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Theosophy

Woven From and Into the Fabric of Sanatana Dharma

The small 19th century Theosophical movement impacted Hinduism in diverse ways, from India's independence from the British to the widespread acceptance of Hindu thinking in the West. We now explore this great mystical tradition.

By Archana Dongre, Los Angeles

Hinduism is seeping deep into European and American society, and not just on the ethnic outskirts. It is mingling with mainstream. In the United States today, dozens of Hindu temples stand tall and regal in the large cities of many states. Hundreds of swamis in their colorful saffron robes travel from place to place on touring lecture circuits, with an entourage of Indian as well as American disciples. Some 800 Hindu-based ashrams are tucked away in rural and urban US hideouts. Dotting the magazine stands of any reputable bookstore are a dozen New Age related publications that dish out Hindu philosophy and spirituality in the diaphanous cloak of The New Age.

A recent issue of Newsweek ran a cover story on Americans "In Search of the Sacred." British author Peter Washington, who has written books on intellectual history, wrote a new book titled Madame Blavatsky's Baboon chronicling a history of mystics and mediums who brought the Eastern spiritualism in the form of Theosophy to America.

The 1990s is an era especially marked by a resurgence of interest in Hinduism as well as Theosophy. The American Academy of Religion, a professional association of scholars of religion made up mostly of teachers of religious studies in universities

and schools of theology, has undertaken a five-year seminar on Theosophy and Theosophical thought.

How did this imprint of Eastern thought come about in a Western country whose thinkers had explained the universe mainly in material and physical terms? As late as the nineteenth century, Western society had a materialistic and mechanistic view of the world, where the universe was thought of as a great clock-like machine which kept running mechanically without any directing intelligence behind it. Consciousness was considered a chance happening, a byproduct of the movement of matter and energy, and thought was said to be secreted by the brain as bile is secreted from the liver.

It is fascinating to take a close look at the early beginnings, the advent of Hinduism in the US and the factors that fostered it in the West. Swami Vivekananda's epoch making speech at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on September 11, 1893, stirred strong thought currents in the American intelligentsia. Swamiji's opening of the speech addressing the audience as "brothers and sisters," his message of Vedanta with its intrinsic implication of universal brotherhood, Vedanta's appeal to the head as well as the heart of people, all influenced and left an indelible imprint on the American society for decades to come.

Another event that proved to be a precursor and harbinger of Hinduism in the West was the establishment of the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York, founded by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Col. Henry Olcott, W.Q. Judge and others. Blavatsky was a Russian noblewoman, Olcott was a distinguished American attorney, and Judge, an Irish lawyer who later became head of the American branch of the World Society. Madame Blavatsky presented ideas and concepts that unified science, religion and philosophy-ideas showing a spiritual purpose and design behind the facts of science, as well as giving a spiritual depth to religion and philosophy.

In the 19th century, imperialism had reached its height. Western nations were so convinced of the superiority of the white races that they had no compunction about exploiting their colonies. In this environment, Mme. Blavatsky taught the first principle of occultism-the brotherhood of all humanity, the unity of all races.

With its strong resemblances to Eastern mysticism and spirituality, Theosophy has an intertwining relationship with Hinduism-especially the Upanishads and Advaita Vedanta-and also Buddhism. While Hindu scholars may feel that Theosophy has borrowed from Hinduism, Theosophists think that Theosophy has not borrowed from any religion, but has commonality with many religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism.

On the popular level, activities that the Theosophical Society undertook around the turn of the century, such as bringing swamis from India who gave yoga and levitation demonstrations to the general public, aroused people's interest in the spiritual sciences of the East. Mysticism also played a large part in Theosophy. Devout members developed and encouraged siddhis like reading people's aura, channeling and past birth memories. Such demonstrations kindled people's interest in the mystical aspects of Hinduism. The theosophists were well versed in philosophy, parapsychology and psychic research. As Gurudeva Sivaya Subramuniaswami commented to this writer, "Knowledge about the indestructibility of the soul, the individual soul as being one with the ultimate reality, and awareness of the astral body gave people a new self image. It gave an individual a happy and confident way to look at himself or herself."

Blavatsky worked to introduce into the West the philosophical and religious ideas of the East, with the aim of showing their mutual and interdependent values. She and her colleagues met with a great deal of opposition, but they also attracted much interest through their writings, lectures and personal contacts.

