

MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM
OF INDIA

by
KSHITIMOHAN SEN

With, a Foreword by
EABINDRANATH TAGOEE

Authorized Translation
from the, Bengali

by
MANOMOHAN GHOSH

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To
ALL THOSE

Who have felt the Supreme Spirit.

in rare moments of self-realization

and

Who seek life's fulfilment in a love

that transcends limitations of creeds,
customs and of race,

I humbly dedicate this effort of mine.

K. s.

Listen, () brother man,

The Truth of Man is the highest of truths,

There is no other truth above it.

Chandidas

FOREWORD

Text books of Indian History, which we read, deal mostly with its external aspect. And in such a history foreigners play the most important part. They have fought battles, conquered the country and ruled it. We have accepted this pressure from the outside, though at times efforts were made to shake it off and have met with occasional success. But on the whole this aspect of India's history reveals to our eyes, in its successive chapters, the failures of her people.

But it will have to be admitted that the Indian sadhana does not identify itself with politics. True it is that great kings and emperors arose in our country; but their greatness has been quite their own. This sort of greatness owes nothing to the people who neither create it or participate in it with any pleasure. It developed along with one's individual power and dwindled with the same.

But India has a sadhana of her own and it belongs to her innermost heart. Throughout all her political vicissitudes its stream has

flowed on. A wonderful feature of this has been that it does not glide along any embankment of scriptural sanctions, and the influence of scholasticism on it, if any, is very small. In fact, this sddhana has mostly been unscriptural and not controlled by social laws of any kind. Its spring is within the innermost heart of the people whence it has gushed forth in its spontaneity and broken through the barriers of rules, prescriptive as well as proscriptive.

Most of the persons from whose heart this spring has come forth belong to the masses and whatever they have realised and expressed was 'not by means of intellect or much learning of the sacred lore' (na medhayd na bahun" srutena).

If we could visualise the historical development of this sddhana we should discover where the living history of India exists. Then we might know after what ideal India has moved on from one period of her history to another, and how far she has realised that ideal. The long course, which the stream of India's cherished ideal has followed through the ages, has been traced in these lectures in all its major and minor branches by my esteemed colleague and friend, Professor Kshitimohan

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Sen. We have seen how deeply true is this stream and how essentially it is India's own. The natural genius for sddhand which is latent in the Indian people has been discovered in these lectures by Prof. Sen. The line of development, which is expression has taken amidst different internal and external obstacles, has been sketched in this work. We still expect to see at some

future date a detailed history of its progressive movement. Unless we have this history, the true picture of India will remain only partially known to her children and such a partial knowledge might be very erroneous.

Santiniktar\
27th Dumber, 1929. RABINDRANATH TACORE

PREFACE

That there may come at any time an invitation from any learned society for delivering a lecture on the history of spiritual quests of the Mediaeval India never occurred to me before. It is nearly thirty-five years ago that in my young days I came to know in Benares sddhus and santas of various sects. It was a matter of happy accident thait I was born in Benares which was a favourite haunt of them all. Possibly due to this fact I could get some opportunities in this field. So charmingly deep and liberal were the sddhand and the sayings of those old sddhus, that I felt an. intoxicating attraction for them all even at a very tender age. During my student life too I passed most of my time in studying these sayings. Luckily enough I secured then, the favour of some good guides in this field, the like of whom it is very hard to meet now-a-days. Persons of this type are growing less in number every day. It was only the other day that Baba Mohan-das the old sadhu of Lakhan-ka village in Bhawnagar (Kathiawar)

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passed away in Santa Cruz, Bombay. He had more than three thousand bhajans in his memory. In the first part of the selection from

the sayings of Kabir edited by me I have referred to some such sadhus. Many, however, were the able sddhakas who left this world without attaining any celebrity among scholars.

