

Hindu Spirituality: How to Grasp the Divine?



Max Demtchenko is an Associate Professor at the Moscow State Linguistic University. He has authored: *Aspects of Hindu-Christian Dialogue in the Mid-Twentieth Century (according to Jules Monchanin's and Henri Le Saux' Experience)*, PhD thesis (Moscow, 2011) and *The Path of Saccidānanda* (Moscow, Ganga, 2008). He has also published the first Russian translation of Swāmī Abhishiktānanda's *Guru and Disciple* (Moscow, Ganga, 2013). His current academic interest is in the field of North Indian rural bhakti movements with a special focus on Nānak-panths as well as on Rāma-rasika traditions' poetry and practices.

Andrew Schumann: India is one of the most mysterious countries over the world. It has been a focus of attention for many philosophers since ancient times. Let me remember Apollonius of Tyana who visited India in the 1st century A.D. for developing an extra-sensory perception. What is so attractive in India for Europeans? Why are we looking for some instructions from the Hindu *gurūs*? What are the basic features of the Hindu thinking and the Indian philosophy as such? How is this philosophy distinguished from the European tradition?

Max Demtchenko: The overwhelming interest in Indian thought flooded the West in early 1960s due to various factors the main of which is probably disappointment of the “hippy generation” in Christian patterns traditional for Europe and the US. Gandhian *ahimsā* was perfectly fitting for pacifist trends while exotic costumes, colours, sounds and smells seemed to be a relief from rigid Catholic and Protestant ways of worship. However this “Oriental spirituality revival” was preceded by earlier interest in Hindu and Buddhist thought cherished by British, German and French intellectuals since early 19th century. Leaving aside more or less professional indological studies by

Max Müller (1823 – 1900), Ralph Griffiths (1826 – 1926) and others we can recall such writers as Romain Rolland (1866 – 1944) who was deeply inspired by a Bengali “Universalist” saint Rāmakṛṣṇa (1836 – 1886) and his main disciple Vivekānanda (1863 – 1902), Leon Tolstoy (1828 – 1910) who wrote: “The metaphysical, religious idea of Krishna... is the eternal and universal basis of all religions and all philosophical systems.”¹ Even Anna Akhmatova (1889 – 1966) couldn’t escape from the charm of contemporary Bengali poetry and rendered her own version of Tagore’s *Gurū Rāmānanda!*

Replying to your further questions I should say that Indian philosophy is a too vast subject to enumerate basic features that would be intact for all its branches and schools. While European philosophy for centuries had been confined within the framework of Christian dogma, Indian thought had been freely developing in healthy atmosphere of dialogue and dispute (akin to the pre-Christian Greek and Roman scene). If you analyze classics of the Medieval Indian philosophy such as *bhāṣyas* by Śaṅkarācārya, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, Rāmānujāchārya, etc., you will find that most of them are based on a free exchange with their counterparts. As a result, during the first millennia A.D. India produced a treasury of human thought comprising probably all possible approaches to the nature of Reality, Universe and place of living beings in it.

Speaking about “Hinduism of the majority” as we know it nowadays I would say that it is characterized by a relative universalism and attempts to embrace all possible religious concepts (both Hindu and non-Hindu) in order to present them as various manifestations of the same Truth (*In pluribus unum!*). This feature is probably the most attractive for foreign seekers coming to India in search of inspiration and enlightenment (as they understand it). It should be noticed however that the universalist rhetoric is often limited by particular philosophical and practical patterns adhered to by this or that school/sect. Another motivating factor is an astonishing coincidence of certain contemporary scientific concepts with Hindu and Buddhist worldview features that has always tended to see the Universe rather in evolutionary and relative perspective than in the linear one more common for Bible-based traditions.