Madame Blavatsky

HPB, as she was known, was a cultured and widely travelled woman. Brilliant, fiery and witty; able to attract the attention of the highest minds, she was in the frequent company of scientists, philosophers and scholars in many fields. She wrote many books-Isis Unveiled, The Voice of Silence and Key to Theosophy. But her magnum opus, The Secret Doctrine, published in 1885, is her most profound book-a bible of Theosophy.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was born on August 12, 1831 in South Russia, in a noblemen's family of father Colonel Von Hahn and mother Helena de Fadeyev. A

gifted child, a linguist, a fine pianist and artist, she had sensed even as a child her developing spiritual powers and that she would use them in the service of mankind. She married at eighteen but soon left the marriage and travelled, and on her 20th birthday in 1851 met Master Morya, the spiritual adept, which proved to be the turning point in her spiritual life.

She travelled to India and entered Tibet via Kashmir and Ladakh. There she spent three years in training with her spiritual master, then left from the East around 1857. She travelled in Europe and elsewhere and again came back to Tibet where she stayed from 1867 to 1870 and completed her control of occult powers. Her second master was Koot Homi.

Blavatsky was a clairvoyant and a practical mystic. Her book Secret Doctrine contains quotations and in-depth knowledge of Upanishads, Smritis as well as other Hindu shastras, even though it is said she did not have those books in her possession. According to John Algeo, president of the Theosophical Society in America, a lot of Blavatsky's learning was intuitive. Her philosophy is altruistic, as dictated by the Vedantic principle of unity which is the same as the unity that Theosophy talks about, and to be used for the good of the mankind and humanity.

After travelling to Egypt, Syria and Constantinople, she was asked to go to America and landed in New York on July 7, 1873, at age 42. She was at the height of her exceptional spiritual, mental and psychic powers. To explain the newly found Eastern wisdom of Theosophy to the West, she faced the challenge of the entrenched beliefs and dogmas of Christianity on one hand, and on the other the equally dogmatic view of the science of her day.

Annie Besant: Hinduism's Friend

It was in India that another Theosophical leader, British-born Irish lady, Mrs. Annie Besant, was instrumental in helping the Theosophical Society. Besant first came to know about Theosophy in 1889 in England when she was asked to review The Secret Doctrine. She was so impressed that she was drawn into the Theosophical Society. She had made a name for herself as a journalist, prolific writer and publisher, and was actively involved in many movements. She first went

to India in 1893 in connection with the Theosophical work.

Besant made India her home, and obviously loved Bharat's spirituality: "After a study of some forty years and more of the great religions of the world, I find none so perfect, none so scientific, none so philosophic and none so spiritual as the great religion known by the name of Hinduism. Make no mistake; without Hinduism, India has no future. Hinduism is the soil into which India's roots are struck, and torn out of that, she will inevitably wither, as a tree torn out from its place. And if Hindus do not maintain Hinduism, who shall save it? If India's own children do not cling to her faith, who shall guard it? India alone can save India, and India and Hinduism are one."

She translated several Upanishads with commentaries in English. She contributed highly and significantly to the cause of Hinduism as well as Theosophy.

In India, Annie Besant saw that under the influence of the Western way of thinking, education and Christian missionaries, young educated Indians had begun to lose pride in their past ideals, culture and religion, and observed that India's ancient and superior civilization in the world was being robbed economically and intellectually by the British. But those people who were drawn to Theosophy, and believed in its doctrine, in a way also believed in Vedanta and many aspects of Hindu philosophy. Thus during the oppressive British regime, when the political environment was not conducive to Hinduism, Besant as well as the Theosophical movement kept people's interest in Hinduism alive and flourishing.

Besant directly influenced Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyer and more. She was for a time involved in the freedom movement for home rule, leading to her arrest by the British in 1916. There was an unexpected and worldwide backlash against her arrest, which resulted at this critical moment in India's history in many more coming forward to fight for India's freedom. Differences with Gandhi and other complications eventually caused her to abandon politics and concentrate on religious work.

Indira Gandhi once said of Besant, "A woman of dedication and fervor, she made India her home and eloquently and courageously espoused the cause of

Home Rule. She was elected the President of the Congress, the highest honor we could then bestow."

Besant became the international president of the Theosophical Society after Col. Olcott's death, who had become president after Blavatsky passed away in 1907.

Charles Webster Leadbeater, a colleague Theosophist of Annie Besant who was exactly as old as she, was a great mystic who became prominent in the Theosophical society in the 1890s. Gifted with a robust physique and a dynamic personality, among his mystical powers was an ability to trace people's past lives. He is credited to have "discovered" Krishnamurti in 1908 when the boy was 13. Being clairvoyant, Leadbeater saw a luminous aura, without a trace of selfishness around Krishnamurti. He declared him an incarnation of Lord Maitreya and the future Messiah. Krishnamurthi left the Theosophical society in 1929, but he left an imprint and a legacy on the world's philosophical thought.

