterings  
 Wander the hymn-reciters, robbers of life! (X, lxxxii)

The Creator of the world, to whom the hymn is addressed, is not himself the ultimate reality: he is merely the first-born from the unborn, in whose navel (bosom?) he abides, together with all that

<sup>4</sup> Liquified butter used in sacrifice.

he fashions. (One should however beware of too-facile christian parallels here: 'The embryo is merely the greatest of the *devas*, a manifestation of the unborn and not really distinct from him'.)

*The upanisadic age*

With the upanisadic period, the experience of the Mystery as Ground not only of the cosmos, but also of man's subjectivity, the Self of his own self, invaded the hindu consciousness with such force that it has been ever since the defining characteristic of hindu religious experience:

The Self is not to be sought through the senses. The Self-caused pierced the openings of the senses outward; therefore one looks outward and not within oneself. Some wise man, however, seeking life eternal, with his eyes turned inward saw the Self.

The small-minded go after outward pleasures. They walk into the snare of widespread death. The wise, however, do not seek the stable among things that are unstable here.

That by which one perceives form, taste, smell, sound and touches of love, by that alone one perceives. What is there that remains unknown to it? Verily this is That.

That by which one perceives both dream states and waking states, having known That, the wise man does not grieve.

He who knows this Self, the experienter, as the living spirit close at hand, as the lord of the past and the future, does not shrink away from him. This verily is That.

He who was born of old from austerity, was born of old from the waters, who stands, having entered the secret place of the heart, and looked forth through beings – this verily is That (*Katha Upanishad*, 2, 1-6).<sup>5</sup>

All these creatures, my dear, have their root in Being; they have Being as their abode, Being as their support . . . That which is the subtle essence (the root of all) this whole world has for its Self. That is the True, that is the Self, *That art thou, Svetaketu* (*Chandogya Up.* 6, 14).

<sup>5</sup> Compare Sankara's commentary on the *Aitareya Upanishad*, 2, 1. 'The supreme Reality, that is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe, transcendent, omniscient (etc.), created in due order this entire universe . . . without the help of any substance other than himself. Then he entered by himself into all living creatures for the sake of self-realization . . . Therefore he is the one living Self in all bodies and there is none besides. And so everybody else too should realize thus: He is my Self' (*Kath.Up.* 3, 1, 8). 'I am this Brahman' (*Br.Up.* 1, 4, 10). Sankara goes on to make it quite clear that there is no question of pantheism here: the supreme Self is transcendent as well as immanent throughout.

What the *Chandogya Upanishad* says of the man in whom this experience has dawned: *na ca punar avartate* – ‘he comes not back again, yes, he comes not back again’, has been verified in the hindu consciousness as a whole. A new dimension of awareness had dawned, and there could be no going back, whatever fresh developments the centuries might bring.

*The theistic movement: a reaction*

One very important development had already begun in the form of a theistic movement both within and outside the upanisadic tradition which, while challenging the core experience of that tradition, did not succeed in escaping its influence.

The roots of indian theism seem to be both historical and psychological: they can be traced back to pre-vedic times, and came to a new flowering under the impact of the psychological reaction to the exclusivism of vedic religion, both liturgical and contemplative. It has by no means been forgotten, even today, that for centuries the saving ‘knowledge of Brahman’ was restricted to the three highest castes, and many in India today would still consider this to be the case, if orthodoxy is to be kept, including many of those excluded from it. Many people none the less have always found it impossible to believe that the supreme Mystery is the private property of the better-born. This conviction conspired with the deep-rooted psychological need experienced by most human beings for a ‘God with a face’, a local habitation and above all a name, to give birth to the *bhakti* tradition of intense devotion to the Supreme under a particular ‘name and form’, which gives full scope for the affective element in human nature and puts warmth and new life into ritual worship. From the later upanisadic period until today, the religion of the people has been markedly *bhakti* in character, and has produced an amazing wealth of tenderly devotional poetry – usually song – to the ‘God of a thousand names’, each region having its own variations and traditions of worship and its own particular ‘name and form’ for the Nameless and Formless. In theory, the *bhakti* movement should have been casteless, and to a considerable extent it has been, especially in the beginning; but gradually it penetrated into all castes and suffered considerable contamination as a result. No man is a pure intelligence or activist; so that it was inevitable that even the more distinctively contemplative or ritualist types should at sometimes be attracted and influenced by *bhakti*: Brahmins are certainly not immune to it.

Today it has a large part in the daily routine of most ashrams, even those whose spirituality is basically non-dualist, like the Sivananda Ashram at Rishikesh.