Andrew Schumann: Local religions in India have no strict boundaries. For instance, Sufism can flow into Sikhism, and Sikhism into one of the branches of Hinduism. Boundaries among religions are ethnic or caste rather than doctrinal. How is it possible to distinguish religious beliefs in India? For example, there is an old community of Kamboj, located in the Northern part of India and Eastern Pakistan. How is it possible to define their religious identity? Is it rather an identity of an ethnic group / caste? How is their identity related to identities of the neighbor ethnic groups/castes?

Max Demtchenko: The British colonial administration has easily solved the riddle by strictly dividing Indians into Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Muslims etc. as defined in the legislation. Of course, I am being sarcastic – this division led to a huge identity crisis within community’s members of which had never thought over the question whether they were Hindus or Sikhs before. In many instances, they were both. As an example, I can mention Udāsīn congregation of itinerant *sādhus* who were basically Hindus (as traced their mythological lineage back to the four Kumāras, children of Brahmā, and accepted the authority of the Vedas) however they were also inspired and led by gurū Nānak’s elder son Śrīchandra (born in 1494) and thus were known as Nānak-putras, children of the first Sikh master. Undoubtedly, they retained many Sikh elements, were propagating the Sikh scripture all over India and generally settled around Sikh *gurudwārās*. The Udāsīn community was inseparable from the Sikh one and a great deal of Udāsīs had a kind of double identity. It was only in 1925 when according to the adopted “Sikh Gurudwārās Act” Udāsīnsādhus and devotees officially lost the right to call themselves Sikhs.

The majority of Kambojas, the ethno-cultural group that you mentioned here above, since mid 18th century have been moved by the life and legacy of their first major saint Bābā Bhūman Shāh (1687 – 1747) who being an Udāsīnsādhu since an early age highly revered (and, according to some sources, personally knew) the 10th Sikh master gurū Gobind Singh (1666 – 1708) as a result his teachings represented creative fusion of *bhakti* (preponderantly Nirguṇa), Vedānta, Sikhism and local folk versions of Sufism. It is interesting to note that his among his first disciples there were Muslims who granted him a plot of land near Pakpattan in West Punjab (now in Pakistan) which belonged to *mahants* (spiritual leaders) of his subject until the Partition tragedy in 1947 culminated in Kambojas' genocide and exodus to the Indian Republic. The massacre of Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan has undoubtedly put an end to involvement of Sufi *sheikhs* and followers in the life of Bhūman Shāh's community however the cult of Muslim saints who belonged or just were close to Kambojas' *gotras* (clans) is still widespread in most of their villages in Punjab and Haryana (the present *mahant's* residence is located a few kilometers from Sirsa and is known as *ḍerā Bābā Bhūman Shāh*). The reasons are basically two: firstly Kambojas' saints are regarded as such not on the account of their religious affiliation but due to their belonging to this or that particular *gotra* (that is, in case I am a member of, suppose, Kamboja Dhot subcaste, I will revere all saints from the same *gotra*, no matter whether they were Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims) and secondly North-Indian folk Nirguṇa-bhakti presupposes the idea of the one nameless and formless Divine Being who, as Kabīr beautifully puts it, manifested himself under names of Rām and Rahīm. For the movement's "holy poets" theological and ritualistic differences are secondary in comparison with God's self-revelation in form of the sound converted by them into *bāñī*, verses chanted even nowadays on a daily basis (including those that became the core of the Sikh scripture). It is devotion to Rām/Rahīm, recitation of his holy name and devoted listening to *bāñī* that brings the adept to the supreme goal and not theology or rituals. Thus a Kamboja devotee performing a pilgrimage will most probably visit not only Hindu temples and Sikh *gurudwārās* but also *mazārs* (tombs) of Sufi saints (a significant number of such tombs such as *mazār* of Bābā Kale Shāh located in Darbi village, Haryana, are even owned and used for ritual purposes by Hindu Kambojas).

