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Shiv Sharan

Not Your Typical French Hindu

Rakesh Mathur, London

"I spent more than twenty years in India in the traditional Hindu world," wrote Shiv Sharan--known in Europe as Alain Dani lou of Paris, France--in Shiva and Dionysus. "I was as far removed from the modern world as though I had been miraculously transported back to the Egypt of the Pharaohs." "On returning to Europe," Sharan went on with characteristic bluntness, "I was amazed at the childishness of theological concepts, and of the barrenness of what is called religion. I found a rudderless humanity, clutching the dying tree of Christianity, without even understanding why it was dying." He was an author, artist, musician and philosopher and perhaps the first European to boldly proclaim his Hinduness. This son of French aristocracy turned Benaras pundit had a wide effect upon Europe's understanding of Hinduism, though upon his passing in 1994, at the age of 87, only a few circles of scholars and musicians really appreciated the extent of his influence.

In 1987 famed sitarist Ravi Shankar, whom Sharan introduced to Europe in 1958, wrote of him, "Having covered the entire length and breadth of our great heritage during his long span,

so deep were his feelings for the Motherland that he embraced Hinduism and took the name of 'Shiv Sharan.' Thus began the incessant flow of his glorious writings on Indian culture especially covering music, philosophy and religion. To this day his continuous contribution to the promotion of India's cultural heritage abroad through his works has no parallel in modern history. His unflinching devotion to our culture and, above all, love for Mother India, defy all expression."

DaniÃ©lou's Italian Sanctuary

At the request of Hinduism Today, I visited his simple villa home, the "Solstice of Labyrinth," 30 km away from Rome, set among the vineyards of the village of Zagarolo. This ancient pre-Roman Etruscan settlement is one of those places where the spirit breathes and peace prevails. Here Sharan spent his latter years with Jacques Cloarec, his assistant and disciple. He wrote incessantly on Hinduism. His presence can be felt all the time in the Solstice of Labyrinth. Cloarec makes sure that all visitors to this villa continue the dialogue, which Sharan poignantly started decades ago on the subjects of Indian music, Hinduism and especially Saivism.

Sharan, though he left India in the early sixties never to return, remained a Hindu throughout his life. He wrote in *The Way to the Labyrinth*, "I have never gone back to India. I know that the world I lived in will always exist but has simply retreated into its shell, waiting for the storms of the modern age to clear away. In order to find it again, I should have to go through the new Europeanized India that is so alien to me. It would take me a long while to readjust to its customs and rites, to that

way of life, eating, and dressing, without which there is no possible access to the traditional world. There would be nothing new for me to find, nothing I did not already know in the former existence I was granted by the Gods in that kingdom beyond time and space--the wondrous and eternal land of India."

Together Jacques Cloarec and I spend several evenings discussing Sharan's life and work. He was born as Alain Dani lou, Jacques related, in Paris on October 4th, 1907. His mother, an ardent Catholic, founded a religious order, as well as the famous "Sainte Marie" teaching establishments. His father was a Breton politician. Sharan spent most of his childhood in the country, with tutors, a library and a piano. Later he studied painting, singing and classical dancing. A great sportsman, Dani lou was a canoeing champion and an expert driver of racing cars.

"He was quite an agitator," Jacques confided. "He refused all limitations on his personal liberties and on his thought. He was very much anti-establishment--most of the time--although he came forth out of very conservative elements. He broke away from his family at a very tender age and became quite a wild person in the artistic milieu. Then he discovered India by chance one day as he was traveling to Afghanistan, and that is when his life changed totally."

With the Sadhus of Benaras

In 1932, together with the Swiss photographer, Raymond

Burnier, this adventurous youth departed for the East, finally arriving in India in 1935. Initially he was associated with Rabindranath Tagore, as director of the school of music at Tagore's Shantiniketan academy.

Sharan could never cope with the Anglicized Indians who were ruling the country on Western concepts. He intensely disliked Gandhi and, to some extent, Tagore. "I soon discovered," he wrote, "that I had nothing to learn from English-speaking Indians--not even from such well-known philosophers as Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo or Bhagwan Das."

His aversion for the India tailored out of English cloth fortuitously propelled Sharan into the depths of Hindu thought. He and Burnier moved to Benaras. There Sharan found a traditional world of writers, scholars, brahmins and monks who were completely indifferent to modern trends of thought. They preserved the traditional ideas, sciences, rites and philosophic systems of ancient India. He realized that these two worlds had practically no contact. They spoke different languages.

Under the guidance of Shivendra Nath Basu, Sharan studied classical Indian music and became an accomplished vina player. He became fluent in both written and spoken Hindi. A famous sannyasi of Benaras, Swami Karpatri, guided his study of Sanskrit and philosophy, and his association with sadhus and gurus.

Initiation into Hinduism

It was Karpatri who initiated DaniÃ©lou into Saivite Hinduism, and gave him the name of Siva Sharan("protected by Siva"). Burnier was also initiated. Both lived as Hindus, including daily baths in the Ganges, a strict vegetarian diet and other observances, many of which Sharan continued the rest of his life.