In this way Theosophy and Hinduism were intertwined together, and while Theosophy's doctrine echoed in parts at least, the Hindu Sanatana Dharma and Vedanta, seemingly having rooted in the Hindu philosophy, the theosophists maintain that their doctrine is not rooted in any religion, but only shares a similarity with others.

What made and continues to make Theosophy so influential is that it opens people's inner eyes to the great inner truths of the all-pervasiveness of God, the oneness of God and soul and the goodness of all. The dualistic western religions had by the end of the 19th century taken a tremendous beating at the hands of the scientific revolution. At a time when many were prepared to accept the atheistic view of the scientists, Theosophy provided a plausible, verifiable and thoroughly fulfilling replacement, especially among the well-educated.

Today there are about 4,000 to 5,000 members among the 150 branches of the Theosophical Society in various cities of the United States. Throughout the world, the society has branches in 50 countries, with about 50,000 members. In a forthcoming article we shall explore the present-day manifestation of Theosophy.

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Sidebar: Theosophy's Western Impact

Text:

"The influence of the Theosophical Society," concludes the Encyclopedia Britannica, "has been rather significant, despite its small following. The movement has been a catalytic force in the 20th-century Asian revival of Buddhism and Hinduism and a pioneering agency in the promotion of greater Western acquaintance with Eastern thought."

Some of the most influential people of its day were attracted to Theosophy-playwright Oscar Wilde, poet W.B. Yeats, author George Bernard Shaw, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, inventor Thomas Edison and even baseball's founder, General Abner Doubleday.

Here is a partial sampling of organizations with direct links to earlier Theosophists: From the earlier part of this century came the I Am Movement (with 3 million followers in 1938), Rosicrucianism, the Liberal Catholic Church, Psychiana, Unity (6 million), Christian Science and sections of the New Thought movement—all influential in the higher strata of society. More recent kindred are the Waldorf alternative schools popular in the US and UK; the controversial Church Universal and Triumphant of Elizabeth Claire Prophet; the conservative US-based Human Service Alliance; the London School of Economics and St. James School; and New Age channeler J. Knight. The famous Findhorn Garden in Scotland came directly out of Theosophy.

The Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita translations of Swami Prabhavananda with Theosophist Christopher Isherwood were singularly successful in clearly conveying Hindu thought to the West. Leadbeater's books on occult sciences, such as chakras and auras, reinforced Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms. Aldous Huxley's book, Doors of

Perception, promoted mystical experience and also psychedelic drugs, leading directly to the explosion of interest in the East in the 60s.

If you dig deep enough, you'll find Theosophical influence in the environmental, animal rights and vegetarian movements. No mystical endeavor in the West is exempt, be it yoga, meditation, channelling, near-death experiences, natural healing, past life research, UFOs, Mt. Shasta or St. Germain. Even Hinduism Today is not exempt-our ashram here in Hawaii was built in 1929 by a wonderful Hawaiian poetess who taught Theosophy here to seekers in the same room where we meditate each morning before dawn.

Sidebar: Theosophy: A Tutorial

Text:

By Archana Dongre

The word theosophy is derived from the Greek word Theo meaning God, and sophos signifying wise, and therefore can be translated as standing for "divine wisdom" or "godly teaching." Theosophy is called an esoteric science because it deals with that which is hidden, and not obvious.

Blavatsky's 1888 magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, propounds the principles and tenets of Theosophy. In it she has quoted profusely from ancient sages like Plato, Confucius, Jesus, Gautam Buddha, and has borrowed heavily from the Hindu Upanishads.

Relationship to Vedanta

When a student of Vedanta like myself read the basic tenets of Theosophy as

laid down by M. Blavatsky, I marveled at its striking similarity. According to Theosophy, the root cause of the entire universe, inclusive of all its animate and inanimate creation, is an entity that is "omnipotent, boundless, and an immutable principle," which, says Blavatsky, is "the one absolute reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned being." This entity existed prior to the beginning of all creation, and will be there after the dissolution of the universe-knowledge Blavatsky was said to have arrived at by intuition.