Andrew Schumann: India has given rise to a special version of monotheism with expressing ecstatic love to the Lord. One of most vivid manifestations of this "erotic" monotheism became the movement of Bengalese followers of Prabhu Jagadbandhu, the 19th-century Hindu Vaishnav Saint. Which main features of this monotheism can you mention? May be can this movement give something to European religions at times of our secular world?

Max Demtchenko: Jagadbandhu's Mahānāma-sampradāya is one of the facets of the 19th century's Bengali renaissance characterized by a rise of humanist egalitarian ideas boosted by cults of "God-men", ecstatic saints looked upon as incarnations of God Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa (less often of other deities). Haripurūṣ Jagadbandhusundar (1871 – 1921) believed he was a reincarnation of a renowned 19th century mystic Chaitanya (1486 – 1534) famous for his ecstatic love towards God Kṛṣṇa from the perspective of the latter's beloved Rādhā. Actually Chaitanya is seen by many of his followers as a joint form of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā or as Kṛṣṇa experiencing the devotional mood of Rādhā. Haripurūṣ in his turn considered himself to be a joint incarnation of Chaitanya himself and his male counterpart Nityānanda. The cornerstone of Jagadbandhu's cult is the so called "Mahānāma", a short prayer thoroughly commented by the saint's major disciples Śrīpad Mahendra and Dr. Mahānambrata, which introduces him as the only Male towards whom all other living beings should take feminine attitude being manifestations of his Śakti (feminine energy). Of course, such attitude presupposes certain erotic sentiments, but on a subtle level of the adept's consciousness. Jagadbandhu's biography "Bandhu Līlā Taraṅgini" written by Gopībandhu Das, reveals the teaching's Tantric roots. The author reports the saint's own statement that his only *gurū* was none else but Rādhā whom even Kṛṣṇahad accepted as his divine preceptor. Is this confession a confirmation of Haripurūṣ's "unique manhood" or rather a search for his (and his listeners')

irrespectively of their sex) innate and often hidden feminine nature? Probably both as the key word in Jagadbandhu's religion is *mahāsanmilan* or “the great fusion” synthesis realized on various levels. Though Haripurūṣ himself often manifested his ecstatically feminine side (those interested in the subject matter may refer to June McDaniel's *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, Chicago, 1989) in practice the *sampradāya*'s devotional approach is quite simple and does not include any specific features that would highlight its erotic character – they remain hidden behind the veil of adepts' contemplative life.

I am not sure if Jagadbandhu's experience can be fully transplanted to the Occidental intellectual and spiritual soil however I'd like to mention an interesting encounter which took place in 1930th in the US. It is a well-known fact that Thomas Merton, a Trappist famous for his experiments with Buddhist contemplative practices, was influenced by a certain “Hindu monk” as he himself later wrote, who allegedly motivated the young man to go back to his Christian roots. It is seldom mentioned that the monk's name was Dr. Mahānambrata who came to America with the scope of preaching Jagadbandhu's message. The attempt was not successful mostly because the teaching seemed obscure to Westerners and the Bengali immigrants' community in the US was still at its childhood stage. Probably Dr. Mahānambrata's failure was also due to his approach to Jagadbandhu's personality in an exclusively religious and devotional light while the saint could be an interesting object of research for anthropologists and even psychologists specializing in gender identities issue.

Andrew Schumann: Many cults in India, especially belonging to low-castes, are so sensual in nature. It is originated from the notion of *rāsa-līlā* – the sensual or even erotic dance around Kṛṣṇa. How is the subject of sex reflected in the Hindu practices now? For example, is it possible to consider Hijra, the caste of transvestites and transgenders, as a special religious group in India?

