

***THREE MEDIEVAL MYSTICS:
KABIR, TUKARAM AND ECKHART***

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Abstract: The Medieval period was found to be more favourable for the development of mysticism. Mystics approach is a direct approach between the soul and god alone and is independent of type of people or external circumstances. It is Mysticism can be broadly divided in to the eastern or the oriental type and western or the Christian type. The present article tries to cover or absorb both the types. Three prominent mystics namely Kabir, Tukaram and Eckhart have been highlighted. The wisdom of mystics is brought out with the use of poetry at places. In a nutshell the paper tries to cover the mystics from east to west.

Keywords: Mysticism, Medieval, East, West, Kabir, Tukaram, Eckhart

Introduction:

The Medieval period was more favourable to the development of mysticism; particularly the 14th century is regarded the golden age of mystical literature especially in Europe. Mysticism is the strange spiritual phenomenon and is almost entirely independent of race, climate and age – Ultimate inward hidden similarity of the human spirit.¹ Mysticism can also be defined as immediate, non-discursive, intuitive relation with the Absolute, whether personal..... or impersonal.....” The word Mysticism was taken from the Greek word Mysteries. (Mystic was one who gaining a knowledge of divine things about which he must keep his mouth shut. Hence the association of secrecy or “Mystery” which still clings round the word.) Over the decades the meaning of ‘mysticism’ appears to have become broader. One of the distinguished philosophers of religion, John Hick, for instance, has defined mystical experience as nothing other than “first hand religious experience as such “.² Arthur Chandler also hit on an enlightening title when he called mysticism “ first hand religion” which means there is nothing second hand about mysticism. The mystics approach to god is a direct approach, not dependent on the other people or on external circumstances, but a matter between the soul and god alone. It’s a solitary experience³. Mysticism describes the way in which man seeks union with god and attains immortal bliss. It is both a view and a way of life.⁴ William James’s term “Mystical Germ” is highlighted as a tune that is always singing in the back of his mind, but which he can never identify nor whistle nor get rid of. “It is”, he says, “very vague, and impossible to describe or put into words.....”⁵

Two facts in connection with the mysticism are undeniable – development of thought and knowledge has been leading characteristics of many mystics. Secondly no one has ever been an unhappy mystic. It is the flame which feeds his or her whole life and he or she is intensely and supremely happy just so far as he is steeped in it.

Mysticism is often divided in to the eastern or the oriental type and western or the Christian type. In the present paper I have tried to absorb both the types.

Kabir

True mystic devotion is above the confines of every religion. Though Kabir (15th Century) was a mystic his worldly wisdom led him to advice his disciples to conciliate all men

Sabse Hiliye Sabse Miliye

Sabka Lijiye Naam;

Haanji Haanji Sabse Kijeye

Waasa Apna Gaam (Jingling Couplet by Kabir)

“Mix with all, with all associate,

Each mans name borrow free;

Let ‘Yes, Sir!’ on your lips be ever

But bide’ neath your own roof-tree”⁶

Kabir’s mysticism was of the same kind and degree as that of the vedantin or the Sufi. For him there was no dualism between the finite and the Infinite, as is well illustrated in the following two quotations from Rabindranth Tagore’s One Hundred Poems of Kabir:

‘O how may I ever express that secret word?

O how can I say He is not like this, and

He is like that?

If I say that He is not like this, and He is like that?

If I say that He is within me, it is falsehood.

If I say that He is without me, it is falsehood.

He makes the inner and the outer worlds to be indivisibly one;

The conscious and the unconscious both are his footstools.

He is neither manifest nor hidden,

He is neither revealed nor unrevealed;

There are no words to tell that which He is.’

And again:

When He Himself reveals Himself, Brahma brings

Into manifestation That which can never be seen

As the seed is in the plant, as the shade is in the tree,

As the void is in the sky, as infinite forms are

In the void-

So from beyond the Infinite, the Infinite comes;

And from the Infinite the finite extends.

The creature is in Brahma, and Brahma is in the creature:

They are ever distinct, yet ever united.....

He Himself is the limit and the limitless:

and beyond both the limited and the limitless is He,
the pure Being.

He is the Immanent Mind in Brahma and in the creature,

The Supreme Soul is seen within the Soul.....

Kabir's Mystic philosophy can be approached through his concept of God or Brahman , his concept of Soul or Atman and his concept of Maya or the world as Illusion.

He says Brahma is beyond time, space, qualities and attributes. It is formless.

Atman is formless, boundless, beyond all change. It is like a drop in the ocean, it cannot be separated, the ocean-ness is in the drop-ness.'Kabir uses the similes from his weaving profession: 'This body is like a garment which must wear out with use. So why be attached to it?'

He describes the multiple identity of soul by various metaphors: The soul is the tree, the soul is the sun, the ray, the light that illumines the darkness all around. As the lotus is not affected by pure water or dew, or the mire surrounding it, the soul is in it and yet not in it. The soul is wind, the soul is fire, the soul is water, the soul is word and the mind all combined.

