

SAHAJA

Sahaja, sahaja, everyone speaks of sahaja,
But who knows what sahaja means?
—Chañḍidās.

The last achievement of all thought is a recognition of the identity of spirit and matter, subject and object; and this reunion is the marriage of Heaven and Hell, the reaching out of a contracted universe towards its freedom, in response to the love of Eternity for the productions of time. There is then no sacred or profane, spiritual or sensual, but everything that lives is pure and void. This very world of birth and death is also the great Abyss.

In India we could not escape the conviction that sexual love has a deep and spiritual significance. There is nothing with which we can better compare the 'mystic union' of the finite with its infinite ambient—that one experience which proves itself and is the only ground of faith—than the self-oblivion of earthly lovers locked in each other's arms, where 'each is both.' Physical proximity, contact, and interpenetration are the expressions of love, only because love is the recognition of identity. These two are one flesh, because they have remembered their unity of spirit. This is moreover a fuller identity than the mere sympathy of two individuals; and each as individual has now no more significance for the other than the gates of heaven for one who stands within. It is like an algebraic equation where the equation is the only truth, and the terms may stand for anything. The least intrusion of the ego, however, involves a return to the illusion of duality.

This vision of the beloved has no necessary relation to empirical reality. The beloved may be in every ethical sense of the word unworthy—and the consequences of this may be socially or ethically disastrous: but nevertheless the eye of love perceives her divine perfection and infinity, and is not deceived. That one is chosen by the other is therefore no occasion of pride: for the same perfection and infinity are present in every grain of sand, and in the raindrop as much as in the sea.

To carry through such a relationship, however, and to reach a goal, to really progress and not merely to achieve an intimation—

for this it is necessary that both the lover and the beloved should be of one and the same spiritual age and of the same moral fibre. For if not, as Chaṇḍidās says, the woman who loves an unworthy man will share the fate of a flower that is pierced with thorns, she will die of a broken heart: and the youth who falls in love with a woman of lower spiritual degree will be tossed to and fro in great unrest and will give way to despair.

Because the stages of human love reflect the stations of spiritual evolution, it is said that the relationship of hero and heroine reveals an esoteric meaning, and this truth has been made the basis of the well known allegories of Rādhā and Krishna, which are the dominant motif of mediæval Hinduism. Here, illicit love becomes the very type of salvation: for in India, where social convention is so strict, such a love involves a surrender of all that the world values, and sometimes of life itself. When Krishna receives the milkmaids, and tells them he owes them a debt that can never be paid, it is because they have come to him "like the *vairāgi* who has renounced his home"—neither their duties nor their great possessions hindered them from taking the way of Mary. The great seducer makes them his own.

All this is an allegory—the reflection of reality in the mirror of illusion. This reality is the inner life, where Krishna is the Lord, the milkmaids are the souls of men, and Brindāban the field of consciousness. The relation of the milkmaids with the Divine Herdsman is not in any sense a model intended to be realised in human relationships, and the literature contains explicit warnings against any such confusion of planes.

The interpretation of this mystery, however, is so well known as to need no elaboration. But there is a related cult, which is called Sahaja,¹ which constitutes a practical discipline, a 'rule,' and what we have to speak of here concerns this more difficult and less familiar teaching.

In sahaja, the adoration of young and beautiful girls was made the path of spiritual evolution and ultimate emancipation. By this adoration we must understand not merely ritual worship (the Kumārī Pūjā), but also 'romantic love.'

This doctrine seems to have originated with the later Tāntrik Buddhists. Kānu Bhatta already in the tenth century wrote Sahaja love songs in Bengal. The classic exponent, however, is

¹ Root meaning, cognate, or innate, and hence, "spontaneous."

Chandidās, who lived in the fourteenth century. Many other poets wrote in the same sense. Chandidās himself was called a madman—a term in Bengālī which signifies a man of eccentric ideas who nevertheless endears himself to everyone. He was Brahman and a priest of the temple of Vāsuli Devī near Bolpur. One day he was walking on the river bank where women were washing clothes. By some chance there was a young girl whose name was Rāmī: she raised her eyes to his. There was a meeting of Dante and Beatrice. From this time on Chandidās was filled with love. Rāmī was very beautiful: but in Hindu society what can a washerwoman be to a Brahman? She could only take the dust of his feet. He, however, openly avowed his love in his songs, and neglected his priestly duties. He would fall into a dream whenever he was reminded of her.

