

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue II (June- 2019)

Hindu Vision in the Poetry of Robert Browning

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.2.04

Abstract

Robert Browning is a positive poet among the great poets of the Victorian age. He is an optimistic, moralist and religious instructor. He occupies a unique place in English Literature. He seeks optimism in any situation of life by preaching universality of soul and advocacy of God. In his poems, Religion holds a prominent place, and religious teachings get expression in a commendable manner. Religion is subject dear to Browning's heart, and several of his poems deal with the theme of religion Faith in God and immortality of the soul. Besides, staunch faith in godly ways and equally profound faith in the earnest endeavour are the salient features of Browning's philosophy of life. His famous poem Rabbi Ben Ezra is an epitome of Browning's philosophy. In many of his poems, we encounter the matching ideas of Vedas and Upanishads. He says that God is everywhere, and we need to seek Him. He is a believer in the immortality of the soul and life after death

Keywords: Immortality, Oneness, God, Spirit, Life, Death, Hinduism, Atman

Browning is a great philosopher and a great thinker who possesses a sympathetic attitude towards all the science, progress, and mental activity and inquiry of time. His poetry is a blend of his philosophical musing and spiritual leanings. He is one of the few English poets whose poetry manifests a concrete synthesis of life as well as a constructive and creative way of thinking which is based on optimism and vigorous faith. He was a staunch believer of the immortality of the human soul and life after death. He holds that the origin of the world lies on the love of the creation and so every iota is marked with the sense of divine and unity with the ultimate.

As a mystic poet, his poetry elaborates holy moments of human life when one has the vision of eternal truth, and one's feeling initiative the oneness with the absolute. Much similar to the Vedantic view, he acknowledges the God is omnipresent. He is not just inside the human heart; instead, he expands into the universe as well as remains present in every phenomenon of nature. The poet has deep faith into the absolute trust in God, and so his poetry communicates the idea that every element of this universe is nothing but the divine creation of God.

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Browning's poetry has a profound influence and connection with the Indian Bhakti tradition. The prominent Bhakti tradition poets appear to be a significant source of inspiration to Browning. Besides, coming to Bhakti tradition, we find poets like Kabir and Nanak expressing the same idea as we see in Browning. Both these poets have prescribed a way of life in which simple and easy to follow preachings which an ordinary man can adhere and lead to a betterment of his life. Both these religious teachers have stood against idol worship and have been the believers of the immortality of the soul and oneness of God.

The poetry of sage poet Kabir illustrates the worth of real Guru and expresses the divine revelations through direct experience. He denounces the conventional methods of attaining God-union such as chanting and other austerities etc. Most of the verses of Kabir are in Hindi, and the poet makes extensive and frequent use of the vernacular. He breaks all shackles of grammar and poetic diction, and he does this to obtain universal access of one and all. He has written at one place:

"Asta Kamala ka charkha banayaa
Pancha tatava ki puni, nava dasa masa
Bunana ko lage murakha maili kinhi!"

(a rough translation is that the eight-petaled lotuses are the spinning wheel containing the five natural elements as the yarn. It takes nine to ten months to knit the sheet of the human body but the foolish man ruins it in a trice.)

"Jaba mori chadara bana ghara aaya
Ranga reja ko dinhi
Aisa ranga ranga rangrezz ne
Lala lala kr dinhi"

(When the sheet is wholly knitted, it is being sent to the dyer who is Guru or the spiritual master. The Master paints it in red, which is the colour of self-realisation.)

3."Chadara odha sankha mat kariyo
Yeh do dina tumko dinhi
Murkha loga bheda nhi Jane
Din din maili kinhi."

(Don't distrust the sheet or fear while putting it on. It is for you for a few days only, and it is momentary too. The idiots do not understand the fleeting nature of this sheet and ruin it.)

