The Influence of India on Emerson and Thoreau

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I. INTRODUCTION

Doom, (or) Time, am I, that causes worlds to perish; matured and here come forth to destroy the worlds.

THIS 32nd verse of the 11th discourse from the Bhagavad Gita, is said to have been recited by Dr. Oppenheimer when the first atomic bomb was exploded in New Mexico near the close of World War II. Strange as it may seem, this famous scientist thought of the words of Hindu Scripture to express his thoughts at the implications of the titanic forces his genius, and that of others, had released in our world.

While millions of Americans would probably never recognize the source of his words, Dr. Oppenheimer was not the first to make them aware of this ancient classic of Hinduism. Ralph Waldo Emerson was reading the Gita some time near the year 1839. It had been published in London in 1785, after the translation had been made by Charles Wilkins. From London it had crossed the Atlantic where it found a fertile soil in the minds of some of the most eminent Americans. Such men as Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Channing, Holmes and many others were beginning to burst the rigid bonds of the older orthodoxy. The Christianity which could be defined as "something to be passed in an examination" had little appeal to them. The well-known poem of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Deacon's Masterpiece," described the change which the "One-Hoss Shay" of Calvinism was undergoing. Emerson's mind demanded wider horizons, and he found them in part in the literature which was now available from India. His mind was essentially an eclectic one, and he welcomed eagerly any new insight which confirmed and enriched his growing ideas. He could no longer be satisfied with "the faith once delivered," and after four years he had resigned from the ministry with a notable sermon on the reasons for no longer celebrating the Holy Communion with his people. In 1838 he further scandalized some people, and alienated even some of his friends, by giving an address to the Divinity students at Cambridge. In the former case of his resignation from the ministry, he had pointed out that (according to his opinion) Jesus had never intended the Communion to be a perpetual observance binding for all time on his followers. He had, said Emerson, also explicitly commanded the washing of one another's feet, and yet this was ignored by those who followed a custom quite foreign to Western usage. Now in the Divinity School address he said that Christianity was guilty of two serious mistakes: 1. It emphasized the Person of Jesus to the neglect of His teaching, and, 2. The moral teaching was quite forgotten in theological system building.

Emerson's revolt, and also his new found sense of freedom, is expressed in his poem, "The Problem," which begins:

I like a church, I like a cowl;
I love the prophet of the Soul;
And on my heart monastic aisles
Fall like sweet strains, or pensive smiles;
Yet not for all his faith can see
Would I that cowlèd churchman be.

The concluding lines continue and repeat—

Taylor, the Shakespeare of divines;
His words are music to my ear;
I see his cowlèd portrait dear;
And yet for all his faith could see,
I would not the good bishop be.

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What then, we may ask, was the source of the ferment which was at work to take his mind farther and farther from the orthodox beliefs of the time? The answer lies in part, in the knowledge of Indian thought which was becoming increasingly familiar as a result of the researches and work of English scholars like Sir William Jones, Wilkins, Colebrooke and Hodgson. Through the research of such men, Eastern thought was at last becoming known in the studies of European and American scholars. This influence was especially conspicuous in the thought of Emerson after 1840, and it is possible to trace its results in his personal, literary, and philosophical opinions.

In his personal life he had suffered the tragic loss of his bride and his beloved son; and yet one of his most marked characteristics was his serenity. This was noted long before the Hindu influence became so strong, for he had written about the son's death, —

> In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate — no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. . . . it does not touch me. Something which I fancied was part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me nor enlarged without enriching me falls off from me and leaves no scar.

On reading such lines, apparently so indifferent to his loss, one is reminded of words which, no doubt, he pondered many times.

> The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead.
> Nor at any time, verily was I not; nor thou, nor these princes of men, nor verily shall we ever cease to be hereafter.

These lines from the Gita (II: v. 11, 12) are those spoken by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield, and their teaching speaks for itself.

Furthermore the lesson of Krishna was given added weight by the story of Naciketas which Emerson read in the Katha Upanisad.

Next to the Gita, the Katha was the most influential book he knew from the Hindu scriptures. The story of Naciketas tells of a young Brahmin who had not been given the hospitality due him by the god of death — Yama. As a result, Yama had grant Naciketas three boons which were as follows:

1. The boy asked for forgiveness from his father, because his father had been angry when the sacrifice seemed unworthy. This was readily granted by Yama.

2. Naciketas asked for knowledge of the fire — sacrifice which has power to gain heaven. This, too, was given.

3. But for the supreme gift of all, the boy next asks for knowledge of what happens to one's Soul after death has summoned it. The reply which Yama gives with great reluctance, because it is so precious, is the essence of Hinduism toward the mystery of life and death. The Soul — says Yama — is neither born nor does it die. It is immortal by virtue of its nature; it never comes into existence; it never ceases to be. This again is the teaching of the Gita.