Kabir also uses many metaphors to describe the concept of Maya. It is like a she-serpent giving birth to many of her own kind. It is ephemeral and ever-changing. It is the great churning. It causes sorrow. It is subtle like a curtain of mist.⁷

Tukaram

Tukaram (17th Century) confirmed his faith by constant reading of the *Jnanaesvari* and the *Eknathi Bhagwat* in the solitude of the hill surrounding Dehu. One of his mystic lyrics says

LET Common Sense the balance hold!

Fast not when thou art hungry;

Nor steep thyself in forest solitude

When thou art thirsting for gay company.

Let common sense the balance hold!

Art thou Sad ?

Think of God.

Art thou Glad ?

Give to God⁸.

All dismay cast thou away;

A child on mother's shoulder resting

Has naught to fear;

Thou art, like such a child,

close held by Narayana.

Art thou Sad?

Think of God

Art thou Glad?

Give to God.

Saints like Tukaram and Kabir were plain simple men. One was a village grocer, the other was a weaver, both uneducated in the traditional sense., yet they could reach the same heights as were reached by Einstein and Kant.⁹ Only difference was Tukaram and Kabir's attainment was intuitive or *Anubhuti* while Einstein and Kant reached through their intellectual capabilities.¹⁰

Mysticism is the art and science of living perfectly ; it is the self knowledge that subsumes knowledge of the world. To the religious mind-it is the search for God, to the Lover-it is quest for the beloved, to the man of action-it is search for the secret of perfect action, to the artist-it is quest for beauty, to the scholar- it is search for Truth. A mystic is different from

Theologian, the logician, the rationalist philosopher and the man of science, for he bases his belief not on revelation, logic, reason or demonstrate facts but on feeling, on intuitive inner knowledge. It is attainment of complete self mastery and self realisation¹¹, it is the death of the ego and end of all sufferings (physical or mental). To the Mystic, whether he be philosopher, poet, artist or priest, the aim of life is to become like God and thus to attain to union with the Divine.

Many Christian Mystics were firmly convinced that our normal, routine, everyday lives on earth were subordinate and secondary only, and that there was another and higher Reality with which they had come into contact and which gave to human life, a fire, a light, a love and an enhanced sense of being. Early Medieval Christian Mystic St. Bernard of Clairvaux¹² (1090 – 1153) and Eckhart Johannes (1260 ? 1328?) usually called Meister (Master Eckhart) were both passionately in love with God.

N.O. Lossky 's Book *Mystical Intuition* (1938) says the highest stages of joy in the Lord are known to us from the works of the great mystics- St Bernard of Clairvaux, the blessed Suso, St Teresa and others. **St. Bernard** was a French theologian and Doctor of the Church. He employs the imagery of spiritual marriage to express his fervid devotion to Jesus. The Church is the bride of Christ. He was so passionately in love with God and Christianity that all those who came into contact with him were swept off their feet by his eloquence and enthusiasm. He is called St. Bernard of Clairvaux because he Set up a monastery at Clairvaux¹³ valley of Light in France(1115), he and his monks pursued the rigours of life to an extreme of ascetism. As a Mystic St. Bernard sought to build a bridge between the two well-known mystic ways- the way of emptiness and the way of fullness.¹⁴ His charm, eloquence, and sanctity profoundly influenced church and civil affairs in Europe in the first half of the 12th century. He was chosen by Pope Eugenuis III to preach the Second Crusade in 1146. His faith was based on an exalted mysticism, which is the subject of many of his Latin Writings.¹⁵ There are two Alpine passes named Saint Bernard The hospice (8,111 ft) founded by St Bernard of Menthon, in the charge of Augustinian friars. The St. Bernard rescue dogs bred by them were formerly used to search for lost travellers. They were known for centuries for saving avalanche victims from snowy Alpine groves.(today helicopters and heat sensors have taken over their work) Of his 332 Sermons probably the most important are the 86 preached on the Song of Songs ; these are permeated with his mysticism.

Like St Augustine, he insists on the 3 stages of mystic experience :

Purgation-practice of self-discipline and of virtues

Contemplation-means heart longing for the Lord

Union- Like a drop of water that is mingled with wine, air. Flooded with sunlight-the soul is inflamed by love is transformed and absorbed in the one.

Eckhart

Eckhart was a German Dominican theologian and Mystic, who said “ Simple people conceive that we are to see god as if He stood on that side and We on this, it is not so... God and I are one in the act of my perceiving him”. He believed himself to be as completely in harmony with the teachings of the Christian church when he recalls the saying of St.Paul “Put ye on Jesus Christ,” he means to imply in this saying ‘Sink yourselves into yourselves, dine down into self-contemplation: and from out the depths of your being, God will shine forth to meet you; He illumines all things for you; you have found Him within you; you have become united with God’s Being. ¹⁶Eckhart is often compared to Shankara owing to his theories of God as *Nirguna Brahman* and *Mukti* as *Nirvana*. Also he distinguished the Godhead from God, just as Sankara distinguished the higher from the lower Brahman. Being experienced are beyond space and time. Eckhart wrote; Nothing hinders the soul’s knowledge of God as much as time and space, for time and space are fragments, whereas God is one. And therefore if the soul is to know God, it must know him above time and outside space; for God is neither this nor that as are those manifested things.