There are collections of many sayings of sddhakas stored up in manuscripts preserved by members of different sects and their maths in different parts of India. In many of the maths the custodians of these treasures preserve them with the zeal of the yaksa of the Indian folk-lore and no one can see them even at the cost of his life. The same is the condition in the libraries of many ruling chiefs of Rajputana. It is not without a bitter experience that one is inclined to make a complaint of this kind against these institutions.

Sddhakas of the Indian Mediaeval age were mostly from the lower strata of the society, but sects which their teachings gave rise to, have tried afterwards in various ways to pass them as men of the higher castes. Thus many sayings of such sddhakas had either to be left out or distorted.

An enquiry into the family history of

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Kabir and Dadu will make this process very clear. The fact that Kabir was the son of a Mahomedan weaver has been sought to be obliterated by many absurd stories. But historical criticism has mercilessly exposed such frauds. It cannot now be doubted that Kabir was born in a Jola family. And as for his initiation it was not at all a singular affair, for Kamananda had many such disciples : arid moreover many sddhakas, even after Ramnanda departed from this life, were influenced

by his doctrines and hence declared themselves to be disciples of the master. We have referred to these things in the body of this work. Some among the followers of Dadu try to smother the truth about his birth by saying that he was the son of a Nagar Brahman. There are however some who say that Dadu, being the Niranfan (God) himself, had no birth in the wordly sense. But truth cannot be suppressed. The late Pandit Sudhakar Dvivedl was of opinion that Dadu was born in a family of leather-workers who manufactured mote or leathern water-bags for drawing water from wells. This however is a partial truth. It has now been discovered that Dadu was born in the family of cotton-carders. The sources of our information have been the

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Jivanparchayi by Jan-gopal, the PantJia-prakhyd by Dasji and the writings of Tejanand. In the absence of support from any other scholar I would have hesitated to make any statement on this point. But Rai Saheb Chandrika Prasad Tripathi who has equal regard for Dadu's doctrine and historical truth, has very clearly written about this. The keepers of those maths, which furnished him with documents in the shape of old manuscripts, have now begun to burn in their anger those old and rare works.

Authentic information in this line can however be had from those sddhus who have turned to the spiritual life due to an inherent love for it and have not allowed themselves to be held by the bondage of sects.

The sectarian sddhus do not care to recognize these deeply spiritual souls who are outside any sect. But any one who is willing to

have really genuine and old things and sayings full of deep meaning, will have to seek their help.

It should be mentioned here that in the sectarian collections we very often miss the really deep and liberal sayings of Mediaeval sddhakas, which are available only from the sddhus who do not belong to any sect.

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With the change of time and circumstances the number of such sddhus is gradually, growing less and less. They are not like the modern sddhus who but for some noble exceptions are as good as professionals, or propagandists. Hence in spite of various kinds of 'Sannyasis' that the modern spirit is calling into existence, the successions of the old-type sddhus are daily coming to an end. It may happen that after a time they will exist only in people's memory and even that much may not remain; for people in general are so very ignorant of them.

But, for writing a true history of the religious and spiritual efforts of Mediaeval India we have no materials other than those which have been enshrined in the sayings and doctrines the sddhus of the period and historical anecdotes about them.

The most important thing about India has been her religious and spiritual life. That she has made an effort to bring about a synthesis in the midst of diversities of various kinds has been the most prominent aspect of her history. From period to period this effort has been continued through successive generations of her great sddhakas, and has concerned itself with her one problem. Political activities have never

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occupied a very important position in Indian history. Hence to understand the secret Soul of India we cannot do without collecting and studying the sayings and doctrines of various sddlius that have been preserved by their followers or the keepers of many sectarian matlis.

Had this been the situation in any progressive country of the West we might have seen that a number of young men would undergo great hardship in order to have access to* these sources, and various institutions of the land would be reverently furthering researches in this line. But to expect similar activities in the present condition of our country would be hoping against hope.

