

A LITTLE KNOWN CHAPTER IN MYSTIC EXPERIENCE OF THE ĀḶVĀRS

A close study of the mystic life has always entailed revision of some at least of the well-known principles of our logical and philosophical thought. Though paradoxically enough the mystic life is said to lead to the personal experience of the Universal nature of oneself which is impersonal, it is however at its higher altitudes that this doubt poise of the Supreme Being or Person or Principle becomes evident.

In this brief paper written to honour Dr. S.K.Belvalkar on his seventy-fifth birthday I wish to study the trends of mystic experience of one of the greatest mystics of South India.

Fracies Thompson in his Hound of Heaven represents the episode of the soul running away from God for fear that God wants to take away every thing the soul possesses for Himself, and in the process loses everything, till finally the soul is overtaken by God and told that God was not chasing the soul to take everything away from it but to give everything to it. The episode is deeply mystically revealing the earnestness of God's love for man. It also reveals that the soul has an inherent capacity to misinterpret God's approaches to man.

Saint Śaṭhakopa, otherwise known as NammāḶvār, describes an experience of his own. When the soul in its extremis has performed the overt act of dedicating itself to the Divine so that all may know¹, the approach of the Divine Lord is sensed and felt and subtly experienced. But the soul's finiteness, which till now did not occupy any consideration or weight in its asking the Infinite to possess it, begins to disturb the soul. How can man dare to love the Infinite, give up itself to it or ever dream of being of it? Indeed whilst this metaphysical impossibility is clear, the soul is aware of another supreme concern for God's perfection and infinity growing within it which is the quality of love for God. 'Am I', says that ĀḶvār, fit to be taken up by God, wedded to God, be related in any sense with God?

Man's endeavour to attain the Infinite as lover is ordinarily considered to be an impossible dream; it has the same possibility as the Utopia of political and mystical dreamers—a dream which the ĀḶvār also had fervently dreamt. Against the advice of all, the mystic yearns for the Divine Lord but at the very moment of its attainment it shrinks from that culmination not out of fear for its own existence and independence but for God's. "Will not God's *nirmalatva*, (freedom from all taint), get affected by His contact with the soul that is infected with all mala? This is a very important problem whose solution was arrived at by some Vedāntins by denying all relationship with the

¹ My article entitled "EROS" : J.S.V.O Institute Vol.V. pp. 1-16 & Vol. VI pp 1-10.

soul or its qualities, but some others have maintained that God's infinite nature is such that not only does it transcend all the *heya* or lower *guṇās* (*nirguṇā*), but has positive qualities of supreme excellence, the like of which the human soul or nature does not know. The Ubhayaliṅga or twofold excellence of God is said to get over imperfection due to God's relationship with the world.

The ĀṬvār does not think obviously from this metaphysical point of view. He finds that the Divine approaches the individual soul, and even as the soul moves away or shrinks from Him due to its recognition of its own impurity, even as the erstwhile *pañcamās* were doing, the Divine by physical transformation of the ĀṬvār reveals that He has a peculiar third power not contained in the Ubhayaliṅga conception of God's qualities and nature, the power of transformation or transfiguration of the psychophysical nature. The ĀṬvār's hymns in the *Tiruvāymoḷi* fifth Hundred (5th ten ff) show how the Divine has come close to the soul and has grasped and embraced the soul and has made it its own. Those who saw the condition of the ĀṬvār could not fail to notice the process-subtle, spiritual and fundamental, by which the finite was absorbed into the Infinite freely and to yield supreme ecstasy. Everything was seen as the grace and glory of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Though the ĀṬvār's consciousness of his singleness persists, the Divine comes nearer and nearer almost telling it that the ĀṬvār need not fear that God's nature would be affected. The form of the Lord looms fully before the ĀṬvār all the time, till the fear of polluting the Divine passes away. Thus there is nothing impossible to the Divine, if the Divine has chosen to accept the soul, with all its metaphysical, physical and physical and karmic differences and imperfections and sins, all get transformed by the Divine touch. The psychology underlying this experience is unique even for the mystics, for it reveals the soul's concern for God's welfare. Southern ĀṬvārs are unique in this respect; they are concerned about God's welfare for on that depends all the world's welfare. Corruptibility, it is said, is the halfbrother of power or as Lord Acton put it—power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is God's *sauśīlya* that gives the cue to the incorruptibility and love soul for the welfare of the Divine Lord. Such an experience however must be traced to the relationship which the wife has to the husband.

