

## Six Short Pieces

**Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta**

### Remembering Tukaram

Let us remember Tukaram in the year of his birth four centuries ago. I would have thought of a public celebration on the occasion were it not a fact that the quarter-centenary of a religious poet cannot possibly be a memorable event today in a Marxist city. I recall how in the late twenties I felt being very close to the Maharashtrian saint poet and almost thought that he was a part of our Bengali literature because the first three chapters of *Bombai Chitra* (1889) of Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923) covering sixty pages contained Bengali translations of Tukaram's verses with the translator's comments. Satyendranath spent the whole of his professional life as an ICS officer in the Bombay Presidency where he not only learnt Marathi but also mastered Marathi culture. And he so loved the Marathi saint-poet Tukaram that when his youngest brother Rabindranath visited him in 1878 he transmitted that love to him and helped him in translating some of Tuka's *abhangs*. When Satyendranath's work on Tuka reappeared in his *Navaratnamala* (1907), it was known that some of the renderings were by Rabindranath himself. Professor Jagadish Bhattacharya identified them in consultation with Rabindranath, and his findings are valuable in Jagadish Babu's *Kavisannidhya*. Rabindranath's translations of Tuka's verses are included in the anthology of his translation, *Rupantar* (1965).

Satyendranath also encouraged his brother Jyotirindranath (1849-1925) to study Tuka's works when the two brothers met in Poona in 1895, and it resulted in the latter's beautiful essay "Tukaramer Abhanga" included in his *Prabandha Manjari* (1905). In his autobiography *Amar Valyakatha O Amar Bombai Pravas* (1915), Satyendranath has a chapter on "Tukaram and Ramdas." It was obviously Satyendranath's work on Tukaram which created in Bengal a profound interest in the Maharashtrian poet.

### Translations

Dinanath Gangopadhyay's *Tukaramer Jivancharit* appeared in 1896 and Yogindranath Basu's *Tukaram Charit* in 1901. We do not have, however, translations of the *abhangs* of Tukaram to compare with Sri Sevanand's two volume *Tukaram Gatha*, a very comprehensive collection of

Tuka's songs translated into Gujarati and published in 1940. If in the near future, there is a new *bhakti* movement in Bengal, we will have a large anthology in several volumes presenting the finest things in our medieval *bhakti* poetry from the Alvars in the South to Shankaradeva in Assam. I should, however, mention the scholarly work on the subject by the late Dr Bishnupada Bhattacharya whose 510-page *Bharatiya Bhakti Sahitya* published in 1964 deserves to be translated into English.

While we appreciate Western scholars' work on Tuka like Justin E. Abbot's 356-page volume based on chapters 25-40, Mahipati's *Bhaktalilamrita*, published in 1930, and Nelson Fraser's collaboration with K.B. Marathe in their large English edition of Tuka's *abhangs* published in 1909, we cannot conceal our unhappiness about European scholars' approach to the Maharashtrian saint which is manifestly warped by their Judaic-Christian prejudice. In Nelson and Edward's *Life and Teachings of Tukaram* (1922), there is a chapter, chapter ten, which is entitled "Is Tukaram's Religion Adequate Today". It is a strange question to ask. The authors' answer to the question is obviously in the negative, and they say: "Tukaram's religion is surrounded by a desert of pantheism and a wilderness of polytheism." "Irreconcilable inconsistencies," they add, "concerning the nature of true religion meet us almost in every one of Tukaram's hymns." We, on our part, may ask the devout Christian -- what is the meaning of the words of Jesus on the Cross in St Matthew -- "*eli eli lama, sabachthani*" (My God, my God, hast thou forsaken me?) How to explain these words of the Son of God expressing his sense of Heaven's desertion?

### **Songs**

Even more prejudiced are the comments of Nicol Macnicol in his introduction to his *Psalms of Maratha Saints* (1919) where he says that he misses in the songs of Tuka "the resonant note of thankfulness which throbs" in the *Hebrew Book of Psalms*. Expressions of gratitude to God or praise for his Omnipotence is alien to the spirit of Divine Love which stirs our medieval mystic. Our mystic songs are not prayers or hymns. They are a cry of the soul, to use the words of Plotinus, they are a "flight of the alone to the alone." Let us remember the words of Sri Ramakrishna that those who really love god do not shower words of praise on Him.

