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Spiritual, Social and Ecological Liberation - an Indian Christian Perspective

By Sebastian Painadath SJ*

The word ashram is derived from the Sanskrit term *āśrama*, which means total pursuit, full dedication, "tireless striving stretching its arms towards perfection", as the poet Rabindranath Tagore put it. Ashrams are places where an intense spiritual *sādhana* takes place. However the term *spiritual* has to be understood in a holistic sense. In the Indian heritage everything is spiritual, everything has a sacred dimension. The ashram is a place where the seeker wakes up to this inner divine depth of reality. Hence it is more than a static *place*. Ashrams are rather a *movement* of the Spirit in the spirit. In the ashram the seeker discerns the movements of the divine Spirit and responds to them creatively. Ashrams therefore did play a formative role in the socio-political life of the people in India: in the ashrams seekers were initiated to the methods of meditation, princes were trained in martial arts, kings were given political counsel, students learnt the Sacred Scriptures, householders received instruction on their family duties, farmers got training in agricultural skills and young artists were introduced to music and dramatics. From ancient times ashrams were powerhouses of spirituality and creativity in socio-political life. Hence the leaders of Indian renaissance of the last two hundred years discovered in the ashram heritage a transformative power for shaping the life and destiny of the people.

The main thrust of an ashram is the integrative approach to life. The overall concern is the liberation and formation of the *whole* person in communion with society and in harmony with nature. The characteristic elements of an ashram are the following: a contemplative atmosphere conducive to spiritual pursuits (*sādhana*), a relentless quest for the Divine (*Brahmajijñāsa*) with an intense pursuit of Truth and Beauty, an all-embracing simplicity of life-style coming from authentic renunciation (*tapas*), a compassionate attitude to people (*karunā*), leading to a genuine hospitality towards all, and a vibrant harmony with nature expressed in a culture of non-violence (*ahimsā*). The ashram is a place where one *realizes* the Self by experiencing the divine depth dimension of reality.

A Meditative Search for the Divine

An ashram is a place of silence. The distinctive feature of an ashram is its culture of meditative pursuits. Seekers come to an ashram in search of guidance in spiritual life. In the process of integral meditation one deepens one's consciousness to realise the divine depth of reality and broadens it to perceive the Divine in all things. The sages of India speak of two inner faculties of perception: *manah* (mind) and *buddhi* (intuitive intellect). *Manah* objectifies everything and analyses reality; *buddhi* enters into the reality by uniting it with the perceiving subject. *Manah* looks at the structures and qualities of reality, while *buddhi* delves into the core of reality. *Manah* pursues the logic of reality; *buddhi* seeks the *mystique* of reality. *Manah* operates within the subject-object polarity and arrives at the knowledge of things (*vijñāna*); in *buddhi* this polarity is overcome: the subject and object merge into a unity of transcendental consciousness in which wisdom (*jñāna*) emerges. *Manah* speculates on the horizontal level; *buddhi* intuits vertically into the depth of reality. What the mind does is reflection over realities; what happens in the *buddhi* is meditation. The "so-called contradictions are such only at the mental level, but are in reality complementary aspects-for the *over-mind*" (intuition) "Truth is hidden beyond words and concepts." (Jules MONCHANIN, "The Christian Approaches to Hinduism," in Indian Missionary Bulletin, June 1952, p. 48.)

Meditation is therefore *ekstasis* at the heart of reality, the conscious movement to the divine *centre* of all beings, the disciplined diving into the depth of consciousness. At this level of deeper consciousness God is experienced not primarily as the divine thou, object of veneration, but as the divine *Self*, the *antaryāmin*, the subject out of which one "lives and moves and has the being."

The Church today needs such oases of silence which could be spiritual refuelling centres along the streets of a speedy life.