The *bhakti* movement was made theologically respectable, to borrow R. C. Zaehner's phrase, by the fourteenth century Vedantin Ramanuja, who argued persuasively that it had a solid basis in the upanisadic tradition, of which, indeed, according to him, it was the only legitimate interpretation. While vigorously rejecting the non-dualism of Sankara, which seemed to him to undermine the very foundations of religion by annihilating all distinction between the devotee and his Lord, he nevertheless adopted a compromise solution which avoided an extreme dualism: for him the individual soul and the cosmos were 'parts' of the Lord. He was not however what we would call a pantheist, since he insisted on a certain distinction between God and the soul, but like many original thinkers he had a linguistic problem in trying to verbalize his experience of qualified non-two-ness (*visistadvaita*). Himself a passionate Vaisnavite, he felt that his whole existence was founded on the possibility of an 'I-Thou' relationship with the supreme Mystery, for this alone gave meaning to his life. His sentiments were shared by many *bhaktas*, and are fairly accurately if vigorously reflected in those of the seventeenth century maharashtrian saint Tukaram :

Cursed be that knowledge which makes me one with thee! I love to have precepts from thee and prohibitions:

I am thy servant, Thou art my Lord; let there still be between us such differences of high and low; let this wonderful truth be established, destroy it not. Water cannot taste itself, nor trees taste their own fruit; the worshipper must be separate, thus pleasure arises from distinction alone.

The diamond looks beautiful in its setting; gold, when it is fashioned into an ornament; if there were no difference, how could you contrast one with the other? After heat one enjoys shade; at the sight of her child, milk comes into the mother's breast: what delight is there when they meet each other!

Tūka says: 'This is a great thing gained, and so I view it; I am thoroughly resolved to desire liberation no more'.

Tukaram was, like Ramanuja, a Vaisnavite, a Varkari, or devotee of Krishna under the local 'name and form' of Vithoba, and regularly took part in the annual pilgrimage to his shrine at Pandharpur, which is still one of the greatest events of the religious year in

Maharashtra. However, the last line of this very *abhangā* shows that he recognized in his heart of hearts that ultimately all dualism has to be transcended.

### *Bhaktas versus Jnanis*

The tragedy of the holy war between *bhaktas* and *jnanis* – a war unhappily still being waged, though somewhat intermittently – is that it entirely misses the crucial point, namely that the upanisadic experience of non-duality marks a break-through into an entirely new level of awareness, and has basically nothing to do with the relative merits of different types of temperamental response. The hardening of the realization that there are three main temperamental ‘classes of men’ into a rigid classification of spiritual paths unfortunately led to the identification in many minds of the *jnani* with the intellectual. This confusion was all the more easy and pernicious because in actual fact the upper castes who had access to the scriptures were *eo ipso* the ‘educated’, who alone had access to learning. It must also be admitted that a person in whom reflective intelligence predominates may well be more naturally predisposed to the naked intuition of Being than his fellows. However, by no means every intellectual is a *jnani* in the upanisadic sense of that term; and many who are not intellectuals may be, for the knowledge in question here is a knowledge by affinity closely akin to the wisdom-knowledge of the biblical and christian tradition. It involves the whole person, and its predisposing conditions are self-discipline and the power to discriminate between the eternal and the non-eternal, accompanied by a hunger for ultimate Reality for its own sake, and a keen awareness of the hopeless inadequacy of all names and forms and conceptualizations. It is explicitly stated to be pure gift,<sup>6</sup> though the aspirant can prepare himself for the awakening by self-discipline and pondering of scripture, especially the ‘great sentences’, in which the ancients have tried to enshrine something of their own experience. When it dawns, this new awareness irradiates *all* levels of consciousness and affective states *from within*: ‘When it is known through all cognitions it is rightly known’: it neither destroys nor diminishes either the knowing subject or the extra-mental world, but simply lays bare their utter non-being

<sup>6</sup> ‘This Self cannot be won by instruction, nor by sacrifice (or intellect) nor by much learning; by him alone can he be won whom he chooses: to him this Self reveals his own (true) form’ (*Katha Up.* 2, 23).

in and of themselves, apart from the sustaining Presence of which they are at once for other levels of awareness the revelation and the veil. The metaphysically gifted man may experience this in a more 'stripped' form than others, but as Tūkaram realized, both *bhaktas* and *karmayogis* are inescapably faced with the fact that duality is not the last word. The late-medieval tamil *bhakta* Sadashiva sums up their dilemma in all its starkness: 'I can find no corner of my heart in which to take my stand to worship him, for in every "I" that I attempt to utter, his "I" is already glowing'.