> He is not born, nor doth he die; nor having been, ceaseth he any more to be, unborn, perpetual, eternal and ancient, he is not slain when the body is slain.
> Who knoweth him indestructible, perpetual, unborn, undiminishing, how can that man slay or cause to be slain? (II v. 20, 21)

No wonder then that the death of Emerson's son had left no scars, for the father came to accept the teaching of the eternal immortality of the soul.

II. EMERSON

The influence of Indian thought on Emerson's literary work may best be appreciated by reading his most widely known poem, "Brahma." When it was first published, his contemporaries failed to make any sense of this extradorinary production. Even in 1876 when "Selected Poems" were being published, Emerson was urged to omit it from his selection. He insisted, however, that it be included if anything was, and so it

remained. It is without doubt the most completely Hindu of all his work.

The idea for "Brahma" seems to have come to him as early as 1845, but it was given to the world until 1856. In the interval he had thought deeply about passages he had read in the Gita, the Vishnu Purana, and the Katha Upanisad. In this last scripture, he found the lines which have already been cited from the Gita. "If the slayer thinks that he slay, or if the slain thinks I am slain, then both of them do not know well. It (the Soul) does not slay, nor is it slain."

Observe how the very words as well as the thought appear in the poem.

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near,
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.
They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt;
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me and turn thy back on heaven.

Almost every line of this poem has been traced to its source in Hindu Scriptures. Here if anywhere is the distilled essence of Hinduism in the thought of Emerson.

One other instance may be given from his literary work, where the evidence of Hindu thought is obvious. It is from the Vishnu Purana and shows how the blindness of men regarding the real nature of themselves and the world in which they live leads to pathetic consequences.

The poem is entitled "Hamatreya" and tells, in Emerson's words, of the New England farmers - Bulkeley, Hunt, Willard, Hosmer, Meriam and Flint and how they rejoiced in their good acres and "sighed for all that bounded their domain!" The land was theirs and would remain so forever if law and heirs could guarantee it. But Emerson asks—

Where are these men? Asleep beneath
their grounds;
And strangers fond as they, their
furrows plough.
(Where are these men) — who steer
the plough, but cannot steer
their feet
Clear of the grave?
Ah! the hot owner sees not Death
who adds
Him to his land, a lump of mould the
more.

Foolish is the man who does not see the vanity of earthly plans and wishes. What is the distinction between the owner and the stranger, between "I" and "Mine" — "You" and "Thine?"

Here is the land,
Shaggy with wood,
With its old valley,
Mound and flood.
But the heritors?
Fled like the floods foam!
The lawyer and the laws.
And the kingdom
Clean swept herefrom.

It is especially interesting that Emerson introduced his famous concept of the "Over-Soul" to express what the Hindus mean by "Brahman" the One behind the Many![1]

Emerson's son tells us that every day his father would go to his study in the woods, and there he would contemplate every object — flower, bird, stone, tree — all about him, seeking to find the Reality behind them! What he wanted to realise for himself was the Hindu belief—"One there is without a second."

Or as the Katha said: "Unto him who sees but One, behind the multiplicity of the Universe, unto him belongs Eternal Peace — to no one else, to no one else." (5: 9-13) "Man" said Emerson, "is a

[1] Emerson was apparently unaware when he wrote "Brahma" that there is a distinction between "Brahma" and "Brahman." "Brahma" is the personal, creator god of the Hindu Trinity. "Brahman" is the impersonal, neuter, absolute, the "One without a second." It was really "Brahman" that he was writing about when he wrote this poem — and also when he had the idea of the Over-Soul.

stream whose source is hidden." He spoke of himself as a "Pensioner," a "surprised spectator," and he asserted that the soul of the whole is within Man. There is the Universal Beauty to which every part and particle is equally related, the Eternal One.

"Ineffable is the union of man with God in every act of the Soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God."— "Let man then learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart; this namely, that the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there." As the father said to his son in the Chandogya Upanisad (6:11-3) "Tat tvam asi" — "That art thou," even so Christ had said "I and my Father are One." We, too, may know that Christ lives in us, and that we are one with Him and with His Father. Paul had not only said "Christ lives in me," but he had spoken of the time when Christ would be subject to His Father "that God may be all in all." (I Cor. 15:28).

Another Hindu concept which appealed greatly to Emerson was that of Karma. Paul had expressed this perfectly when he wrote to the Galations (6:7) — "Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall be also reap." Emerson's affinity for this idea had been foreshadowed by his Divinity School address when he said,—

> The intuition of the moral sentiments is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed, is by the action itself contracted.

The essay on "Compensation" states his views in this matter most clearly. "Thus is the universe alive," he wrote. "All things are moral. That soul which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law. . . . A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life. — The dice of God are always loaded. The world looks like a multiplication table, or a mathematical equation, which, turn it how you will, balances itself. Take what figure you will, its exact value — no more nor less, still returns to you. Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty."

