

Līlā, the Divine Play

FROM ṚgVedic times throughout the Upaniṣads and the later systematic period the concept of God as a single and unique personality is problematic for the Indian thinker. In as much as in the early ṚgVeda several Gods are regarded as representatives of atmospheric forces, they all stand on the same footing. They are all for the Indian mind normal notions, being notions of Nature. But in the moment when the superiority of one of them succeeds in being established, the problem starts. Either the ṚgVedic hymn is then devoted to the main God, say Indra, together with others (Viśve Devās, All-Gods), in a way to avoid an unnatural isolation ; or else, the bundle of divine qualities as a whole is in turn (*kathenos*) compiled on one divine form only, but under the presupposition that yet another God in the next moment can be praised with exactly the same attributes as he who is at present supreme. In the latest parts of the ṚgVeda then, all-embracing highest Gods are conceived, e.g. Prajāpati, the Lord of all beings. But this Prajāpati, while being all-embracing, is only a vague and ambiguous personality and never attained a unique rank. In a similar manner God Varuṇa is significantly addressed either as a dual deity (Mitra-Varuṇau) and then contains all polar aspects, day and night, etc., or else, when mentioned alone, he too, is vague and ambiguous and not supreme as a distinct personality. As I tried to point out in a former essay, ¹ Varuṇa owes his importance less to his own single or dual aspects but to the Impersonal idea of Ṛta whose servant or child he is generally called. The vagueness of an all-embracing divine person is characteristically expressed in the refrain of the so-called Ka-hymn, Ṛgveda 10,121 : “ Whom then shall we adore as the God ? ” This development of late Ṛgvedic thought culminates in Ṛgveda 10,129 which definitely ranges the God or the Gods, as “*arvāg visarjanena*,” downwards in (later), inferior to, the world-emanation, i.e. temporarily, and with regard to value, on a lower rank than the manifested phenomena themselves. Therefore, this hymn asserts that the God probably does not know himself how the world came into being because he is later than its beginning.

After the Ṛgvedic times in Brāhmaṇa and early Upaniṣadic texts predominance is not given to the personal form of a “ He-God,” but to the all-embracing “ It ” out of which the division into the male and female comes into being as yet its manifestations. For several hundred years the neuter Brahman is the highest Divine. It is true that the younger group of Upaniṣads, especially the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, puts a personal Īśvara into the foreground, but Śiva (or Viṣṇu) is once more, either combined in a dual form as “ Hari-Hara,” or, if only one of them is the chosen deity (Iṣṭa-devatā) then even this so-called theistic Upaniṣad definitely asserts that He

1. Cf. the Chapter “ Varuṇa-Ṛta-Karma ” in “ Studien zur Eigenart Indischen Denkens,” Tübingen, 1931.

cannot be grasped in one visible form but only in a series of his *avatāras*, descents (Śvet. up 4, 19 f.) Thus apparent singleness disappears again in multiformity. This consistent reluctance towards uniqueness even of the divine form is as characteristic for the Indian thought as the attempts, unsuccessful as they are, to establish in later systematics the postulates of one single Creator-God.

Let us once more look back on the various concepts provided in Indian texts for this main divine postulate of Creation. In early Ṛgvedic times one God or the other is assumed to be the "*vi-dhātṛ*" which is wrongly often translated as "Creator," while literally meaning "Disposer." God sees to it that Heaven and Earth do not fall together, that the Sun, the Moon shine in their due course, that the udder of the cow fills itself with milk in the appropriate moment, etc., *i.e.* that everything functions in its due order.

Another concept of creation prevalent in Brāhmaṇa-and Upaniṣad-times is that of creation in the sense of "*visarga*," a quasi-biological emanation or secretion of bodily forces. Or else, the cosmic being is dissected, or dissects itself, into different separate limbs by way of a sacrifice, and the earthly beings thus produced are only parts of the cosmic organism.

The logical system of India, the later Nyāya, has taken upon itself a rather difficult task, when establishing the person of a Creator-God and explaining the motives for His world-creation. The supreme Divine cannot have any want; that contradicts its primary perfection. It cannot create either from the motive of compassion towards His creatures; that does not agree with the Indian ideal of divine unperturbed indifference towards worldly happenings. Nor can the God create the whole cosmos for the sole benefit of Man. For firstly, Man is not singled out among his fellow-beings, and secondly not acknowledged as their absolute master. No extenuating fact, therefore, is given to account for such an injustice of God towards the other creatures. The Nyāya and also the earlier Brahma-Sūtras 2:1:33 state accordingly that God creates the world out of mere "*līlā*," play or pastime; but is this divine "*līlā*" merely just a fancy? Or is it an indomitable urge of quasi-biological origin to display His natural forces which refuse to remain in a static condition?