Macnicol is almost ridiculously absurd in his comments on Tuka's words -- "God is their debtor" (*abhang* 1589); "such an audacity is beyond the reach of the Hebrew or the Christian

penitent.” Who can make him understand that love and not penitence is the essence of Tuka’s devotion. And what will Macnicol say about the words of Maria Rilke (1875-1926) – “What wilt Thou do, God, when I die.” The German poet brings to our mind the word of Rabindranath in poem 56 of his English *Gitanjali* -- ‘O thou, lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not.” Some of the European Christian observers on our religious sensibility have no notion of the idea of the reciprocity of love between man and God.

At the centre of Tuka’s religion is his love of god and this urges him to renounce advaita: "Be formless as others desire, but for me take thou on a form. O God I have fallen in love with thy name.” There is an element of tender intimacy in this love which often prompts him to utter words of devout impiety such as (“God is a debtor” which aroused the indignation of a critic like Macnicol.) I do not have the space and far less the ability to bring out the subtler features of Tuka's philosophy of religion. My reader will find those features very lucidly explained in the seventh volume of M.S. Ranade's *Rise of the Maratha Power* (1900) and R.D. Ranade's *Pathway to God in Marathi Literature* (1961) and his *Mysticism in Maharashtra* (1933)

*The Statesman*

07. 10. 1995

### First Prose-Poems in Kannada

When a poet writes a poem in prose, he rejects an old literary tradition. But it may be that he returns to an older, primitive habit of expression. Perhaps the first poet of the world had no notion of the complexities of metre and was happy to speak his words as a “first fine careless rapture.” The discipline of verse came later. I say this without any knowledge of primitive poetry, my only authority here being A.K. Ramanujan, himself a poet and a valued translator of Kannada Virashaiva poetry of the twelfth and the following centuries. A.K. Ramanujan says that “*vachana* is a rejection of premeditated art.” The Virashaiva poets were perhaps the first in our literature to compose poems in prose, making rhythm the soul of their work. In Kannada, these poems are called *vachanas* (sayings) which surpass in style the sayings of Epictetus or Bhartrihari’s *Nitishataka*. This comparison may, however, be misleading when the appeal of the *vachanas* is *spiritual* rather than moral. They are the classics of mysticism in Indian poetry.

### Protestant

The founder of the Virashaiva sect and the first of *vachanakaras* in Kannada is Basavanna of the 12th century, one of the greatest mystic poets of the world. Perhaps his choice of prose as the medium of his lyrical expression is an aspect of his protestant, anti-establishment spirit. As A.K. Ramanujan says in his introduction to *Speaking of Siva* published as a Penguin Classic in 1973, “The Virashaiva movement was a social upheaval by and for the poor, the low-caste and the outcast against the rich and the privileged; it was a rising of the unlettered against the literate pundit, flesh and blood against stone.” It is unfortunate that scholars who deal with protestant mysticism have no notion of Protestantism within Hinduism. When W.H. Auden wrote his fine introduction to Anne Fremantle’s *The Protestant Mystics* (1965), he did not make even a brief passing reference to the Indian Hindu Protestant who repudiated orthodoxy in religion some four centuries before Martin Luther. *Vachana* literature was known to the English-speaking world through Edward Price’s *Kanarese Literature*, published in 1921. Actually, I first read a *vachana* of Basavanna in this work some half a century ago. Before reading Ramanujan’s translations of the *vachanas* of four major Virashaiva mystics in his *Speaking of Siva*, I read V. Raghavan’s *The Great Integrators: The Saint-Singers of India* where the great Sanskritist says in his introduction to the anthology: “These *vachanas* show that Virashaivism was a call to get over formalism, ritual and caste and to vow for oneself the higher life of virtues.”