One consequence of such a comfortable conviction is an inevitable optimism. Emerson developed, as Hindus so often do, a blind spot to the evils and the inequities of life. If, as he says, evil is only relative, a mere deprivation or absence of the good, and if there is an infallible law of compensation, then who are we to cavil and protest against such a perfect arrangement? So he was led to write in the essay on "Spiritual Laws": "Nature will not have us fret and fume. She does not like our benevolence or our learning much better than she likes our frauds and wars. When we come out of the caucus, or the bank, or the Abolition Convention, or the Temperance meeting, or the Transcendental Club, into the fields and woods, she says to us — So hot my little Sir."

This was cutting the nerve of action by an acceptance of things as they are! In 1847 when he was in England, this calm confidence was widely shaken, at least for a time, by the sight of a beggar woman in the streets of Manchester. She was standing in the mud, barefoot and in rags, begging for a pittance to sustain herself and her son. Emerson thought of his own son at home and he wrote—

> Bid Ellen and Edie thank God they were born in New England and bid them speak the truth and do the right forever and ever, and I hope they will not stand barefoot in the mud on a bridge all day to beg of passengers. But begging is only the

beginning and the sign of sorrow and evil here.

But when he was home again, such disturbing thoughts vanish and he writes:

> I cannot look without seeing splendor and grace. How idle to choose a random sparkle here and there, when the indwelling necessity plants the rose of beauty on the brow of chaos, and discloses the intention of nature to be harmony and joy.

And so the word Emerson had for this hapless mother and her child was — "Hear what the morning saith, and believe that."

Such blind optimism led one of his friends to say of him—

> His optimism becomes a bigotry.— To him this is the best of all possible worlds, and the best of all possible times. He refuses to believe in disdisorder or evil. Order is the absolute law; disorder is but a phenomenon; good is absolute, evil but good in the making. . . . If by any mistake he were to visit Hell, he would deny its existence, or find it what he believes it, still the abode of good and the realm of order.[2]

Another Hindu teaching which held a large place in Emerson's thought was that of "Maya" or "Illusion." The preceding quotation makes this clear, but it should also be said that Plato had already familiarised him with the idea in his famous myth of the cave. The shadows are one thing—the true nature of things is another. Men see the shadows and mistake appearance for reality! His short poem, "Maya", expresses Emerson's view, as did a longer one entitled "Illusion."

In "Maya" he wrote,

> Illusion works impenetrable,
> Weaving webs innumerable,
> Her gay pictures never fail,
> Crowds each other veil on veil,
> Charmer who will be believed
> By man who thirsts to be deceived.
> Illusions like the tints of pearl,
> Or changing colors of the sky,
> Or ribbons of a dancing girl
> That mend her beauty to the eye.

If Maya is so potent to deceive man, even God retreats behind the misty veil of imagery and illusion. When he was asked about his belief in God, Emerson refused to be committed. God was both personal and impersonal; the best way to think of Him is in the words of the Hindu thinker — "Neti", "Neti" — "Not that," "not that." God must be defined, if at all, by the phrase: "That from which words turn back." His nebulous concept might have satisfied Emerson, but James Russell Lowell wrote in "A Fable for Critics":

> And though he builds glorious temples, 'tis odd
> He leaves never a doorway to get in a god.
> 'Tis refreshing to old fashioned people like me
> To meet such a primitive pagan as he,
> In whose mind all creation is duly respected
> As parts of himself — just a little projected;
> And who's willing to worship the stars and the sun,
> A convert to — nothing but Emerson.

The truth seems to be that even though he had Christian training and experience in the ministry, his belief in a personal God and in personal immortality had largely evaporated. For God, he had the Over-Soul; for immortality, he had a rather shaky belief in transmigration. If it is true that the soul is never born, and that it never ceases to be, then it must continue to exist in some form or other. In his Journal, Emerson quotes from the Brihadaranyaka Upanisad (IV, 4:3) where, as the soul approaches its departure from the body, it is like a caterpillar which crawls from one blade of grass to another. It is like a goldsmith who fashions new and varied ornaments from metal which he uses from previous objects!

But such comparisons may satisfy Hindu minds. For Emerson they were

[2] *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton,* pp. 484-485.

more like metaphors. Nevertheless the logic of his position more or less compelled him to believe that the soul progressed in its timeless pilgrimage according to the law of Compensation and as justice decreed.

