

## IS INDIAN PHILOSOPHY MYSTICAL?\*

LAXMIKANTA PADHI

The words ‘mysticism’, ‘mystical’ are often used as terms of mere criticism, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast, sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic. Some thinkers interpret that a “mystic” is a person who believes in thought-transference, or spirit-return. The mystic is a person who has attained the union with Reality in greater or less degree or who aims at and believes in such attainment. A person who aspires after the mystical life must have a persistent and penetrating intellect; he must also have a powerful philosophic imagination. Not all mystics need to be philosophers, not all mystics need to be poets, not all mystics need to be Activists, not all mystics lead a life of emotion; but wherever true mysticism is one of these faculties must predominate. No mystical experience is possible unless we have a plenitude of finer emotions all turned to the experience of God. A skeptic is not necessarily a mystic, at least not so initially. One may say that a mystic cannot always be a thoroughgoing skeptic.

Anthony Flew defines mysticism as “direct or unmediated experience of the divine, in which the soul momentarily approaches union with God.”<sup>1</sup> The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy states that mysticism is the “Belief in union with the divine nature by means of... the power of spiritual access to ultimate reality, or to the domains of knowledge closed off to ordinary thought.” Religious scholar Ninian Smart proposes that mysticism is “those inner visions and practices which are contemplative.”<sup>2</sup> The problem with this is that although contemplation may characterize mystical practice and tradition, the essentially mystical experience is itself characterized by a quietude or peace contrary to contemplation, of the essence Robert Forman refer to (with minimal stipulation) as the “pure consciousness experience.” In Smart’s characterization, we find a constructivist bias. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* defines: “A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual unitive experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of

---

\* Earlier version of this contribution was presented in the National Seminar entitled: *Debating Religiosity: Logic, Mysticism and Religious Language* in the Department of Philosophy, Assam University, Silchar, in March, 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Flew, Anthony, 1979, “A Dictionary of Philosophy,” New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Smart, Ninian. “Understanding Mystical Experience,” pp. 12, in Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 1978.

affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of senseperception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.”

More specifically, the English philosopher Walter Stace (1886-1967) distinguished two universal mystical states found “in all cultures, religions, periods, and social conditions.” These two are the extrovertive and introvertive paths to “the unitative experience of the One.” While the former achieves unity by going out through multiplicity looking “outward through the senses”, the introvertive, ‘monistic’ experience “looks inward into the mind,” to achieve “pure consciousness” devoid of phenomenal content. Both achieve ‘Oneness’ as “sacred objectivity.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Basic Characteristics of Mysticism:**

If we go through Indian civilization, we find that the Vedic seers always raised a question: which God is really there? To whom we must offer oblation? This speculation shows that skepticism is as old as the birth of civilization. And the relation between religion and mysticism is explicitly concerned with the separation between mysticism and religion, and it is believed that mysticism is something other than religion and religion is something apart from mysticism. Based on this attitude, there were mystical attitudes before divine religions in Indian culture.

Recently, academic research on mysticism has entrenched in an ideological clash between the interpretation of two schools of mysticism: perennialism (essentialism, or decontextualism), on the one hand, and anti-perennialism (constructivism, intentionalism, or contextualism), on the other hand. The former view upholds the universality of the mystical experience, while the latter view takes it to be - like any other human experience, they say - completely conditional. The point here is that the two schools of interpretation commit the disjunctive fallacy, or the fallacy of exclusive alternatives which is not covered in this contribution.

---

<sup>3</sup>‘Objectivity’ here means not merely the objectivity that the ordinary sensorial-phenomenal objective world objects have, but in contrast, more like the objects of universal truth of mathematics and logic, verities eternally true in all possible universes. This notion is perhaps best phrased “pure objectivity,” what one would expect the transcendental ultimate reality to consist of. It is formless objectivity. It is an ideal state, which is not to say it isn’t also real, even immanent in material reality. Later, I will show how such a notion completes my proposed solution in a metaphysics similar to the ‘Objective Idealism’ of Peirce and ‘Organic Realism’ of Whitehead.

If we analyze the basic features of mysticism, we can find that mysticism is practical, not theoretical. Mysticism is an entirely spiritual activity. The business and method of mysticism is love and love is: a) the active, connotative, expression of one's will and desire for the *Absolute*. b) one's innate tendency to that *Absolute*, one's spiritual weight. Mysticism entails a definite psychological experience. In what follows we will discuss the four marks of mysticism.