The love songs of Chandidās were more like hymns of devotion: "I have taken refuge at your feet, my beloved. When I do not see you my mind has no rest. You are to me as a parent to a helpless child. You are the goddess herself—the garland about my neck—my very universe. All is darkness without you, you are the meaning of my prayers. I cannot forget your grace and your charm—and yet there is no desire in my heart."

Chandidās was excommunicated, for he had affronted the whole orthodox community. By the good offices of his brother he was once on the point of being taken back into society, on condition of renouncing Rāmī forever, but when she was told of this she went and stood before him at the place of the reunion—never before had she looked upon his face so publicly—then he forgot every promise of reformation, and bowed before her with joined hands as a priest approaches his household goddess.

It is said that a divine vision was vouchsafed to certain of the Brahmans there present—for Rāmī was so transfigured that she seemed to be the Mother of the Universe herself, the Goddess: that is to say that for them, as for Chandidās himself, the doors of perception were cleansed, and they too saw her divine perfection. But the rest of them saw only the washerwoman, and Chandidās remained an outcast.

He has explained in his songs what he means by Sahaja. The lovers must refuse each other nothing, yet never fall. Inwardly, he says of the woman, she will sacrifice all for love, but outwardly she will appear indifferent. This secret love must find

expression in secret: but she must not yield to desire. She must cast herself freely into the sea of contempt, and yet she must never actually drink of forbidden waters: she must not be shaken by pleasure or pain. Of the man he says that to be a true lover he must be able to make a frog dance in the mouth of a snake, or to bind an elephant with a spider's web. That is to say, that although he plays with the most dangerous passions, he must not be carried away. In this restraint, or rather, in the temper that makes it possible, lies his salvation. "Hear me," says Chāṇḍidās, "to attain salvation through the love of woman, make your body like a dry stick—for He that pervades the universe seen of none, can only be found by one who knows the secret of love." It is not surprising if he adds that one such is hardly to be found in a million.

This doctrine of romantic love is by no means unique: we meet with it also at the summit levels of European culture, in the thirteenth century. "And so far as love is concerned," says a modern Russian (Kuprin), "I tell you that even this has its peaks which only one out of millions is able to climb."

Before attempting to understand the practise of Sahaja we must define the significance of the desired salvation—the spiritual freedom (*moksha*) which is called the ultimate purpose, the only true meaning of life, and by hypothesis the highest good and perfection of our nature. It is a release from the ego and from becoming: it is the realisation of self and of entity—when 'nothing of ourself is left in us.' This perfect state must be one without desire, because desire implies a lack: whatever action the *jīvan mukta* or spiritual freeman performs must therefore be of the nature of manifestation, and will be without purpose or intention. Nothing that he does will be praiseworthy or blameworthy, and he will not think in any such terms,— as the *Mahābhārata* says, with many like texts, 'He who considers *himself* a doer of good and evil knows not the truth, I trow.' Nothing that the freeman does will be 'selfish,' for he has lost the illusion of the ego. His entire being will be in all he does, and it is this which makes the virtue of his action. This is the innocense of desires.

Then and then only is the lover free—when he is free from willing. He who is free is free to do what he will—but first, as Nietzsche says, he must be such as can will, or as Rūmī expresses it, must have surrendered will. This is by no means the

same as to do what one likes, or avoid what one does not like, for he is very far from free who is subject to the caprices or desires of the ego. Of course, if the doors of perception were cleansed we should know that we are always free ('It is nought indeed but thine own hearing and willing that do hinder thee, so that thou dost not hear and see God')—for the world itself is manifestation and not the handiwork of the Absolute. The most perfect love seeks nothing for itself, requiring nothing, and offers nothing to the beloved, realizing her infinite perfection which cannot be added to: but we do not know this except in moments of perfect experience.