Eckhart was condemned by the Church for his pantheistic heresies¹⁷(he said I am God), but his teachings has had a profound influence on later mystic thought. His pupils(especially John Tauler1300-1361and Henry Suso1295-1365) though remained loyal Catholics, contrived also to be loyal disciples. His disciples venetrated his memory as a Saint. He also influenced a number of protestant theologians and romantic and existentialist writers. The German and Flemish mystics of the 14th and 15th Centuries differing much in temperament from their master and from each other, have yet something in common: something which is shared by no other school. This something is derived from Eckhart; for all have passed under his hand being either his immediate disciples, of the friends or pupils of his disciples. His doctrine is chiefly known to us by reports of his vernacular Sermons delivered at Strassburg; then the religious centre of Germany.¹⁸

The mystics believe that intellect is given us to apprehend material things and the spirit is given to us to apprehend spiritual things, and that to disregard the spirit in spiritual matters, and to trust to reason is as foolish as if a carpenter, about to begin a piece of work, were deliberately to reject his keenest and sharpest tool.

“Barren” and “Desert” are favourite metaphors with Eckhart, as also with several other 13th century catholic mystics.”Barren means empty, void, without any distinctions. “Desert” carries on the same metaphor.¹⁹ He says Soul is “Sunk and lost in this desert where its identity is destroyed.”²⁰

The cloud of unknowing is one of the devotional classics of the English Church. This work by anonymous author²¹ happened when Western Europe was in the throes of the Hundred year war²², the Black Death,²³ social unrest in the English Peasants etc.²⁴ This work also stresses on God can only be loved and not thought of. It is believed to have been composed by its author to help one of his disciples to attain the highest levels of mystical contemplation. He begins with a strong adjuration that no one should read the book who has not himself a full intention of following the mystic path to the end.²⁵ The most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing.

Conclusion

Thus we see most mystics experiencing silent enjoyment of God. Geographical and cultural environment to which the mystics belong is also important. Though mystics differ in their practice and experiences, even within the same religion they share three basic goals;

- 1.Knowledge of a spiritual reality that exists beyond the everyday world.
- 2.Spiritual Union with some higher power.
- 3.Freedom from selfish needs and worldly desires.

To attain the above goals, most mystics undergo some form of self-discipline, leading life in poverty (as St. Bernard and others propagated)

The paper concludes with Kabir who looked on the world as the play ground of the Gods, *Allah* in the West, *Rama* in the East being identical. He said real importance lay in teaching the “ Word of God”. Eckhart says ‘There is nothing alien in oneness. In eternity there is only oneness but not likeness.’

Notes

¹ Otto, Rudolph. 1932. *Mysticism: East and West : A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, New York: MacMillan.

² Singh, Pramod Kumar. 2006. “Buddhist Mysticism: A Few Observations”. *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXIII (2): 221.

³ Hopkinson, Arthur. 1946. *Mysticism Old and New*, London: Nesbit.

⁴ Srinivasachari, P. N. 1951. *Mystics and Mysticism*, Madras: P. N. Publication.

⁵ Spurgeon, C.R.E. 1922. *Mysticism in English Literature*, London: Kessinger.

⁶ Campbell, John. 1905. *The Mystics, Ascetics and saints of India*, London: Fisher Unwin.

⁷ Machwe, Prabhakar. 1993. *Kabir*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy.

⁸ Althaus, Paul. 1928. *Mystic Lyrics from the Indian Middle Age*, London:

⁹ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) German Philosopher who in the famous *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) explored the limitations of reason by which mankind interprets experience.

¹⁰ Tulpule, S.G. 1984. *Mysticism in Medieval India*, Germany: Harrassowitz.

¹¹ Paranjape, M. 1988. *Mysticism in Indian English Poetry*, Delhi: B.R. Publishers.

¹² His Feast Day is on 20th August, emblem is a beehive.

¹³ This monastery became a model of reform and influenced other monasteries in France and elsewhere.

¹⁴ J. V. Ferreira. 1990. “The Luminous Vision”. *The Examiner : The Catholic News Review*, 141(36): 993.

¹⁵ ---- .2002. *The Macmillan Encyclopedia 2012*, London.

¹⁶ Steiner, Rudolf. 1911. *Mystics of the Renaissance in relation to modern thought*, London: Theosophical.

¹⁷ His writings were condemned by the pope.

¹⁸ Underhill, Evelyn. 1949. *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's spiritual consciousness*, London: Methuen.

¹⁹ Stace, W.T. 1961. *Mysticism and Philosophy*, London: MacMillan.

²⁰ Ibid p114

²¹ Perhaps the author was a parish priest in the Midlands of England.

²² A series of wars between England and France lasted from 1337 until 1453.

²³ A form of plague that was pandemic throughout Europe and much of Asia during periods in the fourteenth century (It caused dark splotches on the skin)

²⁴ Wolters, Clifton. 1961. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, London: Penguin.

²⁵ Stace, W.T. 1961. *Mysticism and Philosophy*, London: MacMillan.

Bio:

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