The *bhakta* who is unwilling to accept this must by that very fact refuse to follow out to the end the demands of the inner logic of his *bhakti*, namely total surrender of autonomy to the Beloved: and the *jnani* who accepts it has in the very act of acceptance to live out a no less radical surrender.

#### *Hindu experience today*

I can personally attest that 'knowledge of Brahman, the vision of the Atman, true wisdom' is very much alive in India today. A few years ago I met in the Sri Ramanashram in South India an old man, the greatest tamil poet of his time, who was very frail and rarely spoke: but his door was open for anyone who wished to go and share his silence, and I certainly verified in that room the words of another holy man in that ashram who also 'teaches by silence' with the same effect. He said to me once: 'The silence of the man of understanding is not dead: it is a living silence. Everywhere is Bliss . . . the silence of the man of understanding, his awareness of that bliss, is a perpetual *tapas* (redemptive penance) that is of benefit to the whole world. It is the ego that spoils everything'. Nor shall I ever forget a conversation with another man of God, an old pandit who used to stay with us in our ecumenical ashram at Poona. We were discussing Sankara, the great hindu mystic and theologian of the ninth century. I said that on Sankara's own metaphysical principles, there seemed to be no necessity for the cessation of individual existence at the death of the 'realized' man, though on other grounds Sankara seems to teach this. He fully agreed. 'But', he said, shining eyes wide open at such incredible self-importance, 'Why should one *want* to continue in individual existence once one has realized that *He is all*?'

This last sentence, with its accent of deeply personal love, illustrates something I have noted time and again in my contacts with living Hinduism: those in whom the upanisadic awakening



seems to have dawned most intensely are fully alive at every level of their being: they can express themselves with perfect ease and naturalness both affectively and actively when the situation demands it. So Panditji himself agreed to come to us only if we agreed to do some regular work daily to help 'the poorest, the lowliest and the lost', as he said, using R. Tagore's phrase. He was in fact a convinced Gandhian, social worker and born educator. The Swami who spoke to me of silence is editor of the Ashram magazine, and was not ashamed to mutter '*He Mahadev!*' in heartfelt tones as he stood beside me in a thunderstorm, thereby invoking Lord Siva's protection.

On the other hand, my experience of popular Hinduism in Maharashtra and in the North has equally convinced me that there is even in its simplest and apparently most primitive manifestations a deeply contemplative undercurrent of awareness that all rites and symbols and images of gods are simply 'names and forms', ephemeral sacraments of a Presence that is beyond all name and form. This awareness shows itself in a thousand small but significant ways: in basic attitudes to life and death, in the *acceptance* of death with all that it entails for most people of loss of individuality for oneself and one's loved ones, in the total disregard of rigours of climate, lack of food, sleep and all the other basic amenities of life that characterizes the millions of pilgrims who throng the roads of India every year, intent on the Presence that awaits them at the end of their journey and yet goes with them on their way. It is seen too in the sense of that Presence in others, expressed in courteous and willing service, often at great personal inconvenience. The family may go hungry, but a guest must be fed: he is the Lord. The basic presuppositions of this Presence are not always consciously adverted to, or fully worked out, but they are latent in people of all classes and degrees of education and frequently surface quite unexpectedly. They are nourished through discourse and song in countless temples large and small, in public halls and private homes, and often in the open air. All-India Radio broadcasts devotional songs every morning from six to six-thirty. The whole of India still lives in the presence of God, in the sense that wherever one goes there are constant reminders of the Presence, and even those who no longer consider themselves religious constantly advert to it. This struck me very forcibly some years ago in Benares during the Indian Philosophical Congress. Most of my fellow lady-delegates were Hindus inclined to boast of their emancipation from the 'super-

stitutions' in evidence in the neighbourhood of the holy river. Yet that river and all it stands for in the hindu mind could not be kept out of the conversation, relatively distant though it was, and even though the references to it were usually made in jest.

*Is the hindu experience really unique?*

I said at the beginning of this paper that the distinguishing mark of hindu experience even for *bhaktas* and *karma yogis* is the sense of praising or worshipping from *within* the divine mystery. In its strongest formulations it is said that 'Siva worships Siva', or 'There is only and for ever God alone' in presence of God alone, and worship therefore fades out altogether. A Christian might well be tempted to ask whether this experience is not also to be found in Christianity: Augustine after all speaks of 'one Christ praising himself' in the liturgy, and John of the Cross of 'God giving himself to God' in those in whom 'sonship in the Son' has risen to the level of conscious awareness.