From my coming to Sant mike tan in 1908 I have been continually spending my holidays, vacations and other leisure hours in the study and investigation of the materials mentioned above. For a long time I kept everything to< myself. But afterwards Rabindranath Tagore chanced to know of my activities and urged me again and again to publish the result of my studies.

But I felt a shyness over the proposal and thought that no publisher would be forthcoming to undertake the risk of publishing what to

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the best of my knowledge had yet no market. Authorities of the Indian Press, Allahabad however came forward to undertake publica-

tion, and as a result of the Poet's pressure I had to publish four small volumes, which included only a selection from the most important of Kablr's sayings, while for an adequate representation of this sddhakas greatness no less than ten such volumes were necessary. We have come to know as many as two hundred such sddhakas of Mediaeval India, whose sayings, it may be hoped, will render assistance to humanity in its march to spiritual as well as moral and social progress. This field is indeed vast, but the workers are few and those who have a genuine interest in such things are fewer still.

During rny studies and investigation of the subject I have received great encouragement and assistance from Tagore. At the outset of this Preface I have mentioned that, it never occurred to me that these studies would sver find favour in learned circles. I began work by utilising my leisure hours only. But Tagore very generously gave recognition to the subject in his Visvabharati and thus enabled me to devote my whole time to it. I am sorry to say (hat young men who are to build up our*

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future are still almost absent from the field. The little interest which some of them evince in this line can at best be called a condescension to the subject for the sake of writing out a /thesis meant for some higher degree. But we can scarcely hope to obtain a high quality of work from such people.

The late Sir Ashutosh Mookerji who as a great scholar and educator, had for his life's supreme mission the building up of a true University once expressed a desire to have a long talk with me on this subject. And I did

actually meet him and he discussed in various ways whether any scheme for the furtherance -of such studies could be made. He had in his mind plans for doing many things but his very sad and untimely death put a stop to everything.

The invitation which came to me last year from the University of Calcutta to deliver the Adhar Mookerjee Lectures for the year 1929 was a surprise for me. I never expected, as I have said before, that any learned society would pay attention to the ideas and ideals of those illiterate sddhakas. I do not know who was instrumental in causing such a thing to -'happen. Hence my cordial thanks go to the ^entire executive authority of the University

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of Calcutta. My subject is vast and it is difficult to do justice to it in a lecture or two. But we may hope that before our own power of work will gradually become less and less the young promising students of our country will gradually take the responsibility of this work upon their own shoulders.

Those who assume this responsibility will not go unrewarded. Any one taking to this line will see that there cannot be any experiment in the field of religious and spiritual endeavours that has not been carried out by one or other of the sadhakas of the Mediaeval India. Being quite innocent of any scriptural knowledge these sadhakas never trod on the beaten track; and their genius and vision were, ever free. Sects conforming to some kind of scriptures or other blindly followed the tradition while each one of these sadhakas used his yision to find out a new way of his own. Following these ways we shall meet with instances

of boldness which have been evinced in handling the good and the evil in the human mind. Attempts from various sides >to satisfy the spiritual hankering will also be seen. It is a pity that such a plenty of materials for discussing human culture has to be lying unexplored. We remember in

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this connexion the Bengali bhakta Ram-prasad who said :

"O mind, you do not know agriculture. Without any cultivation lies this field of human existence which properly tilled might have led to the production of a golden harvest."

We who are fettered by our tradition and obsessed by our written literature do not care to see what vast wealth is passing away before our very eyes. Even now^ if we make great efforts we may be able to save a small portion of it. Our information would cover barely; one-sixteenth of whatever once existed. The remaining portion has already perished and the extant portion will possibly vanish rapidly. One studying them will see how the sayings of these unlettered sddhakas are often more deep and sublime than written scriptures. The authors are mostly illiterate and their sddhana includes developing love among the different schools of sddhana and synthesis of them all. This synthesis in spite of all its external difficulties is the true ideal of Indian sddhana.