This latter explanation is suggested by the Sāṅkhya system. Prakṛti plays and displays her power of world-production through manifesting herself. Significantly, she is therefore termed the "*nartakī*," the cosmic dancer. One may combine this concept with the general representation of theistic Sivaism. Śiva is the "*naṭa-rāja*," the master dancer. While generating, he dances his dance of world-destruction, and, while destroying, he provides the potential mass for further outgrowth. Characteristically, Śiva, the God of generation and destruction, has a third aspect, that of the master Yogin who is indifferent towards good and bad karma, because both are interwoven and interrelated counter-forces. Śiva, the master dancer, smiles with ease and plays with the polar aspects of good and bad, positive and negative forms. He brings about

simultaneous and successive counter-actions. Thus dance and play are expressions of neutrality, indifference and aloofness towards single purpose. Līlā is dynamic change, is a swinging to and fro, up and down, like a pendulum in periodic movements.

But there is yet a profane aspect of līlā, very often referred to in the Indian Kāvya, poetry. The beautiful woman is called "*līlāvati*," the coquettish, ambiguous, elusive woman who attracts and escapes and keeps the men guessing. It is no accident that Prakṛti (in the Sāṅkhya system) in her display of cosmic forms tries to attract the male Puruṣa like a woman does in her flirt.

However, this feminine aspect of erotic play has—in true Indian speculation on counter-parts—its male complement. The medieval Kṛṣṇa mysticism, profane and religious, emphasizes divine productivity in playful union and disunion between Kṛṣṇa and his shepherdesses; now he embraces the one, in the next moment he invites and accepts attention from another. He remains ever—youthful, ever—productive and ever—promising for the future. He is eternal youth, the "*Bāla-Kṛṣṇa*." Perfection, attainment, fulfilment, is an end in itself and therefore a boundary line which cuts off further expansion and fruition. Śiva, the mature God, dances forcefully his ambiguous dance of generation and destruction while Kṛṣṇa, the youth, enticingly plays the flute eliciting response, emotions, singing and dancing from his mistresses. The mature God retains his divine, all-embracing qualities through his own polar aspects; the "*Bāla-Kṛṣṇa*" is divine through his infinite promise which ever eludes and ever beckons.

The beauty of the woman's body is expressed in Indian art by broken lines, by her "*bhaṅganās*," her curves which show wilful movements in different directions. The graceful bend of her head is taken up, but thrown in yet another direction, through the curve of her neck and once more changed in dynamic flow by the swing of her hips. The Man-God, especially Viṣṇu, suggests accordingly in Indian artistic representation superiority and domination while assuming the so-called *līlā-āsanā*, the posture of play, crossing his legs and lifting his head in a leisurely reclining pose. Leisure is the expression of freedom from strenuous work and arduous desire.

Play is expression of beauty.² It is no accident that Rāmānuja, the philosopher who tries to combine the general Vedāntic concept of the impersonal Divine with his special notion of a personal God, predicates the divine person with the distinguishing attribute of absolute beauty, the expression of creative play. I should like to mention in passing that this divine predicate of play, though strange for the Western mind in general as a higher quality than serious intent, once also found an advocate in a Western thinker.

2. Synonyms: *lalita* and *sundara*—

Schiller in his "Aesthetische Briefe" claims that the highest creative impulse of an artist is the "Spieltrieb," playful tendency. This statement does not find a justification through reason and argument in Schiller's own exposition, but taken together with the fully developed Indian doctrine, it gets its significance and proper value.

Līlā is the expression of composed pleasure and leisureful happiness. As such, one may well associate it with the divine predicate of the Vedānta system: *ānanda*, absolute bliss. There are different interpretations of this concept of *ānanda*: the Divine rests in itself in complete bliss, gives complete bliss and is complete bliss, which no single effort can afford. One may contrast this idea with the Indian notion of karma: action as toil and discomfort. It is significant that our present period of the world which is considered the worst degradation from the "Golden Ages," those of absolute happiness, is called "*karma-yuga*," the period of worries and unsuccessful efforts.

And yet another main concept of Indian thought can be combined with the concept of *līlā* as the Highest and the Divine. The Pṛhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad emphatically asserts in reverse repetition that "*bhūman* is *ānanda* and *ānanda* is *bhūman*." *Bhūman* literally translated means continuous growth and development, display of the power of "*bhū*," continuous becoming without end, self-sufficient yet never complete in itself. Play, *līlā* too, is a symbol of life-force continuously diffusing.

As regards the concept of Time, *līlā* represents continuity. It is well worth noting that the Greeks from the time of the pre-Socratics establish the necessity of a "*kairos*," of the adequate moment when to start with adequate means to achieve one single purpose and intent. India, on the other hand, who developed her thoughts under the more favourable conditions of a mainly tropical climate, never felt the need of the effortful moment and directed purpose for one single end. Instead of limiting herself to a "*kairos*," a straight line towards a certain end, she thinks in series of continuing receding preceding waves: polar existence is ever present, simultaneously and successively. Heraclitus, then, the Western thinker who more than all others approaches the Indian world of thought,³ significantly grasps the concept of the "*aion*," the creative continuity of time and life-force, under the simile of an ever youthful child at play. In his Fragment 52 he asserts that "the "*aion*" is a child playing with dice. The supreme government of the world lies in the hands of a child."