I am sorry I cannot say much about the philosophy of Virashaivism although it is important enough to deserve a whole chapter of 20 pages in the fifth volume of Surendranath Dasgupta’s *A History of Indian philosophy* (1955). Dr. Dasgupta suggests that “Virashaivas were called Viras or heroes for their heroic attitude in an aggressive or defensive manner in support of their faith.” About Basava, Dr. Dasgupta says that he “was probably one of the most intelligent and emotional thinkers who expressed his effusions in the Kannada language.”

### Style

The *vachanas* are indeed superb in their lyric quality, their words coming upon you as a spontaneous expression of truly mystical feeling. I do not have the learning or the courage to define mysticism. I am happy to rely on the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*’s description of a mystic as a “person who seeks unity or identity with the Deity or the ultimate reality.” You can so

describe Basava and his followers. Basava does not believe in literary finesse: “I don’t know anything like timebeats and metre/ nor the arithmetic of strings and drums.” One recalls the works of Rabindranath in the *Gitanjali*—“My song has put off her adornments.” Basava speaks in the plain vernacular of his soul, the natural dialect of his heart and one feels it even while reading his *vachanas* in English translation. And how does he communicate his monistic or *advaita* feeling? It is not through some dialectical abstraction. He speaks in concrete terms: “make of my body the beam of a lute/ of my head the sounding gourd.” Again, one recalls the words of Rabindranath: *amar e dehakhani tule dharo/ toma oi devalayer pradip karo* (lift this body of mine and make it the lamp of your temple).”

Basava rejects formal worship and even makes gentle fun of ritualism. “Parrots recite/ So what?! Can they read the Lord?” About animal sacrifice Basava says: “The sacrificial lamb brought for the festival/ ate up the green leaf brought for the decorations.”

Virashaiva *vachanas* are classics of Mediaeval Indian mystical poetry. Like the Alwar poetry and the songs of the Tamil Shaivitees, it preceded the saint poets of the North by several centuries thus justifying the Sanskrit saying that Bhakti begins in the South. A.K. Ramanujan’s *Speaking of Siva* is the only work we can read on Virashaiva *vachana* poetry, and it is indeed an excellent work both for its translations and introduction. It is unfortunate that there is nothing more to read on a class of bhakti poetry which is still valued by five million Virashaivas of Mysore and which are some of the finest works in the world’s devotional literature. What I regret is that R.D. Ranade, an authority on Indian mysticism, does not deal with the Virashaivas in his *Pathway to God in Kannada literature*.

*The Statesman*

17.06.1998

### **A Great Marathi Classic**

When I mention the *Jnaneshwari* as a great Marathi classic I do not forget that it has no presence in our works on Indian philosophy and poetry. That a man of small reading like myself can at all venture to write on this work is due to the fact that it has been translated into Bengali by Girish Chandra Sen whose 671-page *Jnaneshwari* was published by our Sahitya Akademi in 1960. It

has a foreword by the distinguished Bengali scholar Basanta Kumar Chattopadhyay who calls it a wonder of the Indian genius. After reading this work in my language I thought it was one of the greatest philosophical poems in world literature and can be placed by the side of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Goethe's *Faust*. If George Santayana knew Bengali he would have added it in his *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910) and changed the title of his work. Girish Chandra has done another service to our literature by translating the other great work of the poet of the Jnaneshwari—his *Amritanubhava*. Girish Chandra gives the Marathi text in the Bengali script which enhances the value of the work because the poet Jnanadeva (1275-1296) was the founder of the literary language of Maharashtra as Dante was the founder of literary Italian.

I miss the name of Jnanadeva in Kshitimohan Sen's *Medieval Mysticism of India* (1935). Actually, Western scholars have cared more for this great Marathi saint-poet than our own scholars. J.N. Farquhar mentions the *Jnaneshwari* as a work, "advaitist in tone" in his *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (1920, p. 234). In the previous year had appeared Nicol Macnicol's *Maratha Saints* which contains extracts from the *Jnaneshwari* which he says in his introduction "forms the most important work in all Marathi literature and has exercised a unique influence both upon the thought and the language of Maharashtra" (p. 15). Much later, Theodore De Bary calls Jnanadeva "the foremost Maharastrian saint" and reproduces a few verses from the *Jnaneshwari* in his *Sources of Indian Tradition* (1958, vol. I, p. 353). Ainslie T Embree too includes some verses of Jnanadeva in his *The Hindu Tradition* (1966, p. 250).