4. Dhruva prahalada sudama ne odhi
Sukhdeva ne nirmala kinhi
Dasa kabira ne aisi odhi
Jyon ki tyon dhar dinhi"

(Great devotees like Dhruva, Prahalad and Sudama have already worn it and another saint Shuka have worn and purified their sheets (souls). The servant, Kabir Dasa, is attempting to wear this Sheet which is given to him by his guru.)

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In the history of Indian Literature saint movement or Bhakti, movements have produced many great saints like Nimbarka, Chaitanya or Kabir. The Bhakti movement was for the reformation of Hinduism as it is believed that several malpractices have crept up in the religion this movement made reconciliation between Hinduism and Islam.

The saint poets of the Bhakti movement attempts to uplift the moral, social and cultural standards of the Hindu community and bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims. Despite their commendable efforts, the fanaticism, conservatism and orthodoxy of the people could not be demolished in *toto*.

There is another equally important poet Guru Nanak. He is known to be an integral part of the Bhakti movement. He plays a vital role in establishing the Bhakti movement in Punjab and brings about a social change through his teachings that flow from his poetry. Guru Nanak projects new ideas and tradition and puts forth before us a different socio-religious order which is founded on the concept of universal brotherhood, Social justice and humanitarian, a cultural vision. He highlights the importance of peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding in his incessantly flowing poetry. He also emphasises the belief of One God and the significance of his name recital. For him, God is an illimitable phenomenon that transcends all boundaries of time and place. Nanak also castigates the caste-based social system, and so he preaches against any discrimination of caste, creed or wealth. He also advocates the rights of women in Indian Society and teaches the man to elevate the social status of women. He holds that woman is the creator of man and she moulds the future of man and so she should be venerated.

Along with Kabir and Nanak, there is another poet Bhagat Ravidas (Raidas). Raidas is a 15th-century mystic poet of the Bhakti movement from Northern India. His devotional poetry has made an indelible impression on the Bhakti movement. Raidas is shoemaker by profession. He also criticises the social division and distinction of caste and gender. He holds that a person is distinguished not by his rank but by his actions. The songs of Ravidas carry many vital features of Bhakti Tradition. Ravidas is primarily a Vaishnava poet who believes in the chanting of the name of Lord Rama.

Besides, there were various women saints also emerged in the sky of Indian Literature who guided the women and the entire society to shatter the stereotypes of multiple kinds. These poets, by their powerful poems, tried to unchain the people from petty traditions, orthodoxy and convention. The names of such poets are Lalla of Kashmir and Akha Mahadevi in particular. Women saints are blessed with varieties of spiritually rich wisdom of India. These poets cum rebels called Meera or Akka Mahadevi are pious and chaste women and are a true paragon of womanhood.

Meera or Meerabai is one of the best women poets of this tradition. She is the reluctant bride of Prince Bhoj Raj of Mewar. She is a prominent Hindu mystical poet whose poems are famed throughout India. She is also known as a disciple of Ravidas and as a poet who publically dances in the mixed company of devotees.

Pag ghunghroo bandh Meera nachi re

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(Meera dances with anklets on the feet)

The poet Meerabai has penned around 200 to 1300 devotional songs called bhajans. These love songs of Meerabai are very much held in esteem by various scholars as well as the ordinary folks. Also, these petitions of love dedicated to Lord Krishna are the most precious treasures of Indian Literature. Meera's love of Krishna is such that she forsakes every social liability, and even she refuses to offer worship to her family deity, Durga. She is from the Saguna class of worshippers of Brahman. Most of the poets of the Bhakti movement are the devotees of an almighty God, and the Sufi saints spread their message of love for humanity. Likewise, the Islamic stress on equality is respected by the Sufis far more than by the Ulema. This has brought the mystic orders into the direct reach of the commoners. Sufis and Bhakts believe in the need to unite with God and stresses on love as the basis of the relationship with God.