A last reflection of this truly cosmic concept is given in the lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore. In his "Waxing Moon" he finds the expression for limitless eternity in the simile of children, playing near the beaches with

3. Cf. my essay "The philosophy of Flux in Heraclitean and Indian Thought," Silver Jubilee Volume Bhandarkar Institute. Poona 1942.

pebbles which they lift and throw away, building and destroying structures of running sand, empty shells and fragile leaves, dancing and smiling and singing senseless words of continuous rhythm. Divine purposeless irresponsible *līlā*.

In the psychological sphere, in the artistic, in the ontological and, as we shall see, in the physical sphere *līlā* is effortless transformation, super-reasonable construction and destruction. We may combine this idea of *līlā* with the vague, but significant, Indian concept of the "*ākāśa*." "*Ākāśa*," the ether, is the medium of light and sound. It is permanent in its continuous change and contains in itself in an embryonic stage all manifestations as waves. While not being one-sidedly fixed, being Space in motion and oscillating balance, therefore containing all in one, emptiness and compactness, it is for the Indian the all-embracing Divine, ambiguous and elusive as it is. It cannot be rationally fixed and grasped, but yet is felt as ever-present, and ever-productive.

Thus we have derived from the different aspects of *līlā* several postulates of Indian thought: Not definite one-sidedness, not fixed purposefulness but productive ambiguity, endless combination of more than one tendency, that is the divine meaning of *līlā* for the Indian.

One can even try to view from this angle another predominant Indian idea: that of *Māyā*. As I pointed out in several former essays,⁴ *Māyā*, derived from the root *mā*, indicates temporal reality, reality for this empirical sphere of measurable forms. But all measurable, that means limited, shapes are bound to have an origin and an end, and as such they do not imply constant reality and lasting permanency (*sub specie aeternitatis*). The first occurrence of the term *māyā* is in ṚgVeda 5,85 and 8,89 where Indra is called "*pururūpa*," the multiform, when applying his power of *Māyā*. Accordingly, Kṛṣṇa in chapters 10 and 11 of the Bhagavadgītā displays in his divine epiphany—in a kind of momentary repetition—all existent phenomena of the atmosphere and of the earthly world by manifesting himself as creatures, as mountains, as metres, as syllables, as Vedas, etc. . . This epiphany is called his "*vi-bhūti*," his power of displaying divergent (*vi*) functions and beings (*bhūtas*). This manifold manifestation and simultaneous transformation is his *Māyā*. *Māyā*, then, is not unreality, but an ever-changing play and display of forms. All phenomena stand side-by-side, all fulfilling their own functions, all interwoven in their tendencies, regulated and restricted in their functions by an immanent dynamic order, but not limited in direction from without. *Līlā* is elusiveness and *Māyā* is elusiveness, because both represent manifoldness, change and ambiguity. Like bubbles of Matter forms are assumed and lost, shapes are momentarily real and yet when seen in consecutive moments, they lose their reality and their forms. *Māyā* and *līlā* are appearance and disappearance. As such they are eternal fraud or eternal potentiality.

4. Cf. e.g. my Indian & Western philosophy,—A Study in Contrasts p. 50ff.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

After having examined the concept of *līlā* throughout the various branches of Indian thought, one may now try to approach this problem from the linguistic angle, but especially in true Indian manner from the psychological aspect of sound. It is no accident that the most sacred syllable "Om" lends itself to all kinds of linguistic and psychological speculations. Om is the divine sound, because it satisfies the Indian postulate of continuity and vagueness. The air compressed in the main centre of breathing goes out into the surrounding air as a continuous sound whose single constituents are indistinguishable. The same qualities of liquidity and continuity are conveyed in the sound of "l," in this case of the word *līlā* corroborated through reduplication. The word *līlā* suggests by its very sounds liquidity like water, like air.

A difficult term of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad 4, 3, 7, is "*lelāyati*" which is used in its context to assert that the constant divine Being appears as if (iva) it moves continuously about, *i.e.* it vibrates to and fro.⁵ Does this term belong to a root *lī* with reduplication, or does it belong to the same root as *līlā*? In both cases the onomatopoeic significance cannot be disregarded for establishing the rational meaning of the word.⁶

BETTY HEIMANN.

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5. Compare also Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 1.2.2 and 1.2.4 where *lelāyati* and *lelāyamāna* are used to designate the flickering of a flame. Compare further Brahmasūtras, 1.3.39 where Brahman (Prāṇa) is said to vibrate (*Kampana*).
 6. Since this article was sent to the press, I happened to see a paper by Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy on the same subject in the Journal of the American Oriental Society, 1941, and I am pleased to state that the two presentations supplement each other. Readers are referred to his paper for additional references to the subject in Sanskrit literature.