**a. Ineffability:**

In a narrow sense, ineffability means inability to capture the experience in ordinary language. To say that the experience is ineffable makes a two-fold claim: a. that it is in some sense beyond expression, that it is indescribable or unspeakable, b. that expression is in some sense forbidden, that any attempt to do so would be unfaithful or untrue to the experience. There are some thinkers who regard discussion of such an experience as not only unwise, but also a taboo. And these are the things that one should not speak. One more factor for ineffability is the gap between a mystic and the other ordinary man. Linguistic communication is nothing but a transaction between two parties i.e. the speaker and the hearer. In the case of a mystic and an ordinary person, there is a qualitative difference in their understanding for the non-mystic, who is in the ordinary level, cannot understand the intentions of a mystic. But mystic experience does not always remain ineffable. Mystics are human beings sharing human forms of life. When we have a glance at the mystic literature, we find that mystics mostly try to use general terms on the one-hand, and figurative speech on the other in order to communicate to the non-mystics. It is also not true that mystic experience cannot be communicated at all except by one's own experience. A non-mystic can understand something about the mystic object and mystic experience.

**b. Noetic quality:**

Mystical experiences reveal an otherwise hidden or inaccessible knowledge. To experience mystical states means to have a state of knowledge. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance. And as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority. Provide insights into unobtainable truths.

**c. Transiency:**

Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day. Often, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory. But when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance.

**d. Passivity:**

When the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. This latter peculiarity connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance. When these latter conditions are well pronounced, however, there may be no recollection whatever of the phenomenon, and it may have no significance for the subject's usual inner life, to which, as it were, it makes a mere interruption.

**Mysticism and Matilal:**

In the history of philosophy, we find that very often the mystic experiences are rejected on the ground that they are subjective experiences. B. K. Matilal claims that philosophy in classical India was often a genuine intellectual effort but not a 'perfumed nonsense'. Matilal opines:

It is clear that the *Nyaya-Vaishesika* thesis is a good answer to mysticism and the ineffability doctrine. It should also remove the Western misunderstanding that Indian philosophy is invariably mystical. The business of most classic Indian philosophers was solid and down-to-earth philosophic argumentation, not the creation of mystical illusion or poetic descriptions of mystical experiences. (*Journal of Indian Philosophy* 3 (1975) 25:3-258.)

Bertrand Russell distinguished two impulses in the history of philosophy i.e. the mystical impulse and the logical one. Matilal shows that one can not say that Indian philosophy is an outburst of the mystical impulse. Because, in Indian philosophy mysticism is the subject of argument. And what is argument is the expression of a logical inclination? The interpretations of Indian philosophy as mystical urge rely upon the psychopathology of the Indian mind are challenged by

Matilal. He says: ‘to understand the development of philosophy in India, one must study the arguments proper’. He also attacks mysticism as a doctrine as mysticism has been loosely used for a variety of views. The salient feature of these views is that the seers envision an integrated picture of the cosmos and promote a special type of human experience that is at once unitive and non-discursive, at once self-fulfilling and self-effacing’. In this context, William James said: ‘this experience has a “noetic” quality, the experiencer becoming directly aware of the ultimacy of the experience’. (William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; New York)

Let us try to highlight Matilal’s well argued thesis with some questions: let us grant that Indian Philosophy is not mystically inclined. Why then is it that in India mysticism is the repeated theme of the argument? If Reality is not Ineffable, why does mysticism crop up in different independent intellectual traditions? To respond these questions Matilal’s rationalism considers that: Mysticism undoubtedly figures prominently in Indian disputations, and in traditions. No other intellectual tradition revolves so closely around mysticism. Indian philosophy did not just affirm ineffability, but argued about it quite in a right way. But why is it consistently and perennially about the mystical? The answer is: Mysticism as a doctrine is an important theme in Indian philosophy, because it plays a very special role against the unique Vedic background of Indian philosophy. However, for Matilal, mysticism in India was not the outburst of the ‘mystical impulse’ at all. We can argue that mysticism was originally an expression of the most extreme kind of ‘logical impulse’. Say for example, the doctrine of ineffability was a revolutionary attempt to combat obscurantism and jargon. Ineffability was meant to encourage one to think for oneself, to challenge authority. This is the opposite of mystical impulse.

But, ineffability had also a logical error. It was forced by its own logic into a new kind of jargon which is exposed by Matilal. Because of their reverence for the *Vedas*, some Indian philosophers felt the need to preserve those as authentically as possible. In the absence of Vedic writing, the problem of preserving an authentic verbal record found a unique solution in India. It was achieved by the division of labour of a special kind, particularly by the *Purohitas* (Brahmins). The priests or Brahmins were charged with the task of memorizing the works, without interpreting them. Interpretation was left to others. Hence, there was no way a priest could

contaminate the verse to suit his philosophy, because his task is not to expound wisdom but merely to know the words and to recite them by heart in right/holy occasion.

