

# India of the Heart

Marcus Lefébure

*'I let the crystals resolve into their mother liquid'*

Wittgenstein

India had been exercising more and more of an attraction on me for some years, and I did occasionally wonder why this was so. Then I came across a saying of André Malraux to the effect that there is *a secret India in the heart of each one of us*. I began to realise why I was in India: I was exploring my own heart, yet, like Jung in regard to Africa, I needed the India without to bring out the contours of the India within. And this is in fact how my experience of India has gradually evolved: the outer world that now swam into my ken has helped to disclose new potentialities within myself.

At the same time I am also a child and representative of the European culture in which I was brought up, so the potentialities that India was opening up in me could also be those of my culture as a whole. And this is the spirit in which I offer these reflections from India: immediately they represent one person's experience of getting in touch with new possibilities, ideas and directions, but, in so far as others who share my heritage can recognise themselves in what I say, they can serve as pointers to the way in which we might together help our Western society as a whole to direct itself anew.

## 1. *Liquid and Crystal*

The initial and for a long time the predominant impression of India was one of seething and bewildering confusion. And some of the contradictions of life in India can be suggested by a few images from the first few hours after my arrival in Bombay.

Among the innumerable shanty-dwellings that one passes on the long drive from the grey, inhospitable hangar-like buildings of the customs shed of the airport to the Bombay suburb of Dadar there was a naked child leaping through one of the rubber tyres borrowed from the making of the hovel in which his family lived—and already I reflected that to leap is the meaning of the Latin word that lies behind our term 'resilience': jumping, bouncing back. Then, on the hundred-mile-and-

more night drive in the shared taxi from Dadar, past the awesome silhouettes of the Western Ghats to Puné, I was struck by the sheer volume of freight lorries that toiled up and down the pitted and twisting road. If this was a developing country, I thought, it was intensely so. Then, once safely—but only just—inside the Christa Prema Seva ashram in Puné, I was kept awake most of the first night. It was not just the hardness of the slatted wooden bed, and the demented howling and baying of the dogs that I imagined were sniffing and scavenging round the corrugated-iron and sack-cloth dwellings resting against one of the garden walls of the ashram. Above all it was the almost unceasing noise of the bus station on the other side of the ashram, and of the railway line a little beyond that again—a veritable cacophony of beat machines revving up, and of assorted horns, hooters, sirens and whistles, that was nevertheless vibrating with life and industry. And this fever of activity was the point.

For India was poor indeed, shockingly, desperately poor, as everybody says, and teeming, but merely passive, resigned, other-worldly, as so many people have long ago also said, No. So much of the equipment (the remaining cycle-rickshaws, the battered buses and lorries, the wayside home industries) was ramshackle, and so many millions of her people were still squatting and meeting and selling and living in the dust and dirt of the streets, yet despite and through all this hand-to-mouth and do-it-yourself existence there was a persistence that therefore became the sign of a startling vigour and a secret urgency. What gradually emerged too through all this was the almost infinite resources of the crafts and skills of a very ancient civilisation, applied now to modern tasks, in just another phase of its immemorial existence. Over the next few weeks I realised that what was significant was not the Indians' poverty of means but the determination and inventiveness, the ambition and even the new greed that went into the deployment of these means, and certainly the obsession with money as well as the long inherited skill with money that was at work here in India.

At the same time, there was the other side: the endless walking along the dusty roads into the far distance; the stoic waiting, waiting, waiting of so many for so long; the resigned patience of it all; and above all, perhaps, a somehow far-seeing and yet glazed passivity in the eyes and face, as of a fog-like *maya* through which everything was perceived. And everywhere there really were scattered but cumulative signs and hints of a pervading spirituality. The stereotype of other-worldliness had some foundation in reality.

Gradually too, however, this disconcerting multiplicity and seeming contradiction began to sort itself out into some shape, finally into a most intricate and wonderfully ordered shape, like fluid forming into crystals. This began to come through in many different ways.