In his 30 years with DaniÃ©lou, Cloarec never heard him speak of this initiation, nor for that matter, of any other kinds of mystical inner experiences. "He was extremely discrete," he told me, "He would never speak about himself. He did say that just after his initiation he felt things had changed and he was now completely included in the Hindu world. He did puja nearly every day, but refused to allow anyone to watch."

The tradition Sharan adopted was that of the Saiva Agamas. This was really a crucial event, for nearly all modern exponents of Hinduism to the West belonged to the Smarta Sampradaya [tradition] of Adi Sankara. There are numerous differences between the philosophy of the ancient Agamas--which are the primary source and authority for Hindu ritual, yoga and temple construction--and the largely philosophic system propounded by Sankara in the 7th century ce.

As one example, the Agamic tradition does not regard the physical and spiritual worlds as mere maya or illusion, but rather considers them sacred creation, the visible form of the Supreme God. Hindu temple worship based upon this belief is a most important manifestation of the Agamic tradition. Smartas consider temple worship a lesser form of spiritual practice. The brilliance and uniqueness of Sharan's books, such

as the encyclopedic Hindu Polytheism, was in his knowledgeable articulation of the Agamic mysticism which embraces the vast majority of Hindus.

In 1949, Sharan was appointed professor at the Hindu University of Benaras and director of the College of Indian Music. He corresponded with René Guénon about the philosophic and religious approaches of Saivite Hinduism. Greatly interested in the symbolism of Hindu architecture and sculpture, of which he made a thorough study, he made long trips together with Burnier to Khajuraho, Bhuvaneshvar and Konarak, as well as to many lesser-known sites in Central India and Rajputana.

In 1954, he left Benaras to take up the post of director of the Adyar Library of Sanskrit manuscripts and editions at Madras. In 1956, he was made a member of the Institut Français d'Indologie at Pondicherry, and subsequently of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient.

Impact of India's Independence

Sharan always believed that the foreign occupations of India, first by the Muslims then by the British--created deep rifts in Indian society. Those who were forced to collaborate with the invaders, learn their language and attend their schools and universities still believed themselves to be Hindus, but in fact, had only very vague notions of Indian science, philosophy and cosmology.

Most of the Indians running the administration of India during these occupations, Sharan believed, had to accept so many infractions to the rules of their society, so many moral and dietary compromises and absorb so many points of view foreign to their hybrid culture that they completely cut themselves off from any real knowledge of their traditions.

Sharan found that all the Hindus who ever occupied official functions and university and administrative posts were English-speaking and British educated, not only under British rule, but in the Indian administrative services that followed after Independence. "Men like Nehru and Tagore knew nothing about Hindu culture except through British authors," he observed. "Tagore was very much opposed to the rigors of the traditional society."

A close friend of the Nehru family, and in particular of Mrs. Pandit, Nehru's sister, his sympathies lay with the Independence Movement. But after the independence of India when the new government attacked orthodoxy, it was suggested that his role would be more useful in the West in presenting the true face of Hinduism.

On Mission to Europe

"Sharan began to appear in Europe again from time to time after World War II," relates Cloarec, "and was somewhat of an eccentric because he had kept the kondu[hair tuft] of a good orthodox Hindu, which made of him a 'hippie' before the fact. But this eccentric person affirmed in a superb manner his

knowledge of India from 1960 onward through his great work, Hindu Polytheism, which was printed by the prestigious Bollingen Series of Princeton University Press."

Once in Europe, he wrote prolifically. Among his most popular books were Hindu Polytheism; Virtue, Success, Pleasure and Liberation, The Four Aims of Life; The Ragas of Northern Indian Music; Music and the Power of Sound, plus books on sculpture, architecture, tales, history and yoga. He completed the first full translation of the Kama Sutra just before his death.

His double culture, which was by no means artificial, gave Sharan an outsider's vision of the Western world. In two of his works, Shiva and Dionysus and While the Gods Play--Saiva Oracles and Predictions on the Cycle of History and the Destiny of Mankind, he deals with the problems of a Western culture gone astray, having lost its own traditions and taken man away from nature and the divine. He demonstrates that the rites and beliefs of the ancient Western world before the onslaught of Christianity are very close to Saivism and clearly explains it with the aid of the texts and rites that have been preserved in India.

"My translation work and my attempt to elucidate Hindu conceptions presented many difficulties," Sharan once acknowledged, "because no words in any Western language can express the very subtle notions of Hindu metaphysics or cosmology. I had to express one way of thinking through the bric-a-brac of the vocabulary of another. Everything had to be rethought, no word could ever be translated directly by another."

Sharan's books have been published in twelve countries, in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese and more.

Promotion of the World's Music

For many in Europe, however, Sharan is best known for his promotion of the classical music of India and other countries. In 1958 he was the first to produce an anthology of Indian music, which included the Dagar brothers, Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Pattamal, among others. He arranged, against all advice, an international tour for the Dagar brothers in the concert halls of Europe where heretofore only European classical music was played. Similarly he advocated "equal status" for the classical traditions of all cultures. Famed violinist Yehudi Menuhin said in 1981, "It was Daniëlou who, more than anyone else, thanks to his gifts of enthusiasm, ardor and communication skills, has furnished many elements of mutual comprehension which brought us closer to one another. The fact that music is today recognized as an essential value of all cultures and a universal discipline is to a large degree thanks to Daniëlou." Mrs. Gobeil, director of Arts and Cultural Life at UNESCO, observes, "Daniëlou was conscious of the value of traditional cultures 50 years before we were."