Thus after analysing the philosophy of Robert Browning in the preceding chapters and the philosophy of the poets of the Bhakti tradition in this chapter, it can be said that there is much resemblance between both. Whatever the way, the poets of Bhakti tradition emphasised on the need to unite with God to get salvation. In the same manner, Browning considered God as the final and perfect authority that compensates man even after this life for his failures. Browning has firm faith in God. Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra is the best exponent of his theme of God-man relationship. According to Rabbi Ben Ezra:

God's plan in our creation has arranged
For youth and age, and no view of life is
Consistent with it which ignores the work
Of either. Man is not a bird or a beast, to
Find joy solely in feasting; care and doubt
Are the life stimuli of his soul: the divine?
Spark within us is nearer to God that is

The recipients of his inferior gifts. (Berdoe 373)

Rabbi says that a man whose soul works only to support his physical needs is no better than a brute. A man should strive for spiritual development and not be satisfied with mere physical needs. The test of a man is the extent to which his body, functioning to the best of its ability, helps the soul in its development. Browning does not negate the importance of physical powers or the shape of a man. The flesh of man is to help him in his spiritual progress. The physical abilities of man are also gifts of God, and have their value and should be put to good use. The heart should cry out in joy that God is glorious for having given a man so many gifts. Rabbi realises, in his old age that God has a complete plan for the universe and man. He calls God's plan for man flawless:

Perfect I call them plan:
"Thanks that I was a man!
"Maker, remake, complete-I trust
What Thou shall do!" (Browning 481)

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This poem presents Browning's philosophy fully, logically, and in detail. The essential features of Browning's philosophical thought are-first-of, firm all faith that human life is an organic whole, i.e. youth and old age are equally crucial to man; belief that man; secondly, idea that man's spiritual condition distinguishes him from animals, and it is struggle which can lead to achievement and spiritual development; thirdly, faith in death as a gateway to a better life; and fourthly and above all, a complete trust in God and in the immortality of the human soul. God makes man ultimately fit for life beyond the earth, i.e., fit to meet God. According to Browning, man's chief aim is to evaluate himself to divine proportions to achieve oneness with the absolute divine essence. The materials of life, by which man can touch the divine, are knowledge, truth, and love. These materials of life are very well adopted by the poets of Bhakti tradition also as Kabir, Nanak, Meerabai, etc.; they all followed the path of truth and love. The highest of them is love because it is the quality which is familiar to God and man. And just as inferior brains and natures point to the advent of man, so did the old mind and life of ancient man foreshadow the higher and nobler man, and so do now the powers and potentialities of our highest race point out, ever forward, to the man that is to be:

Progress is the law of life, man
Is not a man as yet?
But in completed man begins a new
A tendency to God. . . . For God
Is glorified in man. (Berdoe 74)

According to Hinduism also, God is present in everything, in every being. A man is nearer to the supreme spirit than an animal; an animal is closer to him than a plant, and a plant is more adjacent to him than a lifeless stone. The more of such spiritual qualities as goodness, justice, mercy, love, and kindness a man has, the nearer he is to the Supreme Being who is the source of all spiritual qualities. And the more he has flaws such as cruelty, selfishness, greed and lust, the nearer He is to the animal. Thus the universe is the vast amphitheatre in which there is a colossal struggle going on between spirit and matter, giving rise to various orders of being ranging from the lifeless stone to the Omniscient Supreme Spirit. Teachings of Hinduism, teachings of the poets of Bhakti tradition and the teachings of Robert Browning, they all emphasise man finding his soul within. Presenting the same ideas C. Rajagopalachari says, "concentrating the mind on the spirit within; a man should realise the divine character of his soul and its inherent freedom". (Rajgopalachari 10) He again says, "The soul is divine in origin. It is not altered in mature by the qualities of the mind in which it is embodied. It can be released from the meshes of these qualities by a realisation of its intrinsic divine nature" (Rajgopalachari 11).

Thus, in order to conquer all weaknesses and fear, anxiety and despondency, sense of bereavement and helplessness in these ever-changing physical conditions of the world and to cultivate the understanding of the world, a man ought to know and always remember that he

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is essentially a spirit (Atman), free from birth and death, free from all the limitations and sorrows to which the physical body is subject.

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