Thus, for example, one of the most valuable possessions in the excellent little library of the Christa Prema Seva ashram in Puné is the multi-volume collection of the legal codes of old India, the *Dharmashastra*, made by a great Sanskrit scholar of the university of Puné. And the really significant thing about this collection is an introduction by none other than Radhakrishnan, formerly holder of the Spalding chair of Eastern Religions in All Souls, Oxford, before becoming president of free India. For what this scholar-statesman talks about is not so much the laws as their deepest religious inspiration. Then, the critically interesting thing about the ever more officially supported native science of Ayyurvedic medicine is again its religious origin. And the very seething of commercial activity, in market street or international offices, let alone the prevalence of haggling, alongside all the manifestations of religion, can perhaps be most revealingly seen as a relic of the antique concept according to which human life unfolds in four *ashramas* or phases, those of learner, householder, forest-dweller and renunciant, i.e. in terms of a *progressive redemption of material and worldly existence*. Similarly too we learned that the revived and purified dances of India, especially the beautiful Bharata Natyam dances of the South and the Kathak dances of the North, are products of the temple, just as the subtleties of the ragas are meant to rouse and wrap the emotions into essentially religious and contemplative adoration.

So what can gradually emerge from letting the initial welter shape itself in the pondering heart and mind is this: law, medicine and commerce, music and dance, let alone the more evident manifestations of religion, are like so many rays of a central sun, like the intricately interdependent filaments of a spider's web, like the spokes of a wheel radiating from and to the hub—and I deliberately apply to forms of life images used time and again in the *Upanishads* to describe the many-layered vortex of reality and being.

And that this refractive quality of Indian life is not just my subjective fancy but is a deliberate produce of the collective mind of India, and precisely how it is such a product of this mind, can be seen at its most explicit in the very lay-out of the classical Indian temple.

## 2. *The Temple as the Crystallisation of Life.*

Take, for example, the quite awe-inspiring temple of Kailasa, the most spectacular of the carvings made out of the sheer rock over hundreds of years between the sixth and tenth centuries at *Ellora*, north-east of Bombay. The symbolism of this rock-hewn temple is as multiple and subtle as its sculptures are intricate. Thus the very name, reminiscent as it is of a mountain in the Himalayas, as well as its literal manufacture out of the high hills and the skyward *élan* of the whole structure, all express the archetypal symbolism of the assault on the world mountain that

aspires to heaven. Even more pointedly, there is the usual progress of successive spaces: the *gopuram* or gateway between everyday life outside and the sacred enclosure as a whole, the *mandapam* or outer court, then the *mulasthanam* or inner court and sanctuary, and, finally, behind that again, the *garbagriha*, 'womb-room', or inner sanctum (and the guides quite unselfconsciously refer to this innermost space as the *sanctum sanctorum*, in Latin). This particular temple happens to be dedicated to the Lord Shiva, so what this inner sanctum encloses and focuses on is the phallic stone *lingam* of Shiva plunged into the vaginal round of the stone *yoni*. At the same time, the fact that this is only the most undifferentiated symbol of creativity is caught from the complementary fact that this same creativity is then also rearticulated in the sculpted figuration of the loves and adventures of the Lord Shiva, at once creator, destroyer and preserver. In particular, and quite centrally, especially in the neighbouring cave, number fifteen, he is rendered in his creative aspect as Lord of the Dance, Nataraj, with a quite breath-taking and exquisite combination of joy, lightness and elegance. Thus the point towards which everything converges is also the point from which everything emanates—and in a Sāivite temple everything is represented as emanating from the Absolute with all the vital energy and radiance of the dance, the cosmic dance.

The real point, then, of the temple constructions so beautifully epitomised in this 'glory of Ellora' is not that they represent some self-enclosed worship but that they catch up the very process of all Indian life. It is not just that, as St Paul would have said, these are a very religious people—there are wayside shrines more numerous than in Catholic Brittany; in any temple big or small one can see touchings of the ground and images and bowings and prostrations movingly reminiscent of Orthodox devotion; one is liable to be woken by temple chant, 'Jai, Jai, Jai', or distracted by processions of pilgrims, or engaged in conversation by an individual pilgrim who will explain the pilgrim ritual of forty-one days' abstinence. No, it is rather that, over time, one can gradually realise that the whole of Indian life does indeed have a central focus and spring that is spiritual, and therefore that it has a fundamental unity that we in the West can now find only in the history books of our own past or in descriptions of so-called 'primitive societies'.