To sum up what has been said thus far, we can do no better than to quote Frederic Ives Carpenter, who wrote in his book, **"Emerson and Asia"** (p. 254):

> As time goes on, I believe that it will become increasingly clear that Emerson, in discovering the Asia of the mind, was guided by that beneficent Fate of which he wrote so much. The first truly American thinker, he first explored this new and untried field of the imagination. He initiated a new scholarship and a new type of thinking. Like Petrarch, he is the great precursor of a new Renaissance, the American Renaissance of Orientalism. Just as in the 14th and 15th Centuries, the newly discovered riches of classical literature were stimulating the minds of Italians to a new scholarship and a new creation, so in the 19th and 20th centuries the newly discovered literatures of Asia have been stimulating the leading writers of America to new explorations and new horizons of thought; which shall include the lands of the ancient East.

III. THOREAU

If Emerson is due a debt of gratitude for the way in which he introduced the thought of India to America, we thank him again because through him Thoreau was made aware of the literary and philosophical treasures of the Orient. Apparently Thoreau had no awareness of Indian thought while he was an undergraduate at Harvard. It was when Emerson opened his library to him, and he read for himself in this new world of Oriental ideas, that he was set on fire with an enthusiasm which never left him. He was able to return this favor later, when he bequeathed to Emerson some of the books an English friend had sent him. This Englishman, Thomas Cholmondeley, had visited Thoreau, and afterwards had sent him 44 volumes from England which he thought would be most interesting and valuable to him. This was truly a gift of the gods to Thoreau, and he cherished them for the rest of his life, and finally left some to Emerson. An idea of his absorption in this new world of Indian thought, can be gained from Thoeau's remarks after reading the Laws of Manu.

> That title: — he wrote — "The Laws of Menu (sic) with the gloss of Calluca, comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindustan, and when my eye rests on yonder birches, or the sun in the water, or the shadows of the trees, it seems to signify the laws of them all.
> They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted down from those old times, and no more to be refuted than the wind.
> When my imagination travels eastward and backward to those remote years of the gods, I seem to draw near to the habitation of the morning, and the dawn at length has a place. I remember the book as an hour before sunrise.[3]

To anyone familiar with the Laws of Manu, it is hard to imagine such praise, but Thoreau did not spare words when attempting to express India's appeal to him.

Perhaps the best way in which to understand his knowledge of India is to select passages from Walden and let them speak for him. They bring out clearly that Thoreau was an ascetic and a mystic, and no organised system of thought is to be found in his writings. His mind meditated upon the ideas which he found so congenial to him, and in his hermitage at Walden pond he lived again with the forest dwellers of India.

These quotations from Walden are examples of his reading and his enjoyment of Indian life and thought.

> How many a man has dated a new era, from the reading of a book.
> How much more admirable the Bhagvat Geeta, than all the ruins of the East.

[3] *Journal* — Vol. I, p. 264.

> It was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who loved so well the philosophy of India.
> The Harivansa says — "An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning.
> "There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon," said Damodara when his herds required a larger pasture.
> The Vedas say, "All intelligences awake with the morning."
> The Vishnu Purana says, "The householder is to remain at eventide in his courtyard, as long as it takes to milk a cow, or longer if he pleases, to await the arrival of a guest."

And finally, perhaps most important of all,

> In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial, and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets, as it were, grate in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.

How incomprehensible such a flight of imagination must have sounded to the hard-headed neighbors of Concord! Since Thoreau indulged in fancy rather than systematic thinking about India, it is difficult to say whether he shared Emerson's interest in Karma, Maya or Transmigration. In one place Thoreau writes, "Methinks the hawk that soars so loftily and circles so steadily and apparently without effort, has earned this power by faithfully creeping on the ground as a reptile in a former state of existence." But his more mature view is that human life, like the grass and the flowers, revives from its roots to new life in future growth. Death was simply a "return to nature;" in his case, a welcome release from a frail and sickly body.

It was nature that gave Thoreau inspiration, contentment and conclusion. A very significant passage tells us of the way he spent his time at Waldon pond,

> Sometimes in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon; rapt in revery amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in my west window, or the noise of some travellers' wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in the seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than the work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works.

This self-portrait of his peaceful and contemplative life makes us realise how much at home he would have been in the hermitages of the forestdwellers of ancient India. He recognised this when he said, "To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a Yogi." It could only be at rare intervals because he was also involved in life — as they were not — and few of them would ever have gone to jail or written an "Essay on Civil Disobedience!"

One of Thoreau's favorite literary works from India, was the drama "Shakuntala" by Kalidasa. This classic story of a beautiful girl, abandoned by her lover with her infant son, is replete with scenes of nature which must have been dear to Thoreau. There are the animals and the birds, all without fear of man. There are beautiful descriptions of the trees and the forest creepers, the flowers and the loveliness of the world

of nature where harm is done to none. It must have struck responsive chords to read such descriptions on the shores of his New England pond.

But when all is said and done, there is no denial of the fact that both Emerson and Thoreau were not Indians; they were Yankees, and they remained so in spite of the previous discoveries made by them in the writings of a land they never saw. For them both — in Thoreau's words — India helped them see that —

> The Universe is wider than our views of it — Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a moring star.

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