Today the greatest Sanskrit scholars to some extent are not those with a great depth of understanding, but those who can recite them flawlessly and effortlessly if necessary. This method of preserving the verbal record was astonishingly successful only at a cost. And the cost was that though the verses were remained, the original interpretations of the words were gradually lost. Yet people remained in awe of the words. The preservation of the *Vedas* was the Sanskrit Grammar. This grammar of Panini is uniquely suited to the study of the Sanskrit language, with a minimum of interpretation. It is a characteristic of the grammar that it is *synthetic*. It shows how to synthesize elements into longer fragments. It is also *phonetic*, in the sense that it deals primarily with sentences and sounds, rather than with meanings and interpretations, though the latter cannot be entirely avoided. Indian grammar treats language as phonetically as possible. By 'phonetic' it is meant to contrast with Aristotelian grammar which ruled in the West until the discovery of Paninian grammar in nineteenth century. Sanskrit grammar deals with particles of words as sounds, where the Greek approach was judgement-oriented.

In 700 B.C. Indian life came to be dominated by the unmeaning word and it was remained, for the most part and time. Even a Hindu wedding in modern society is a matter of ritual, and recitation of the *mantras*. The priest does not understand it. And the audience will carry on with what they are doing while the chanting of mantras goes on. Thus, we can say that in all Hindu ceremonies, there is only one God, and that is the God of the pure phoneme, the unmeaning sound. This entire phonetic religion finds expression in the doctrine that the whole universe is contained in the word *AUM*, a sound. Everything is in this one word. Not in its meaning, but in the *sound*. This is the obscurantism which the doctrine of ineffability set out to destroy. Ineffability asserts that the most important things are not in words, not even in Vedic words. So when we hear the words, we do think for ourself. The words need us to think and interpret them.

The doctrine of ineffability was originally an expression of the logical impulse, of rationalism, the impulse to challenge terminology and obscurantism. But

it fell prey to a serious argument which rendered it obscurantist in its turn. In order to oppose the power of the meaningless word, the early *Upaniṣads* deny that ultimate knowledge is expressed in Vedic verse. But unfortunately, the *Upaniṣads* did not go far enough. They did not deny the view that Vedic verses contain the very wisest of words. This is the difficulty. If the most important knowledge is not expressed in the wisest of words, then knowledge must be inexpressible. This is how the doctrine of ineffability came to exist which Matilal has criticized. The Buddha opposed not only the Vedic cant but also the *Vedas*. He did so in order to be rational, pragmatic and humane.

Let us consider the question, 'why is mysticism found in all intellectual traditions, even ones which are independent of each other? What do these traditions have in common?' W. T. Stace thinks it could be the ineffable reality, which is common. But Matilal has demolished this suggestion. It could be human nature which is shared by all traditions. But this takes us back to the mystical impulse theory of philosophy which is not satisfied. All mystical traditions do share something, which they also share with Non-mystical traditions. That something is *language*. One may believe that mysticism is really a theory about language, and hardly about reality. If we regard mysticism as a theory of language, and not a theory of reality, there is nothing mysterious about the fact that mysticism occurs in different independent intellectual traditions.

### **Is mysticism a theory of language?**

One may say that yes, and the reason is suppose that, I have no particular theory of language. Suppose I find that I cannot express adequately my disgust upon seeing some colour. Can I then say that there is any thing that is ineffable? Not everything that I cannot 'express' is ineffable. So, if I go on to say that something is really ineffable, I am proposing a theory of the limits of language. It is a prejudice that Indian mysticism has a tragic story, which was began as a revulsion against the worship of jargon - out of an overwhelming concern with language. It cannot be a coincidence that the dangerous rise of popular mysticism today comes at a time when the nature and limits of language have again become topics of philosophical concern. This also partly explains the newly found popularity of the mystics in India and East Asian countries.

One can only hope that the modern and very different problems about language will soon be resolved, before our neo-Greek culture, which is now with determination denying its own values, turns entirely upon itself. The compelling modern reason for mysticism seems to be the discovery of Russell's and other antinomies, which cannot be solved without falling back on a logical inconsistency at some level. Mysticism in Western thought has also been associated with linguistic worries regarding the Bible, which is more akin to Indian mysticism than the more dangerous modern kind of mysticism.

**REFERENCES:**

- B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* Hibbert Journal, Vol. 12:1914.
- B. Matilal, 'Mysticism and Reality: Ineffability' *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 3 :1975.
- John Searle, *Speech Acts* Cambridge, Mass., 1969
- J. J. Katz, "Effability and Translation," in F. Guenther and M. Guenther- Reutter, eds., *Meaning and Translation* New York, 1978.
- G. Frege, "Compound Thoughts," *Mind* 1963: 1-17.