All this, however, is still to experience India in purely Indian terms. The way in which this experience can click into a concept that opens it up to the Western mind is to be found in that Indian re-expression of Christianity that is the little Benedictine ashram of Shantivanam, Forest of Peace, in South India.

### 3. *Shantivanam as a Recapitulation of the Temples*

To come off the crowded bone-shaking bus with its scale of five different  
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notes of the horn on its way from Trichy through the nevertheless fertile, ordered and happy landscape of South India; thence to tread the fine sand of the lane among the banana and coconut trees in the sudden silence of a sun-drenched day until one enters the cultivated clearing and stillness of the ashram of Shantivanam, set as it is among the eucalyptus trees beside the sacred river Cavery; and so to find one's way into a 'forest of peace' indeed—all this is to gain an immediate intimation of the meaning of the place. This meaning only unfolds in the days that follow.

Physically the ashram of Shantivanam consists of some six acres of land on the right bank of the river Cavery, that here flows languorously and widely, sometimes silver, sometimes mud-brown, down from its source in the Deccan plateau towards the Indian Ocean below Madras on the East. The main entrance is by way of the *gopuram* or gateway constructed in the Indian style and bearing the superscription 'Ashram of the Holy Trinity'. After entry the first thing that meets one's eye is the towered 'temple' or chapel. Slightly off-centre to that is the round, thatched and wood-pillared library, complete with raised platform and wicker chairs under its generous eaves for reading and meditation in the heat of the day or the stillness of evening. Behind that again, loosely-positioned round three sides of an open square, are, respectively, the long barn-like refectory building, open to the air from waist height, where all sit cross-legged on the floor at meal times, the byre for what turns out to be a small herd of sleek-coated and obviously well cared-for Friesian cows, the showers and W.C.s (Indian and European styles!), and the further three-sided buildings of the main guest quarters, round the tap and washing stone and drying lines. And further around are various individual brick and thatched terracotta-washed huts, including that of the prior, Fr Bede Griffiths, and the simple wigwam shaped *Dyanamandir* or meditation hall, placed amid the lush model garden behind the refectory.

This is the setting of what one soon discovers is a meeting place of largely European and American seekers, many of them lapsed Catholics disappointed by the dessication and externality of their received religion, as Fr Bede told us one day, and of increasing numbers of Indian priests, sisters and layfolk wishing to have a personal experience of this pioneering but now well-tried experiment in an Indianised way of Christian life. More than a meeting place, however, Shantivanam has a very definite identity and purpose. To understand this one needs to know a little of its history.

It was in the nineteen-thirties that the celebrated intellectual, friend of such people as Teilhard de Chardin and Père de Lubac, Père Jules Monchanin, disconcerted his friends and admirers by conceiving a project like that of Roberto de Nobile some three centuries earlier,

namely, so to penetrate the ancient Hindu civilisation of India as to rearticulate Christianity in terms of India's essential spiritual insights and modes of expression. It was in this way that he worked for many years in a parish for the bishop of Trichy and was finally offered two acres of land on the banks of the Cavery near the village of Thanirpalli, the present Shantivanam. And it was here that he was in due course joined by another visionary Frenchman, Père Henri le Saux, who had independently conceived of a similar project in his traditional Benedictine monastery of Kergonan in Brittany.

However, Père Henri le Saux, Abhishiktananda as he became, Bliss of Christ, became increasingly possessed by an eremitical and mendicant vocation and spent more and more of his time, in the fifties and sixties, away from Shantivanam, in search of the essential Hindu experience of the underlying oneness of all things, *advaita*, a-duality, the Real of the Real, of which the seers of the Upanishads had spoken. In particular he was more and more drawn to the symbolic expression of this search, the Ganges towards its source in the limpid light and air of the Himalayas. It was thus left to Fr Bede Griffiths, monk of Farnborough and Prinknash and author of *The Golden String*, when he, in his turn, was called to India and to Shantivanam, to return to the first inspiration of finding a way of Christian life that retained the traditional Benedictine features of an open hospitality integrated into public and private prayer but did so in a characteristically Indian idiom.

