

## Theology of a Convert<sup>1</sup>: A Contribution to Indian Christian Theology from the Cultural and Religious Heritage of India

P. Victor Premsagar\*

### INTRODUCTION

The often quoted prophetic words of Bishop B.F. Westcott of Durham that 'a definitive Commentary on St. John's Gospel would come from India, with its background of mystical insight'<sup>2</sup> are, perhaps, fulfilled by this book written by the Rev. Dr. Yisu Das Tiwari and his son-disciple Ravi Tiwari<sup>3</sup>. It is not an academic commentary, but the Witness of Yisu Das to his experience of the vision of Jesus and a brief commentary with his own thoughts on the Farewell Discourses of our Lord<sup>4</sup>. It is an interpretation of his own conversion experience and his son's presentation of it in the traditionally accepted framework of the *Brahma Sutras*. It is unique in the sense that it was written in the Hindi language, with all the nuances and depth of the religious and cultural heritage and the scriptural foundations of the Indian sages.

Ravi has rendered an invaluable service to the Indian church, by translating his father's commentary on 'the Farewell Discourses in St. John 14. 1-19', written in a 'chaste and literary Hindi', into the English language. He also give his own interpretation of the unique experience of his father, after the pattern and framework of Veda Vyasa's<sup>5</sup> *Brahma Sutras*<sup>6</sup>. In this book Ravi has put together his father's articles, an autobiographical account of his conversion, the witness of a host of his friends and students from all over India and overseas, to his father and towards the end of the book, on the basis of his father's life and ministry. Ravi shares his own interview with his father's experience and the scriptural foundations, attempts a new and bold approach to Indian Christian Theology. Ravi's doctoral research studies on Adi Sankaracharya and Paul Tillich<sup>7</sup> had adequately prepared him for this task of interpreting his father's Christian faith and experience.

Yisu Das Tiwari was himself well trained and equipped in the Hindu classical writings, Sanskrit and Hindi languages. He also had English education at the famous

\* Bishop P. Victor Premsagar, former Moderator of the Church of South India, is Professor of Old Testament at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai.

St. John's College, Agra and later studied Greek at the Regent's Park College, Oxford under the great New Testament scholar Dr. D.G. Kilpatrick<sup>8</sup> in preparation for the translation of the New Testament into Hindi. In this translation he captures the cultural and religious heritage of his traditional learning<sup>9</sup>, which are a treasure of immense value for the students of Indian Christian Theology and Biblical Studies. Thus, Yisu Das Tiwari was exceptionally qualified to translate and interpret St. John's Gospel.<sup>10</sup> The son discovers in these accounts, the hidden heritage of their ancestral learning, as a family of Vedic teachers.

### **Yisu Das Tiwari's Conversion and Appropriation of the New Faith**

Yisu Das Tiwari saw his conversion as adding something new to his ancestral faith and culture. He never imagined that he was breaking away from his family and his ancestral faith, until the door was shut on his face and he was driven out of his home and the Brahmin society. In spite of this, he saw his new found Lord in continuity with his own ancestral religion and traditions<sup>11</sup>.

His conversion was through a vision of the Lord, which he describes so vividly and yet in a mystical manner. He tells that 'a gracious personality was by his side on whom he could repose his feverish head, one who is closer to him than the closest friend, one who understands him and one who is indescribable (*anivachaniya*)'. He continues that his sinful habits and besetting temptations were broken and that life seemed to be different. 'Trees looked greener and the chirping of the birds was sweeter' (p.4). To begin with, he was against Christians as they were criticizing the Hindu religion and argued that the Tiwaris are from the Vedic tradition and do not belong to the popular Hinduism with many gods. It was his experience *anubhava* of a vision of Christ that had transformed him.

His visit to Mahatma Gandhi's Ashram was a unique experience for the young Tiwari. The daily duty of doing the sweepers task of cleaning the latrines, making no caste distinctions in the community, spinning thread and weaving the khadi cloth, living his daily life austere with a consciousness of ethical and moral foundations, made a lasting impression upon him. His father had requested the Mahatma to wean his son Badri Prasad, away from the influence of Christian missionaries to the ancestral religion. Gandhi observing the earnestness of the young man in his new faith, advised him to be a good Christian if he really wanted to follow Jesus. Gandhi always addressed him by his Christian name.

The Rev. C.F. Andrews, whom Gandhi named Deenabandhu, also made a deep impression upon him at the Ashram. It was through reading his book *Christ in the Silence* that had drawn his attention earlier, to the last chapters of the Gospel of Saint John. Deenabandhu advised Yisu Das not to cut himself off from his people and from the political and social movements of his nation, in their struggle for freedom.