### **Worship**

I was attracted to Jnanadeva by Dr. Radhakrishnan's illuminating comments on his philosophy in his 223-page introduction to his English edition of Badarayana's *Brahmasutra* (1960, p. 58). Here Jnanadeva is called an *advaitavadin* of the Sankara school. Here we have a problem, the problem is how can a *bhakta* poet be an *advaitavadi*; Radhakrishnan solves the problem in so far as it can at all be solved. He says that "though a follower of *advaita* of the Sankara school, he encouraged worship of a Personal God. The Personal God is not a phenomenal appearance of the absolute but is the Absolute itself which has in it the principle of plurality. The world is not the expression of *maya* but is the outcome of "divine love and joy" (p. 58). Actually a *bhakta* is necessarily an *advaitavadi*. What we call *advaita* or monistic poetry is only a prayer for *advaita*:

there cannot be a lyrical expression of *advaita* experience which is beyond words. We know Ramaprasad did not love to be sugar because he wanted to taste sugar. When William James speaks of Vivekananda's "monistic music," he means his stirring words on *advaita*, not his experience of nonduality. Let us see that in what we mention as our *advaita* songs the poet's words are in the future tense. "O Lord let there be no thee and me between us."

### Yearning

When the English poet George Herbert says "O, be mine still; still make me Thine;/ Or rather make no Thine and Mine" he has a monistic urge, but does not reach the pinnacle of *advaita*. Rajanikanta Sen sings "*kabe tomate ami haba amar ami hara*" (when shall I lose myself in thee), he too has only a yearning for *advaita*. In poem 12 (written on 19 January 1941) in *Janmadine*, Rabindranath says: "*amar amir dhara mile yetha yabe krame krame/paripurna chaitnyer sagar-sangame*" (when the stream of myself will gradually flow into the fullness of the Spirit) he speaks of a happy possibility and not of an attainment. When Shankara wrote his poems, he not only attributed qualities to Brahma but gave him a consort who is mentioned as Brahmahishi.

When Jnanadeva wrote his *Jnaneshwari*, he was a boy of nineteen and the poem is a paraphrase of the 700 verses of the Gita in 10,000 verses. While you read it, you feel that here is a *bhakta* yearning for the *advaita* experience. I think the *Amritanubhava* is more of a monistic poem than the *Jnaneshwari*; but here too *advaita* is but an aspiration. In his *Pathway to God in Marathi Literature* (1961), a work which is as important for our understanding of Jnanadeva as the seventh chapter in M.G. Ranade's *Rise of Maratha Power* (1900), R.D. Ranade says that the poet is related to God as waves are related to the sea. The finest work on Jnanadeva I have read is B.P. Bahirat's *The Philosophy of Jnanadeva* (1956; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1961) who explains the poet's ideas of *advaita* in these words: "The finiteness of the individual does not mean that it is a degradation of Reality; but it implies that the Reality determine itself in order to realize itself in various forms." If my readers must have at least one verse of Jnanadeva to remember, I will choose it from *Amritanubhava* rather than from the *Jnaneshwari*. This is because the *Amritanubhava* is more monistic in tone than the poet's major work: "as the waves play so the soul blossoms into many and play". Like all the Indian mystics, Jnanadeva sees the One in the Many.

23.09.1998

### A Great Punjabi Classic

One who presents a book of religious verse, particularly a book of prayers, as a classic faces questions. The first question is -- can religion be the inspirer of a literary classic? Did not Dr. Johnson deny that "contemplative piety" could be poetical? And T.S. Eliot says that "since the time of Chaucer, Christian poetry has been limited in England almost exclusively to minor poetry." But is T.S. Eliot's own *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), admittedly a religious drama, minor poetry? I am incapable of going deep into this question of literary criticism for lack of learning and fineness of perception. As but a common reader I see that a book of devotional verse, the English *Gitanjali*, brought its author world fame. I, however, know that today at the main gate of the Garden of the Muses there is a sign-board saying "God is not allowed." But let me not conceal that I read the songs of Ramprasad with eyes wet with tears and call him a great poet. A village bard writing in the plain vernacular of his heart without any finesse of idiom and metre may not be so valued by the modern reader.