The opportunity which I have been allowed has been utilised in barely giving a glimpse of that sddhana. It has been merely an out-

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line. It is my desire that on some future occasion I shall try to give a fuller history of the age in which such a sddhand prevailed. By a mere skeleton of it we cannot give any adequate idea. Without blood and flesh upon it, its living forms become difficult to comprehend. Some account of the achievements of the sddhakas and their sayings are needed for visualizing a correct picture of that age.

Many workers are needed for this vast field of researches, and hence I invite the young scholars of our country to this work. My heartfelt thanks go to the authorities of the .University who gave me this opportunity of .saying these few words and I am also to remember here again the great educator, late Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee.

My thanks are also to my young friend Mr Manomohan Ghosh who very kindly helped me in the correction of proofs and other matters. To all others who were of help to me in one way or other I express my gratefulness.

Last but not the least I am to acknowledge my deep debt of gratitude to Rabindranath Tagore who possesses a great reverence for the sddhakas of Mediaeval India as well as a rare power of appreciation and enjoyment of

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their deep and sublime sayings. The enthusiasm and reverence which Tagore cherishes for them have been of great help to me while working on these sayings. I am glad that his

blessings in the shape of a Foreword from his-
pen have adorned these pages.

Santiniketan, -- ~

T la KSHITIMOHAN SEN

January, 1930.

PREFACE TO THE TRANSLATION

In March 1929 I delivered The Adhar Lectures in the Calcutta University. In the limited space of those Lectures I had to review the broad outlines of the history of the spiritual quest of medieval India, to which fuB justice could only be done in a more elaborately treat- ed work. However, as I have studied facts from a new angle of vision, even this short sketch may have some value for the student of Indian thought and culture. This is my excuse for placing before public the English version of these Lectures, delivered originally in Bengali.

The English title of this work, Medieval Mysticism of India, will probably require some explanation, for the word 'medieval' naturally calls up to our mind a host of ideas associated with the European Middle Ages and one may well surmise some similarity between the Christian mysticism of those ages and the mysticism of Medieval India. But nothing can be further from the fact.

The chief characteristic of the typical Indian mystics was that they did not submit to the control of any church

(i.e. sectarian organization) or scriptures (sdstras).
This
freedom in the matter of spiritual culture which was
well-
nigh non-existent in medieval Europe gave Indian mystic
experiences a richness and variety which we shall look
for
in vain elsewhere.

Rich though it was from its early (Upanisadic) period,
Indian mysticism became doubly so when Islam came to
be a power in India. Impact of this new and powerful
faith released the latent forces of India's religious
life; and
it was by her mystics that a synthesis was sought to be
brought about between the conflicting elements of the
two.
Those who achieved and guided this synthesis were

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persons who, due to their birth in the so-called lower
classes of society, were free from the bondage of
scriptures
or of any institutional religion. Another very
important
fact about them was that they had no ascetic aversion
to
life and its responsibilities and, in this respect too,
they
stand in sharp contrast to the Christian mystics of
Europe.
These facts explain the vigorous and marvellous
develop-
ment of mysticism in medieval India.

My thanks are due to the Calcutta University for
giving me permission to publish these Lectures in an
English translation. And for actually translating them
I
am to thank very warmly my young friend Mr. Manomohan
Ghosh who made every effort to make this translation a

readable one. To my esteemed friend Mr. C. F. Andrews too I am to express my sincere thanks for having very kindly gone through the entire translation in manuscript.

One aspect of the translation should be mentioned here. A number of Indian terms which, I think, have no exact English equivalents, have been given in transliteration and these have been defined in alphabetical order in the beginning of the book. As regards the transliteration of Indian words I have to some extent deviated from the accepted standard. This modification has been made for the convenience of the general reader.

In the Appendices I have reprinted four of my own articles published in the Visvabharati Quarterly. They, it is hoped, will to some extent supplement the reader's knowledge of India's Medieval mysticism presented in the Lectures in broad outlines.

KSHITIMOHAN SEN
Santiniketan,

50th December 1935.

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