The second unique feature of the ĀṬvār's experience, which has not been so much noticed as it ought to have been, is the possibility of the realization of God's world here and now. This is preceded by the experience of the higher path or the lighted path (*Arcirādi mārga*), but there are obviously differences between the Vedic version and the Pāñcrātra version given in the Mahābhārata (see *Tiruvāymoḷi* Xth Hundred, ninth dēcaḍ). The usual view is that the soul is given the vision of its great future Destiny. But it almost appears that the soul is not merely witnessing in a vision, but actually being taken along to the Highest. On the path it sees the glory of the decorations made by all, the path shown by the Munis, the way lighted by the gods and the divine rapturous music, and leading the way to the inner halls of the Divine

Lord of all gods, eternal and the souls of the earth and nature. The celestial world of purity rings with the chants of the Hymns of the Eternal Veda in all its fullness. Finally comes the Vision of the Lord of all in the gem-decked Hall of Eternity which throws all into raptures of Delight. For more the ĀḶvār declares, “The servants of Heavenly abode were delighted that Heaven was indeed accessible to morals of the Earth” (X.9.9). The route is thus for the preparation of the soul to arrive at the Vaikuṅṭha—the *paramapada*. The description is similar, to a considerable extent, to the vision of Nārada in the Svetadvīpa.

The soul has not only the intimations of immortality and attainment, but it also actually experiences the Transcendental Godhead’s entry into it, for that is the nature of the descent for the purpose of transformation of the earthly consciousness itself. Only he, through reminiscence, can bring back the sense of the infinite possibility and power of transcendence and transformation; not others who have just wild and unrestrained imaginations and hopes of a socialistic world or free brave world. The meaning of descent of the higher free souls, *muktas*, for the release of the less fortunate and bound souls, in order to guide, to lead, to save and to redeem them, lies precisely in the trenchant formula, the blind shall not lead the blind, or else the less blind will lead the more blind. The versions of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṃsa about some of his most intimate and close disciples regarding their past might throw some light on this. The fully illumined souls, dedicated to the Divine alone, plunge into the world at the behest of God to save men, to prepare the coming of the Divine Kingdom here and in this material world itself. It is this that the ĀḶvār again reiterates when he exclaims that pure and eternal souls have come to the world in their plenty singing the songs of God and rapturously proclaiming the presence of God here so as to dissipate the darkness that has overtaken the world during the Kali. (X. 2).

The names of God resound everywhere. Every body is worshipping God or is engaged in serving God. The temples of God are thronged with souls that, beholding the Lord, change their lives and seek to behold the beauty of God. Behold the destruction of Kali—the spirit of darkness, atheism, and unbelief, the passing away of sin and the reign of immortal life that is liberated from the threat of Death. He speaks about it all as actually happening before his very eyes. What is not possible to God and God-men?

That the mystic seer has not given us a blue print of the world as transformed by the Divine Force through the myriad god-men only shews that the mystic is yet a hymnist worshipper of the grace of God.

The spiritual anticipates and reveals the ‘Idea’ as already a ‘fact’- an inevitable destiny of the world; the intellect secures the possibility of the human factors which go into the making of the world on the divine plan or vision, if it is blessed with the same; or else it muddles through ideals which are counterfeits or simulacrums of the

Vision, weary and broken and despairing. In the mystic divine knowledge, gnosis chases away the ignorance and death and diseases and disruptions; in the intellect ignorance and death trail the way of ascent towards the ideals.

It is precisely because of this the ĀḶvār has represented his ascent to the Divine Nature and Mansions as several times interrupted by the psychical and the physical factors which are unable to bear the strains of spiritual consciousness.

The Tiruvāymoḷi (the auspicious spiritual outpourings of Saint Śaṭhakopa) reveals some of the most important episodes of the mystic experience and clearly anticipates the modern aspiration towards the Supramental life, whilst it confirms some of the luminous statements of the master-mystic Socrates in the *Phoedo* in regard to the transcendental journey which is described so chastely and elegantly as the *āptavacana* in the matter, not his personal experience. No one has, except the Vedic Ṛṣi, stated the path of our transcendent Ascent or the Descent for *kaiñkarya* as the ĀḶvār; therefore it is not strange that it is stated that Saint Śaṭhakopa translated the Vedas into the beautiful Tamil language.

I must mention in this connection that I owe it as a matter of great inspiration and encouragement that Dr. S.K.Belvalkar and Rao Bahadur K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar had personally given to me in 1940 to pursue the researches into the South Indian Mysticism, and it is a result of that counsel and command that I was enabled to pursue that study. It is appropriate that I should write on that topic dear to Dr. S.K. Belvalkar for this Felicitation Volume.