The great Punjabi classic I have in mind is Guru Nanak's *Japji*, a hymn-book of thirty-nine songs, constituting the opening of the Holy Book of the Sikhs, the *Adigranth* of Guru Granthasahib, compiled by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjun, in 1603-1604. I first read the *Japji* in Dr Satish Chandra Bandyopadhyay's Bengali translation published in 1937. Satish Chandra gives the Punjabi text in the Bengali script and a translation in Bengali verse. What brought a common Bengali like myself to the canonical scriptures of the Sikhs may be a legitimate question.

When I came upon a copy of Satish Chandra's *Japji* at College Square in 1938, I had just read Sarat Kumar Ray's *Sikhguru O Sikhjati* published in 1910 with an introduction by Rabindranath. Sarat Babu's presentation of Guru Nanak and his life and teachings made a great impression on me. Add to this what I had read in Rabindranath's *Jivan-Smriti* (1912; Eng tr, *My Reminiscences*, 1917) about the poet being in the company of his father in Svarnamandir at Amritsar: "The golden temple of Amritsar comes back to me like a dream. Many a morning have I accompanied my father to this Gurudwara of the Sikhs in the middle of the lake. There the sacred chanting resounds continually. My father seated amidst the throng of worshippers, would sometimes add his voice to the hymns of praise!" I imagined some of these hymns were from the *Japji*.



### First Visit

Devendranath's first visit to the Golden Temple took place in 1856-57 when he heard, as he reminisces in his autobiography (*Atmajivani*, 1898; Eng. tr., Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi, 1907 Macmillan ed. with an introduction by Evelyn Underhill, 1914). Devendranath says how the Sikh devotees sing Guru Nanak's famous song "*gaganamai thal, ravi chandra dipaka jvale*" (In the disc of the sky,/ The sun and the moon shine as lamps). The song in its Punjabi text is included in the *Brahmasangit*, the psalter of the Brahma Samaj. Rabindranath's translation of his song, "*gaganer thale ravi chandra dipaka jvale*" is included in *Rupantar* (1965). Actually there are four of Guru Nanak's songs in Punjabi in the last unabridged edition of the *Brahmasangit* published in 1931. When I acquired my copy of the Bengali *Japji*, I did not know that eleven hymns of Guru Nanak were included in Durgadas Lahiri's 1048-page collection of songs published in 1905 as *Vangalir Gan*. In this anthology of Bengali songs, Guru Nanak's are printed in the Bengali script.

I was so moved by Guru Nanak's songs that I looked for some other works on the subject. But I had to wait for another ten years for a second Bengali *Japji*, Jatindramohon Chattopadhyay *Japji athaba Nanak Gita* which was published in 1946. The sub-title of this translation appealed to me as a proper description of this religious classic. It is as comprehensive and as catholic as the *Bhagavad Gita* which I look upon as the *summa theologica summa philosophica* of the Indian tradition. And I call *Japji* a great classic because when I first read it I thought it was our first vernacular Upanishad and what is even more striking is that it is written in colloquial vernacular. And Guru Nanak gives that vernacular the dignity of a classic language.

### Clumsy

Ten years later appeared a third Bengali *Japji*, in the first volume of Haranchandra Chakladar's three volume (incomplete) translation of the *Adigranth*. Chakladar's Bengali edition of the *Japji* offers illuminating annotations bringing out echoes in its verses of the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Obviously, I looked for some English works on the *Japji* and found its first English translation in the *Adigranth* of Ernest Trumpp (1828-1885) who was asked to translate the Sikh scriptures by the Secretary of State for India. Published in 1877, the work was not accepted by the Sikh community as reliable and I too found it a rather clumsy presentation of a

great work. But in M.A. Macauliffe's six-volume work *The Sikh Religion*, first published in 1909 and later reprinted in three volumes in 1963, there is a beautiful translation of the *Japji*, although I miss in this otherwise magnificent presentation of the entire *Adigranth*, an editorial note on the *Japji* as a religious classic.