Renunciation and Simplicity

What characterises as ashram at the first look is the genuine simplicity of life. The living quarters are often constructed as small cottages built in a form attuned to the local socio-ecological milieu. The conveniences are kept to the minimum. There is nothing that smacks of luxury or extravagance. The food is simple and invariably vegetarian. The ashramites wear very modest clothes made of cotton. In their dealing with guests and the local people too there is simplicity and approachability. These are genuinely Gospel values which characterised the life of Jesus. In the course of centuries the structured forms of religious life and the institutionalised types of pastoral care in the Church developed certain behaviour patterns which do not communicate these evangelical values. As a result they often lack credibility in giving witness to the message of Jesus. Ashrams experiment with a way of life that takes us back to the original inspiration of Jesus. Without embodying the values of simplicity and renunciation the Church cannot preach the crucified Christ. With the elements of simplicity and renunciation ashrams are effective pointers of a counterculture in the midst of today's consumeristic culture. "The ashram life challenges the uncontrolled development of the world's mechanistic industrial complex." (Cf. J. MONCHANIN/SW. ABHISHIKTANANDA, *An Indian Benedictine Ashram*. Santivanam 1951, Foreword.)

Ashrams are also eco-sensitive centres. The ashram spirituality enables one to perceive the divine presence in nature. Across the centuries ashrams in India have sprung up in the sylvan surroundings of a river bank, hill top or mountain valley. Some ashrams are located in a serene corner of a village or even in a city but with a campus full of trees. Several ashrams keep a herbal garden in order to conscientise the people on the healing powers of plants and trees. *Satsangs* and spiritual discourses often take place under an auspicious Tree thus recognising that the Tree is the primal teacher of humanity. For meditation one sits on the floor: earth is experienced as the *body of the Lord* and as the *primordial mother* of all living beings. (Bhavavad Gita, 11, 10ff, Atharva Veda, X11, t, 1-63.) In order to face the challenges of the current ecological crisis there is need to develop an eco-sensitive spirituality. Nature has to be taken not as something for us to exploit, but as the *home* of life entrusted to our care. The experience of the ashrams can be very valuable in discerning the direction which humanity should take for its survival. *Sarvesam mangalam bhavatu - may all things enjoy wellbeing - this is the basic prayer of an ashram.*

An Integral Social Concern

If the spirituality of an ashram does not respond to the movement of the divine Spirit in the actual context of the life of the people it could be insensitive to the cries of the people and to the *groanings* of the Spirit as well. But the social involvement of an ashram has a different dimension. It has been an insight of the Indian sages and the teaching of Jesus that the root cause of suffering and exploitation is the greed that poisons the human mind. Hence lasting social transformation demands a radical change in the mentality of the people. As long as the competitive drive of the powerful circles and the consumeristic attitudes of the people reign supreme in modern life, poverty, marginalisation and exploitation will continue. With their authentic life of simplicity ashrams offer a place where people can come to a critical self-reflection on their basic value systems. Such an attitudinal change presupposes a spirituality that enables one to perceive the transformative presence of the Spirit in oneself and in the world.

The *social* contribution of an ashram is therefore a spiritual vision of reality. By welcoming all seekers irrespective of caste or creed, social or economic standards, an ashram bears witness to an egalitarian community. "An ashram is a place where what is broken is made whole, what is diverse in the spirit is integrated; a place where the oneness of the person, the self, with the whole of reality, with the whole cosmos, with Brahman, with the all-enveloping Reality, the only true Reality, is achieved." (Claude D'SOUZA, S.J., "Ashrams and the Socio-economic and Political Needs India", in VANDANA, *Christian, Ashrams*, p. 93.) Indian sages demand that all work that is liberative has to be done in the spirit of *ofyajña*. One commits oneself to the welfare of others not from the angle of egoism (*ahamkāra*), but from within the experience of union with the divine Self (*ātmabodha*). Otherwise the question will remain: who will liberate the liberator. Theology and spirituality of liberation has to evolve out of contemplative perspectives. "It is the inner centre which is the real source of all life and activity and of all love. If we could learn to live from that centre we should be living from the heart of life and our whole being would be moved by love. Here alone can all the conflicts of this life be resolved." (Bede GRIFFITHS, *The Golden String*. London: Collins, 1984, p. 146.) This is the specific element that the ashrams awaken in the Church.

**The author is a well known theologian and is the founder Director of Sameeksha Ashram, Kalady, Kerala, and is a member of the Ashram Aikya. The above contribution is taken from a longer paper entitled: The Spiritual and Theological Perspective of ashrams.*