Very surely the love of woman is not the only way to approach this freedom. It is more likely by far the most dangerous way, and perhaps for many an impossible way. We do not however write to condemn or to advocate, but to explain.

In reading of romantic love we are apt to ponder over what is left unsaid. What did the writers really mean? What was the actual physical relation of the Provençal lover to his mistress, of Chāṇḍidās to Rāmī? I have come to see now that even if we knew this to the last detail it would tell us nothing. He who looks upon a woman with desire (be it even his wife) has already committed adultery with her in his heart, for all desire is adultery. We remember that saying, but do not always remember that the converse is also true—that he who embraces a woman without desire has added nothing to the sum of his mortality. Action is then inaction. It is not by non-participation but by non-attachment that we live the spiritual life. So that he in Sahaja who merely *represses* desire, fails. It is easy not to walk, but we have to walk without touching the ground. To refuse the beauty of the earth—which is our birthright—from fear that we may sink to the level of pleasure seekers—that inaction would be action, and bind us to the very flesh we seek to evade. The virtue of the action of those who are free beings lies in the complete co-ordination of their being—body, soul and spirit, the inner and outer man, at one.

The mere action, then, reveals nothing. As do the slaves of passion impelled by purpose and poverty, so do the spiritually free, out of the abundance of the bestowing virtue. Only the searcher of hearts can sift the tares from the wheat; it is not for mortal man to judge of another's state of grace.

When we say that the Indian culture is spiritual, we do not mean that it is not sensuous. It is perhaps more sensuous than has ever been realised—because a sensuousness such as this, which can classify three hundred and sixty kinds of the fine emotions of a lover's heart, and pause to count the patterns gentle teeth may leave on the tender skin of the beloved, or to decorate her breasts with painted flowers of sandal paste—and carries perfect sweetness through the most erotic art—is inconceivable to those who are merely sensual or by a superhuman effort are merely self-controlled. The Indian temperament makes it possible to speak of abstract things *même entre les baisers*.

For this to be possible demands a profound culture of the sexual relationship—something altogether different from the “innocence” of Western girlhood and the brutal violence of the “first night” and the married orgy. The mere understanding of what is meant by Sahaja demands at least a racial if not an individual education in love—an education related to athletics and dancing, music and hygiene. The sexual relation in itself must not be so rare or so exciting as to intoxicate: one should enjoy a woman as one enjoys any other living thing, any forest, flower or mountain that reveals itself to those who are patient. One should not be forced to the act of love by a merely physical tension: minutes suffice for that, but hours are needed for the perfect ritual. What the lover seeks should be the full response, and not his mere pleasure: and by this I do not mean anything so sentimental as “forbearance” or “self-sacrifice,” but what will please him most. Under these conditions violence has no attractions: in Arabia, Burton tells us, the Musulmans respected even their slaves, and it was “pundonor,” a point of culture, that a slave, like any other woman, must be wooed. (There has been no actual slavery in India, or very little).

Lafcadio Hearn has pointed out the enormous degree to which modern European literature is permeated with the idea of love. This is however as nothing compared with what we find in the Vaishṇava literature of Hindustān. There, however, there is always interpretation: in European romantic literature there is rarely anything better than description. That should be only a passing phase, for the real tendency of Western sexual freedom is certainly idealistic, and its forms are destined to be developed until the spiritual significance of love is made clear.

Under the sway of modern hedonism, where nothing is accepted as an end, and everything is a means to something else, the pre-conditions for understanding Sahaja scarcely exist. Sahaja has nothing to do with the cult of pleasure. It is a doctrine of the Tao, and a path of non-pursuit. All that is best for us comes of itself into our hands—but if we strive to overtake it, it perpetually eludes us.