What makes the *Japji* a classic? It is a super lyrical expression of a catholic faith which integrates, without lapsing into eclecticism, all forms of spiritual sensibility into a philosophy of religion rooted in Vedanta. What is striking is that Guru Nanak accomplishes this task without any show of dialectical prowess. Perhaps for him it was not a task to be performed, but a spirit to be expressed. Seldom is such a profound philosophy expressed in such spontaneous words. When we read the *Japji*, we seem to hear the voice of the Upanishads reaching us in a new idiom. God is both far and near, he is formless and he has a form too. He is incomprehensible and is yet accessible to man; he is at once *saguna* and *nirguna*. We speak of the teachings of Guru Nanak; perhaps we have not yet responded to the poetry of his teachings. It is not even briefly mentioned in W.H. McLeod's *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, an excellent work on the subject published by the Clarendon Press in 1968 to mark the 500th birth-anniversary of Guru Nanak. Before I leave my readers, I may quote a verse of the Guru which is memorable as an expression of the place of ethics in religion: "There is no devotion without virtue." Of the lyrical genius of Guru Nanak, a very fine instance is his verse: "I have no strength to live, and no strength to die."

What is the philosophy of Guru Nanak? I think it is a form of monistic pantheism which reappears in the modern age in *Sri Ramakrishnakathamrita*.

*The Statesman*

29.09.1998

### **Kashmiri Mystic Forgotten**

I call Lalla Ded or Lalla Didi, the 14th century Kashmiri poetess, a forgotten mystic because she is not even briefly mentioned in works on Kashmir Shaivism which is magnificently presented in her poetry. There is no reference to her in J.C. Chatterjee's otherwise authoritative work on Kashmir Shaivism published in 1914. There is an excellent article on Kashmir Shaivism in the

fourth volume of *The Cultural Heritage of India* (1956) by Arabinda Basu who too does not mention the great Kashmiri prophetess. What is particularly curious is that we do not find this first medieval mystic of North India in the standard Bengali work on the subject *Bharatiya Madhyayuge Sadhanar Dhara* (1930; Eng tr., Manomohan Ghosh, *Medieval Mysticism of India*, 1935). Since this work became a source-book for subsequent Bengali scholars dealing with the subject, there is no mention of Lalla Ded either in *Madhyayuger Bharatiya Sadhak* (1943) of Charu Chandra Bandyopadhyaya (1877-1938) or in Bishnupada Bhattacharya's *Bharatiya Bhaktisahitya* (1964).

I turned to Lalla Ded's mystic songs after reading about them in *Languages And Literatures of Modern India* (1963) of Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1890-1977) where Dr Chatterji says: "In the fourteenth century we have in Kashmir a great Shaivite women-saint, Lalla Didi or Lal Ded, whose compositions, in a modern Kashmiri form, are in the mouths of all Kashmiris, both Hindus and Muslims, and they represent the oldest specimens of Kashmiri which still have been continued down to our times by oral tradition." This aroused in me an interest in Lalla Ded and ere long I came upon an incredible learned edition of her songs in *Lalla Vakyani or the Mystic Songs of Lal Ded: A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir* by Sir George Abraham Grierson (1851-1941). Sir George did not rely on the available manuscripts of these songs because, he thought, they would be corrupt. He, therefore, engaged some local pandits who were capable of reciting the songs in their original form although they did not know the meaning of all the words. Sir George also used manuscripts of the songs as they were collected by Mark Aurel Stein (1862-1943) which are preserved in the Bodleian as Ms. A and Ms. B. Grierson's editions gives the Old Kashmiri text in Roman, and then Rajanaka Bhaskara's Sanskrit translation, in Roman, sometimes Stein's text in Nagari and then his own English translation and illuminating commentary.

### **Monism**

The work was published as *Monograph XVII* of the Royal Asiatic Society London, in 1920. The work includes a "Preliminary Note on Yoga" by L.D. Barnett which enables the reader to approach the songs in terms of Shaiva Yoga.