It is the combination of all these strands that gives Shantivanam its distinctive character. For what strikes one very soon is not so much the transposition of Christianity, and certainly not its more evident surrounding features, like the colours of the palm trees and the hibiscus flowers, nor even the Hindu gestures of lights and the multiple use of flowers in the liturgy. It is not even the gathering of all this into what is nevertheless a recognisably Catholic round of prayer. No, it is the contemplative and mystical quality of this prayer that impinges above all.

And this comes through first of all in the very lay-out as well as the feel of the 'temple' or chapel that is at the physical and spiritual centre of Shantivanam. For the gardens and grounds surround and lead into the outer covered space of the chapel. This narrows somewhat into the space of the raised sanctuary, complete with its small lotus-shaped altar, which then in turn leads into the never-frequented *garbagriha*, 'womb-room', the Hindu-like inner sanctum that nevertheless contains a tabernacle and therefore a traditional sanctuary lamp in such a way that the glimmering of the lamp in the semi-hidden space within is a felt symbol of the luminous darkness celebrated in the Judaeo-Christian and mystical traditions everywhere. In other words—and this is, of course, no accident—this is the very same ground-plan and structure as that of the classical Hindu temple I have already evoked: with *mandapam* or outer court for the congregation,

*mulasthanam* or inner court for the priests, and *garbagriha* or 'womb-room' for the God, all in enfilade in such a way as to suggest *a process and a progress ever more inward*.

It is, however, in the teaching of Fr Bede that all that is thus latent in the static structure comes to explicit and dynamic life. From the ground of twenty-four years of living, study and prayer in India, first in Kerala, then in this clearing of peace, he has so thoroughly concentrated the Hindu scriptures and mystical writings from everywhere that this teaching streams out of him, more formally in the eucharist and evening prayer, less formally in talks in the meditation hall or even in personal conversations in his hut. This teaching is distilled into certain deceptively simple leitmotifs. Whether he starts from a passage of the Old or the New Testament, or from, say, the *Bhavadgita*, or a Sufi mystic, he returns time and again to certain seminal notions: that the world and the psyche are composed of successive layers and so constitute a ladder of being, like body, soul and spirit; that the cosmos and life therefore have a progressive spiritualisation built into them; that this is why the India that has expressed and retained the sense of these things exercises the appeal it does; and that what it thus awakens and represents above all is the inclination and right of each one of us to the contemplative and the mystical life.

This message comes over as such an effortless whole that it may be some time before we realise that it owes a great deal of its appeal to the fact that it is not so much something exotic and alien as something obscurely familiar in fresh guise. This new hint can prompt us to search the collective memory of the West. And it is as we do so that one particular term leaps out like an electric spark to produce a flash of recognition and so enables us to understand the Indian experience in Western terms too.

What, then, is this revelatory term and how do we come to it? This is what we must explore next.

#### *4. The Meaning of India as a Reminder to the West*

Perhaps the easiest way back to the term in question is to start from the observation that the seeming whole of Fr Bede's teaching in fact has two distinguishable aspects, corresponding to two complementary expressions of his being. On the one hand, he is undoubted *guru* in the Indian tradition, on the other hand he is nevertheless an individual with a very particular history and as such he is merely a bearer of this archetype—who happens to be a very humble bearer at that. More particularly, he may even wear the saffron robe and exercise a feudal style that goes with it, yet behind all this is an engagingly familiar figure—a simple, old, Catholic monk and an English country parish priest, kindly and shrewd. It is Europeans who have assumed the Indian garb at Shantivanam; these spiritual reconnoiters of the East have started from the Western heritage they share with us. And this is here the point: Fr Bede and his predecessors have sought to strip themselves of as

much of the Western trappings as possible in order to be able to take up the apparel and the finest spiritual intuitions of India, opening themselves up to the gift India has to offer, yet it is surely because they thus went to India out of the fullness of another theological and liturgical tradition and were somehow rightly predisposed by it, that they could so readily be quickened into a profound sympathy with the Indian endeavour.