She further describes the three aspects of this ultimate reality as Absolute Abstract Motion, Absolute Abstract Space and Duration. The Absolute Abstract Motion is pre-cosmic ideation. It is the root of that quality which makes creativity possible, and it is also the root cause of the individual consciousness. Through infinite graduations and "steppings down" (somewhat as a transformer steps down the mighty power of electricity so that it becomes useful rather than destructive) it manifests as our consciousness, our mind and our thoughts.

Absolute Abstract Space is that aspect which gives shapes or forms to the different things in the universe. Duration is the root of time, that from which the principle springs into manifestation. This aspect makes "action" possible. Thus, Theosophy states that from this ultimate reality, we derive our consciousness, our minds, our power of thought and our power to create. It is the one principle that is not only the cause, but the unifying force and one common factor in the entire creation.

This Theosophical concept of the ultimate reality is akin to the Brahman principle propounded by the Advaita Vedanta, the only subtle difference being that while the Upanishadic sages and the commentators of Brahmasutras like Shankaracharya described the nature of Brahman as Sat, Chit and Ananda, or existence, consciousness and bliss, Theosophy delineates its aspects in a different way.

Universal Brotherhood

After establishing the one common thread in the entire universe, the next logical outcome is the doctrine of One Life, universal brotherhood, not just as a beautiful ideal which we hope to achieve someday in the far distant future.

Theosophy looks upon the brotherhood as an inescapable law, as inevitable as the law of gravity, or any other natural law through which life manifests. It connotes an implied respect for all human beings as well as for the entire realm of living things. We cannot break this law, but we can break ourselves against it. The concept of one ultimate reality behind all is a benevolent declaration with applications in daily, practical life.

Life Cycles and Maya

The second proposition of Theosophy states the absolute universality of the law of periodicity through which the One Life operates, the flux and reflux, the ebb and flow of activity. Blavatsky states that the alternations of day and night, life and death, sleeping and waking are so common that it is easy to realize that the rule of periodicity is one of the fundamental laws of nature. The sixth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita similarly talks about the pairs of opposites such as pleasure and pain, light and darkness, night and day that follow each other.

Blavatsky refers to the universe itself as the periodic manifestation of the ultimate reality. The universe is Maya, she tells us, in the sense that it is temporary. There will be many phases of creation through millennia upon millennia. Creations change, the only constant factor is the ultimate reality from which the creation springs forth. Maya, in her opinion, is not illusion, but it is a power, the power of creation. The root meaning of the word maya signifies "a magic creation or display."

Soul and Oversoul

The third basic proposition of Theosophy affirms the fundamental identity of every soul with the universal Oversoul and the "obligatory pilgrimage of every soul through the cycle of incarnation or necessity," as Blavatsky comments on the cycle of births and deaths that each soul undergoes. Each soul is responsible for its own actions, but it should travel in the company of other pilgrims in mutual affection and helpfulness.

Because of our identity with the Oversoul, we are endowed with physical powers such as walking and talking and mental powers of thinking and feeling. We as human beings are part of the same great intelligence that designed and maintains the complex universe within its set of natural laws, that keeps it in perfect balance.

Seven Races of Man

Theosophy believes in seven human races that were created on earth in sequence, with millennia when those races overlapped. The theory is in sharp divergence with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. While he postulates an unbroken sequence of linear development from simpler to more complex or higher forms of life, Theosophy sees evolution as the impulse of conscious life to take on forms which fulfill its inner needs.

Theosophy believes that the first Root Race appeared on earth at a time when the planet was still in a formative stage. Called Etheric race, it comprised beings with subtler, more fluid and less dense bodies. The second race called Hyporborean, had loose knit, half human, watery bodies.

The third root race, known as Lemurian, is said to have inhabited a continent in what are now the South Pacific and Indian Oceans. This race is ancestral to the peoples who later occupied the continent of Africa and parts of Australasia, areas where the earliest human or humanoid remains have been found.

Theosophy also believes that certain great beings descended on earth and gave a spiritual impetus to the deepening of human consciousness. The fourth race has been called the Atlantean, a name derived from the celebrated lost continent of Atlantis to which Plato referred. The fifth root race is the Aryan, and although it generally refers to the Indo-European tribes that invaded India, the term Aryan literally means noble, and in Theosophy, the word refers to all the diversified peoples of the fifth race.

The sixth and seventh races are yet to come, and their roles and cultures on

this earth are still unknown. Each of the seven root races is said to have three representatives: 1.) Manu-Progenitor or Archetypal man; 2.) a Bodhisattva-Buddha to be or future enlightened one; and 3.) a Mahachohan-the title traditionally given to the head or apex of the inner cultural and spiritual development of a race.