I think Lal Ded's songs are particularly important as an expression of a philosophy of religion rooted in monism or *advaita*. Usually, we think there can be no poetry of *advaita*

because the monistic experience is incommunicable. When Shankara (780-820) composed his beautiful hymns, he happily took a holiday from his severe *advaita*. But we have in our religious poetry *advaita* sensibility, a yearning for *advaita*, not its attainment. Lalla speaks of obtaining Shiva, not of being Shiva: “With the fire of love I parched my heart as a man parcheth grain. And at that moment did I obtain Shiva.” It is not an *advaitist* merged in Brahma: it is a theist’s sight of his God. A monist cannot be a poet without lapsing into a happy theism. In song 7 Lal Ded says: “That Thou art I, that I am. Thou, that these are joined in one. I knew not.” And when she knew it, a silence alone could be its expression. Lal Ded contemplates an *advaitic* state when “a void became merged with the Void.”

### Duality

If Lal Ded feels that she is yet to attain *advaita*, she has a monist’s dislike for duality: “He whose mind has become free from duality,/ He and he alone, hath seen the Lord of the Chiefest of gods.” Although a Shaiva Lal Ded is a universalist in her spiritual temper: “Let him bear the name of Shiva, or of Keshava, or of the Jina, or of the Lotus-born Lord, whatever name he bear,/ May he take from me, sick woman that I am, the disease of the world.”

I do not have the learning to explain Lal Ded’s ideas in terms of Shiva Yoga. Most of her verses can, however, be understood as we understand and appreciate the poetry of our medieval poets. They are not made obscure by the metaphysics of *advaita*. When she says: “Yet is it near by thee: search for it not afar.” We remember the verse of our Charya poet Chatila: “*Niyaddi bohi dur ma jahi*” (Sukumar Sen, *Charyagiti Padavali*, 1956, p 54; Eng tr, Sukumar Sen, “Old Bengali Texts”, *Indian Linguistics*, Vol X, 1948, p. 5; Enlightenment is near, stray not far.”)

I find a very interesting parallel between the Kashmiri poetess and Rabindranath in respect of their idea of the void as but a clothing of the Lord. Here my text of Lalla is that given in R.C. Temple’s *The World of Lalla the Prophetess*, 1924: “Air and sky: what garment is more fair?” (Ten songs of Lalla are included in Margaret Macnicol, ed, *Poems by Indian Women* 1923; there are specimens in Louis Renou, *Hinduism* (1963), W.T. de Bary, ed, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1958, and Ainslie T Embree, *The Hindu Tradition*, 1966). In Rabindranath we have: “*tomar shesh nahi tai shunya seje shesh kare dao apnake je*,” thou art endless; so you take the void as your garment to appear as nothing: the song, composed in 1914 is included in *Gitavitan*,

song 45). The Shakta poet Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1772-1821) describes the Mother as “*Shunya mahakasha*” is one of his songs.

One of our medievalists may now produce a large anthology of religious songs in all our languages to show that from Kashmir to Bengal and from the South to Assam it is the same heart that pulsates in our spiritual life.

*The Statesman*

18.11.1998

### **A Great Tamil Classic**

But what is a classic? I may not know. Even Sainte-Beuve and T.S Eliot leave some questions about it unanswered in their essays bearing the same title “What is a Classic.” In these latter days, a classic is a problem. It is a problem because now a work valued as a classic is not read.

I remember my teacher who taught us Aristotle’s *Poetics* once told our class that we read all kinds of rubbish; he read only Homer. I do not know how many even in Greece read only Homer for there are now other Homers, plenty of them, demanding attention. I think there is a kind of Gresham’s Law operating in literary currency making bad books drive good books out of circulation.

An old man like me now verging on senility cannot be abreast of the times as a reader of books, and he often takes solace from the words of Thomas Hood:

“The noisy day is defined by a crowd  
Of undistinguished birds, a twittering race;  
But only lark and nightingale forlorn  
Fill up the silences of night and morn.”

But the great Tamil classic I have in mind is still a popular book amongst the fifty-five million people of Tamil Nadu and not a few of them would have some of its verses on their lips. And the *Kural* or the *Tirukkural* (the sacred *Kural*) composed by Valluvar around the fifth century A.D. was hailed as a classic by the world early in the eighteenth century when Father Joseph Beschi (1680-1747) translated large parts of it into Latin.