Max Demtchenko: It depends on the community which the adept belongs to. Attitude towards *rāsa-līlā* and its projection on religious life may vary from its emotionally charged implementation in the ritualistic practice (most often clandestine) to absolute denial with all possible options in between. My own interest is in Rāma-rasika tradition rather than in Kṛṣṇa-rasika due to my personal background as well as my focus on Avadhī poetry which is predominantly Rāma-oriented. General approaches towards the Divine are similar in both movements: just like I mentioned above in respect of Jagadbandhusundar's views, God is regarded as the supreme Male, while other living entities should consider themselves as his feminine energy and thus see him as the Supreme Beloved. In *rasika-bhakti* the adept chooses (or rather his preceptor “reveals” to him) his eternal *sambandh* (type of relationships) from the perspective of which he from now on should contemplate God. Normally *sambandh* is determined by the *gurū*'s particular sub-sect – for example all members of the Sakhī-sampradāya are automatically initiated into the *sakhī-sambandh*, that is the mood of Sītā's sisters or female companions. In rare cases, the initiated disciple's behavior also changes – he may manifest feminine traits and manners, wear female clothes, etc. But most often *sambandh* (as well as the fact of initiation itself) is kept in secret and is practiced on the personal contemplative level only. The central narrative for all Rāma-rasikas is the story of love between Rāma and Sītā as described in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as well as in its various local versions and Rāmaite poets. Thus a 19th-century classic of Rāma-rasika poetry Yugalānanya wrote in his *Nāmakānti*:

प्रीति प्रनय परतीति एकरस श्री मजनू लैले सि है।
युगलानन्य इशक बलों को कीमत चाहिए जैसी है॥

“The love of Majnun and Laila is the unquenchable sensuality and devotion. [The one, who chants Rāma's name] should also be possessed by such love.”

It is interesting that the author widely uses Persian and Arabic references while describing realities of the Rāma-bhakti. He goes on to say that for a *rasika*-devotee it is a waste of time to turn to *brāhmaṇa*, deities and sages:

छन्द प्रबन्ध योग जप तप से परतम प्रभा प्रकासेगि॥

“Do you really hope that chanting of the Vedas, meditation, yoga, prayers and ascetic efforts will help you to see the Supreme Spirit’s light?”

It shows that there has always been a certain argument between *rasika-bhaktas* and orthodox Hindus on both theoretical (or philosophical) and practical aspects of spiritual life.

Unlike *sakhīs* and other *rasikas* Hijras are not a religious group. Practically any transgendered or transvestite person can be considered as a Hijra. A great number of Hijras traditionally form a caste comprising many sub-divisions and very few of Hijras are involved in Hindu temple worship mostly as dancers and singers. For example in one of the main temples of Rāma-rasikas called Kānak-bhavan Hijras often sing and dance during the evening *āratī* collecting donations from visitors. Position of Hijras in Indian society is quite ambiguous: they can be considered as outcastes by some orthodox Hindus however their presence at weddings and other social functions is believed to bring luck so in such cases they impart their blessings and are treated in high esteem by participants and guests.

Andrew Schumann: In mass media we often listen to different sex scandals with some Indian pop *gurūs*. For instance, Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan was embroiled in such a scandal in the recent days. Perhaps, is it one of the parts of *rāsa-līlā*? That is, is the sex with the *gurū* examined as a norm of showing respect to him? Who are the *gurūs* for the Indian communities now? Which role do they play?

Max Demtchenko: I don’t think these sex scandals have anything to do with the *rāsa-līlā*. It is rather a question of personal crimes committed by particular people. To be a *rasika* devotee one should be duly initiated into the *sampradāya* by a bona-fide *gurū* taking into consideration that its eroticism is primarily of spiritual, contemplative nature (unlike in some *bāula* and *sahajiyā* sects). Gurū Rām-Rahīmhas a totally different background and his teaching can be defined as neo- (or rather, pseudo-) Sikh while for Nānak-panths (traditions tracing back their spiritual genealogy to gurū Nānak and his family) sensual practices are not common.

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1. Quoted from Dr. A.P. Gnatyuk-Danil’chuk. *Tolstoy and SwāmīVivekānanda*. Kolkata, 2006, p. 10.