The answer seems to be that strictly speaking the experience of non-duality is not confined to Hinduism: it is a basic intuition open to the whole human race, because it expresses the deepest truth of our being, as one of the medieval christian mystics realized when he said: 'He is thy Being, but thou art not his Being'. There does however seem to be in the hindu make-up a basic psychological predisposition to this awareness of there being ultimately 'neither within nor without'. In its most radical form it may not be too common even in India, but it certainly seems to be more common here than in the West, and when one compares the two historical traditions this is undeniable.<sup>7</sup> There are moreover signs that many from the West are coming to discover this experience through contact with the hindu tradition. Perhaps we may therefore see here an instance of charismatic gift, more intensely, though not exclusively, given to India for the growth in the Spirit of the whole human race.

*The future*

What is the future of hindu religious experience? The prospects

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<sup>7</sup> It would be instructive to study in this connection the fate of those christian mystics who showed signs of this awareness (for example Meister Eckhart). Yet a strong case can be made out for claiming St Thomas Aquinas as a non-dualist. A whole paper could be written on this question, which is of vital importance today when the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular is still bedevilling our spirituality.

seem to me to be very good. In spite of the growing tendency to question or even abandon traditional practices and beliefs, there is even among intellectuals and students of all social classes a strong secret desire for an authentic spiritual experience, for the discovery of something within their own tradition that can bear the weight of living. One student group in particular had elected to produce a cultural programme for some English students, to communicate to them the essential message of Hinduism. (They were Hindus.) It turned out that they had not the faintest idea what this was, so they sat down, armed with the *Upanisads* and the *Gita*, to find out. For several days they read, argued, reflected and came for elucidation and encouragement. In the end they put on an excellent programme. They told me afterwards that this had been a revelation to them, that *this* was the thing we should be doing for them in college, namely helping them to find the Presence within themselves and then live by it! 'This is what we need – not talks on drugs and things like that. We know all that and anyway it is not the main problem for us'.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

It seems to me that the religious experience of Hinduism constitutes for Christians a tremendous challenge of which we are as yet scarcely even aware. Far too few Christians have come close enough to it to feel its overwhelming impact on their own lives by allowing it to awaken them to the reality of their divine sonship in the Son.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that the Hindu experience needs no paschal death: there is much in Hinduism that cries out for the healing and purifying touch of the Spirit. But this mystery is already at work there: we should perhaps meditate on the significance of the fact that both *Bhakta* and *jnani* recognize that they have to face a death-experience to attain the supreme end of human existence, the *bhakta* by total surrender of all his fears and weakness, the *jnani* by willingly accepting the eclipse of his own individual self-awareness (the fact that this is restored to him makes no difference to the reality of his acceptance). Ramana Maharishi, the

<sup>8</sup> They are instinctively at home with the very upanisadic idea that dichotomy between the sacred and the secular must go, to be replaced by the realization that everything is *holy* – and this without prejudice to the lawful autonomy of the secular in its own sphere.

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of its amazing power to do this is to be found in the life and writings of Dom Henri Le Saux (Abhisiktananda): see *Saccidananda: A Christian approach to the Advaitic Experience* (Delhi, 1974).

greatest *jnani* of modern times, actually underwent a kind of dramatization of death at the moment of his initial awakening at the age of seventeen. His own account of that experience, taken in conjunction with two passages from the christian scriptures, seems to provide a fitting conclusion for this paper and a fruitful starting-point for a christian reflection on the mystery of Christ in the Hindu context:<sup>10</sup>

I was sitting alone in a room in my uncle's house when a sudden violent fear of death overtook me . . . The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards, and I said to myself . . . Now death has come, what does it actually mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies! And I at once dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out stiff as though *rigor mortis* had set in, and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, so that neither the word 'I' nor any other word could be uttered. 'Well', I said to myself, 'this body is dead . . . But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert, but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the "I" within me, apart from it. So that I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies, but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means that I am the deathless Spirit'. All this was not dull thought: it flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought-process. I was something very real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with my body was centred on that. From that moment onwards the I or Self focussed all attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Absorption in the Self continued from that time on. Fear of death had vanished once and for all. Other thoughts might come and go like the various notes of music, but the 'I' continued like the fundamental *sruti* note that underlies and blends with all the other notes. Whether the body was engaged in talking, reading or anything else, I was still centred on 'I'.

'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2, 20).

'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10, 30).

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<sup>10</sup> In juxtaposing these texts it is not my intention to pass judgment on the vexed question of the relation between christian mystical experience and mystical experience beyond the frontiers of the visible Church. All I know is that the Spirit is definitely at work beyond those frontiers, giving to every man, in secret ways known only to God, the possibility of being associated with the Paschal Mystery of the Son (cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Perhaps it is time we took this out of the document and into our lives.