Preserved in the India Office Library (now the British Library) the Latin manuscript dated 1730 was printed in 1886 for inclusion in an appendix to G.U. Pope's English edition of the work published that year.

The *Kural*, named after its metre, is a didactic poem in 133 chapters with ten couplets in each, that is, it is a work of 1330 distiches and 2660 lines of verse in all. While fixing its genre we must call it a didactic poem although it has none of the insipidities of an ethical horn-book. Here we have the very poetry of morality—each maxim striking you as the life blood of a master spirit.

### Library

Let us remember that it was translated into Latin by a European some 55 years before any Sanskrit work was translated into any language of Europe. And how it touched the heart of the world we can see from its many translations since Father Beschi's.

There is a French edition in Bibliotheque Nationale which is dated 1767. Dr Graul's Latin and German translation appeared in 1856. In his sonnet on Valluvar included in his English *Kural*, Dr. Pope calls him "Bard of Universal Man."

I think Pope said this realising that the *Kural* was not a Hindu, or Buddhist or Jaina text because it embraced the cardinal truths of all these faiths. There is some primal sympathy in Valluvar's great heart which places him above all dogma and doctrine.

Let us listen to a French admirer of this Tamil poet, M. Ariel who wrote in a letter to Burnouf in 1948 about his work that "this is a masterpiece of Tamil literature -- one of the highest and purest expressions of human thought, in the austere metaphysical contemplation of the great mysteries of the Divine Nature, as in the easy and graceful analysis for the tenderest emotions of the heart."

Winternitz called it "one of the gems of world literature," while G.U. Pope called it "an apple of gold in a network of silver."

I first read the *Kural* in Nalinimohan Sanyal's Bengali translation published by our Vangiya Sahitya Parisad in 1937 with a long and illuminating introductory essay by Suniti Kumar Chatterji. Nalinimohan's own introduction to the work is at once scholarly and perceptive.

I was so fascinated by the work, by the sheer grandeur of its moral tone that I looked for other works on the poem and while visiting Madras, now Chennai, I could collect G.U. Pope's edition, translations of Ellis, Drew and Lazerus, A. Chakravarti's magnificent bilingual edition, a volume of 648 pages, and H.A. Popley's *The Sacred Kural* published by the Oxford University Press in 1931.

### **Dravidian**

I could also acquire a copy of E.J. Robinson's *Tamil Wisdom* first published in 1873. In his introduction, Robinson says: "Nothing certainly in the whole compass of human language, can equal the force and terseness of the sententious distichs in which the author conveys the lessons of wisdom he utters."

Here I may add an appreciation of the *Kural* by an authority on Dravidian languages and literatures who was also a Sanskritist, Robert Caldwell (1814-1891), who says in his *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* (1856, reprinted in 1875 and 1956) that "in ethical apothegms (of the *Kural*) Sanskrit is outdone by Tamil."

I must not leave my readers before placing before them a few sayings which make the *Kural* one of the profoundest of moral poems:

"Kind speech is love-filled, guile-free speech;  
The speech of those who have seen the Real."

Here ethics meets religion, a kindly word being the word of one who knows his God. The *Kural* is a poetical handbook of ahimsa:

"Through others ill may do, it is better far,  
On their behalf to suffer, to no one doing ill."

The poet of the *Kural* is capable of expressing his noble ideas in a language of dry humour:

"If each one saw his faults, as those of foes,  
Would any ill befall the human race!"

There is a Gandhian overtone in words like:

"If you would punish those who have done you ill,  
Shame them by kindness in return."

I do not call it punitive kindness; this is generous forgiveness of one who believes in a reciprocity of humane feeling.

I suggest that our National Book Trust bring out a modern English edition of the *Kural* and then encourage the literary *akademis* of our states to produce translations in all our languages.

*The Statesman*

04.07.1998

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We gratefully acknowledge the help of Professor Sourin Bhattacharya for the selection and Mr. Sarbananda Chaudhuri for providing the text.