In 1963 he created the International Institute for Comparative Music Studies in Berlin and Venice with the help of the Ford Foundation of America. By organizing concerts for the great musicians of Asia and the publication of recorded collections of traditional music under the aegis of UNESCO, he played an

important part in the rediscovery of Asian art and music in the West. Because of his efforts, Indian music's influence can be seen on various established Western artists such as Xenakis, Nadia Boulanger and his friend, Maurice Béjart.

Sharan received numerous awards during his lifetime. President Charles de Gaulle presented him with the Légion d'Honneur, the highest award in France. In 1981, he received the UNESCO/CIM prize for music, and in 1987 the City of Paris honored his 80th birthday.

Shiv Sharan died January 27th, 1994. In accordance with his wish, he was cremated at Lausanne, Switzerland, without rites or ceremony.

Sharan's books, published under the name Alain Daniélou, are available in English translation from Inner Traditions, 1 Park Street, Rochester, Vermont, 05767, USA. Jacques Cloarec may be contacted at Via Colle Labirinto, 36, 00039, Zagarolo (Rome), Italy.

Sidebar: Shiv Sharan on Hinduism

From Hindu Polytheism(1964):

The word "Hindu," used for convenience, can be misleading, for it may convey the idea that Hinduism belongs to a country, to a particular human group, to a particular time. Hinduism, according to Hindu tradition and belief, is the remnant of a universal store of knowledge which, at one time, was

accessible to the whole of mankind. It claims to represent the sum of all that has come to be known to man through his own effort or through revelation from the earliest age of his existence. The development of the mutually exclusive creeds which now claim membership of the greater number of human beings seems to be, in the Hindu view, a comparatively recent phenomenon, which appeared only during the Kali Yuga. Whatever value we attribute to more recent religions, we should not attempt to equate Hinduism with them. Hinduism cannot be opposed to any creed, to any prophet, to any incarnation, to any way of realization, since one of its fundamental principles is to acknowledge them all and many more to come.

The Western approach to Hinduism tends to present us with a clear picture of original systems which become confused and mixed in the mass of Hindu thought, while the Hindu approach wants us to see a coherent, all-inclusive, ever-evolving knowledge with its roots in ancient systems which tried to express, more or less successfully, the complex structure of the cosmos, a structure which came to be better and better analyzed in the elaborate mythology of the later ages.

From Shiva and Dionysus(1979):

Life is one. There is no boundary between the vegetable, animal and human worlds. They are interdependent, and their common survival depends on respect of their harmony, whereby none assumes the role of predator, or the right to alter the balance of nature. The Gods and subtle energies are present everywhere in the world and within ourselves. A return

to Saivite wisdom would appear to be the only way to ensure a respite to a human race which is running towards destruction at an ever-increasing pace.

Sidebar: Some Personal Reminiscences

By Jacques Cloarec

"When I met Sharan in 1962, he had definitely left India and looked totally European, dressed Western-style and smoked abundantly. There was nothing to make him stand out particularly. Yet, I noticed very quickly that there was a certain bearing in him, a certain inner process going on, a certain way of thinking, that was totally different from those you would find in Europe. He had kept his Indian habits, that is to say ways of doing things, and especially a way of reflecting--the constant questioning of all established concepts. He had a sense of values of good and evil that made him different from anyone else around him.

"Even though he was director of a famous music institute, and making a good salary, he lived simply at that time in a small room. He refused even to give his laundry out to be done, and I found him washing it personally. He cared little about money, but his needs were always amply met, first through the support of Raymond Burnier, then from his well-paying job as director of the music institute. Only in the last few years has any substantial income come from his book royalties.

"A few years later, in the 1960s, he got in the habit of wearing a rudraksha mala, a very Saivite thing, and what surprised

everyone most was a little golden Linga that he would wear in a very obvious way over his Scottish neckties.

"He had adopted Indian thinking in a very deep way and without any reservations. He felt that its philosophy and religion had no rival anywhere in the world as to its profundity and its logic. He regarded all other systems as completely wrong.

"Sharan was a secretive person, humble, transparent. For years and years that I lived with him, I never saw him reading or writing Hindi or Sanskrit. So I had some doubts whether he could read them at all. Then when he decided to do the Kama Sutra, he couldn't find any pundits who could help him do that, because the language was so tough. So he really surprised everyone when he started to translate it all on his own. And he worked extremely hard for four years to do a very difficult translation from the very archaic Sanskrit of Vatsyayana. The second commentary in Hindi was a little easier for him. After he completed Kama Sutra, at 85, he began translating the Artha Shastrawhich he would never be able to finish."

Jacques Cloarec was Sharan's personal assistant for 30 years.