For the Western Christian tradition was predominantly Greek-speaking before it also became in part Latin-speaking, and it was St Maximus the Confessor who, building largely on the work of his Greek-speaking predecessors, yet one of the last fathers of the undivided Church, in the seventh century developed a highly individual but deeply traditional conception of the liturgy. In his view it is because the inner tendency of our physical life is to grow towards spiritualisation that it is patient of being caught up *par excellence* by the liturgy, in so far as the material is inherently interlocked into and subordinated to the spiritual as world is to Church, nave to sanctuary, people to priesthood, earth to heaven.

Now this process and dynamic had already by St Maximus' time been called by the Greek term 'mystagogy'—a progressive leading into mystery. And *this* is the concept and the key to unlock an understanding of the whole Indian enterprise in Western terms: the quest of India, expressed in its life in the round, articulated in its temples, and recapitulated at Shantivanam, resonates so sympathetically in so far as it can now be called and so seen to be a *mystagogy*—an Indian variant of something within the collective experience of the West: a progressive leading into mystery indeed, an ever deeper penetration of the inwardness of the external (and I think of the time 'when the two shall be one, and the outer shall be as the inner', as the Second Letter of Clement puts it). Contrariwise, this name can now be offered back to India from the West, to complete the interchange of gifts.

It is this *vision of life as a mystagogy*, as powerful as it is pervasive, that is the particular contribution India still has to make to us in the West. Nor does it really matter that this very vision is poignantly in crisis in India itself. (We have met many Indians—many of whom, we have been astonished to find, turned out to be Brahmins—who were confusedly but certainly aware that India may no more be able to integrate the undoubted benefits of science into a spiritual culture than we have been in the West.) For what is in question for us is not imitation but rediscovery, not a belated catching up but a return, not the kindling of a fire anew but the rekindling of a flame that we have experienced ourselves in the West but let die awhile.

##### 5. *Back to the Womb of Water*

One last word. The graduated spirituality that India can be seen to model for us also has a complement and a corrective of particular interest to us at our conjuncture in the post-Christian and secularised West: the differentiations are a ladder, and yet behind them is an even more fundamental unity. This

perception is expressed for me above all in the mystical poetry of Kabir, the fifteenth-century weaver who was the heir to the Muslim and Sufic as well as the Hindu traditions of mysticism. It was in this mystical school that he came to a perception of the integrity that underlies all differentiations. But he also happened to be an artisan and a married man, and since it was therefore as such that he was given to see everything as an effluence of the one God, he broke through to what might be called a mysticism of everyday life:

O Servant, where dost thou seek me?  
Lo! I am beside thee.  
I am neither in temple nor in mosque:  
    I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash:  
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies,  
    nor in Yoga and renunciation.  
If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at  
    once see me: thou shalt meet me in a moment of time...

    If you have union now, you shall have it hereafter...  
In the home is true union, in  
the home is enjoyment of life:  
Why should I forsake my home and  
wander in the forest? ...  
    Open your eyes of love, and see Him  
who pervades this world! Consider  
it well, and know that this is your  
own country!

(translated by Rabindranath Tagore)

We need to note that Kabir was not a purveyor of cheap grace: his pervasive sense of the intimate interplay of love and renunciation proves this. But his particular gift was that he transcended the wonted distinctions between marriage and celibacy, ritual and life, sacred and profane in his own person before he did so in his poetry, and so he restored us to the primordial unity that all differentiations of analysis, nomenclature and charism only subserve. So he personified what is perhaps the final message of India: that we are all fellow-receivers and re-makers of a material world patient of divinisation—initiated into the Mystery.

Can we still reappropriate that message? In our way, according to our own stamp and genius, *chacun(e) à sa vérité* (mindful that *multae viae veritas*, truth has many ways)?