In the passionless spontaneous relation of Sahaja, are we to suppose that children are ever to be begotten? I think not. It is true that in early times it was considered right for the hermit who has renounced the world and the flesh to grant the request of a woman who comes to him of her own will and desires a child. But this is quite another matter—and incidentally a wise eugenic disposition, removing an objection to monasticism which some have found in its sterilisation of the best blood. The Sahaja relation, on the contrary, is an end in itself, and cannot be associated with social and eugenic ideas. Those who are capable of such love must certainly stand on the plane of the 'men of old,' who did not long for descendants, and said 'Why should we long for descendants, we whose self is the universe? For longing for children is longing for possessions, and longing for possessions is longing for the world: one like the other is merely longing.'¹ We cannot admit such a longing in Sahaja. It is however just possible that such a relation as this might be employed by the Powers for the birth of an avatār: and in such a case we should understand what was meant by immaculate conception and virgin birth—she being virgin who has never been *moved* by desire.

The Sahaja relation is incommensurable with marriage, *categorically regarded as contract*, inasmuch as this relation is undertaken for an end, the definite purpose of 'fulfilling social and religious duties,' and in particular, of paying the 'debt to the ancestors' by begetting children.

Those whose view of life is exclusively ethical will hold that sexual intimacy must be sanctified, justified or expiated by at least the wish to beget and to accept the consequent responsibilities of partenthood. There is, indeed, something inappropriate in the position of those who pursue the pleasures of life and

¹ *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad.*

evade by artificial means their natural fruit. But this point of view presupposes that the sexual intimacy was a sought pleasure: what we have discussed is something quite other than this, and without an element of seeking.

It is only by pursuing what is not already ours by divine right that we go astray and bring upon ourselves and upon others infinite suffering—to those who do not pursue, all things will offer themselves. What we truly need, we need not strive for.

It will be seen from all this how necessary it is that sexual intimacy should not in itself be considered an unduly exciting experience. It is more than likely also that those who are capable of this spontaneous control will have been already accustomed to willed control under other circumstances: and a control of this kind implies a certain training. We may remark in passing that in 'birth control' we see an objection to the use of artificial means—an objection additional to what is obvious on aesthetic grounds—in the fact that such means remove all incentive to the practice of *self*-control. Those who have good reason to avoid procreation at any time, should make it a point of pride to accomplish this by their own strength—and in any case, no man who has not this strength can be sure of his ability to play his part to perfection, but may at any time meet with a woman whom he cannot satisfy.

How is one to avoid in such a relation as Sahaja the danger of self-deception,¹ the pestilence of suppressed desires, and even of physical overstrain and tension?

For very highly perfected beings it may be true that those subtle exchanges of nervous energy which are effected in sexual intercourse—and are necessary to full vitality—can be effected by mere intimacy, in a relation scarcely passionate in the common sense. We read, indeed, of other worlds where even generation may be effected by an exchange of glances. But it is given to few to function always on such a plane as this. Are we then to forbid to those who need the consolations of mortal affection—are we to forbid to these the passionless intimacy of Sahaja? Why should we do so? Even for those who cannot renounce the sheltered valleys of the personal life for ever, it is well sometimes to breathe the cold air of the perpetual snows.

¹"How nicely can doggish lust beg for a piece of spirit, when flesh is denied it!"—Nietzsche.

We should add that 'to whom chastity is difficult, it is to be dissuaded': in order to be sure of our ground we should not attempt the practise of a degree of continence beyond our power. We should also be careful not to 'mix our planes' or to make one thing an excuse for another. We must recognize everything for what it really is—the relative as relative, the absolute as absolute—and render unto Cæsar those things, and only those, which are lawfully his.

We are now, perhaps, in a better position to know what is meant by Chāṇḍīdās when he speaks of the difficulties and the meaning of Sahaja. What he intends by 'never falling' (*satī*) is a perpetual uncalculated life in the present, and the maintenance, not of deliberate control, but of unsought, unshaken serenity in moments of greatest intimacy: he means that under circumstances of temptation none should be felt—not that temptation should be merely overcome. And to achieve this he does not pray to be delivered from temptation, but courts it.

Here nothing is to be done for one another, but all for love. There is to be no effort to evoke response, and none to withhold it. All this is far removed from the passion and surrender, the tricks of seduction, and the shyness, of the spiritual allegory and of the purely human experience.