Later, he joined the Serampore College to study theology. But was disillusioned by the life and studies there. He saw that the teachers were professionals and trained their students to be professionals, with no emphasis on the experience of the faith

and personal transformation<sup>12</sup>. Tiwari left Serampore and wandered about as a Sadhu, often apprehended by the British Police suspecting him to be a wandering political activist.

He did his teacher's training and worked as a teacher for sometime. He later returned to Serampore and completed his B.D., studies. Tiwari felt that his tradition had not prepared him for social life with others. He appears to have been lonely and withdrawn all though his life as a pastor, professor and scholar. The accounts of his friends and students express great admiration for his scholarship, humility and devotion, but they also note that Tiwari was reticent and lonely amidst the Christian people. Was it his disappointment about the Christians and the church? Or was it his humility that kept him removed from others?

His scholarship is exceptional with proficiency in Sanskrit, Hindi, English, Hebrew and Greek, and deep knowledge of Indian philosophy, religions and the Bhakti Movements. He was equipped for teaching and translating the scriptures. Jan Henningsson in a Review Article<sup>13</sup> makes a critical study of his translation of the New Testament comparing it with the older and the later translations. Tiwari's translation is very much appreciated by the Hindi-speaking inquirers that it appeals to them better than the other versions.

Yisu Das had faith in the person of Christ and surrendered himself completely to his will. But he had his own critical questions about the new faith. These give an insight into the genuine doubts, which arise in the minds of the new inquirers.

- a) How can Christ rise from the dead? Is physical resurrection possible? For a Hindu the soul is immortal but the body decays, changes and perishes.
- b) Is it ethical to say that some one suffers for the sins of others? It seemed very bad to glory in the fact that some one had suffered for his sins.
- c) The doctrine that 'we are washed in the blood of Jesus' seemed very strange to him as a strict vegetarian.

But Tiwari says that God had given him the wisdom to be humble in his doubts and questionings. He felt that these must be true, although he does not yet understand them. He acknowledges that the Creeds contain 'great and vital truths'. They safeguard the unchanging Gospel from subjectivism and help the believers to test their faith in relation to the faith held by the saints in the past and in the present (pp. 7-8)

### Ravi Tiwari's Interpretation

Ravi Tiwari understands and interprets his father's experience and commentary on the Farewell Discourses, in the framework of Badarayana's *Brahma Sutras*. Ravi discusses the first four Sutras of the first section. This is a new creative attempt to

make a contribution to Indian Christian Theology. Others have done a comparative study to identify it as the Crown, the acknowledged, the unknown and the hidden Christ of Hinduism and recognized parallels in them. Here is an attempt to affirm the continuity of the new faith experience with the traditional faith of his father, which he had insisted all through his life. Ravi follows the method of Sahnkara's commentary (Bhashyam) on the *Brahma Sutras*. Ravi gives six reasons for adopting the methods of the *Brahma Sutras*:

- a) They are Indian based on the scriptures of the Upanishads. Yisu Das considers the Farewell Discourses in St. John's Gospel as the Upanishad of Christ and the Yesu Gita.
- b) The method of the Sutras is suitable and attractive to the Indian mind.
- c) It is open to new creative interpretations.
- d) It has a universal appeal and is used by different sages of diverse schools of thought, to set forth their own new understanding and interpretation of the faith based on the Sruti (revelatory) scriptures.
- e) It has a systematic approach, which is helpful in constructing a systematic Indian Christian Theology.
- f) The Sutras have been used to express theological ideas and therefore are helpful to Indian Christian Theology.

Yisu Das presents Christ of the Farewell discourses in St. John's Gospel, almost in the pattern of Krishna interpreting in the Bhagavadgita, the Vedic and Upanishadic thought in simple terms to a novice like Arjuna. Yisu Das was not a philosopher or a theologian, but a mystic in the Upanishadic tradition and a Bhakta in communion with his *Ishta*<sup>14</sup> Jesus, his God and master.

Ravi still has with him bundles of notes on St. John's Gospel left by his father. I hope that he will publish them as well, with his own notes giving theological and philosophical perceptions. I found it helpful to start with Ravi's interpretation before starting to read the book from the beginning. In fact, this book is the contribution of both the father and the son to the Indian Church. Yisu Das contributes from his experiential vision of Christ, seen from his own learning in his faith traditions and his devotion as a Bhakta. Ravi, as a theologian, and professor of philosophy and religions gives form and depth to the writings of his father. It is a unique contribution to the Biblical studies and to the Indian Christian Theology. It appears to be providential that the son could interpret the father's ideas and systematize them to evolve a new method of interpreting the scriptures and theology. This method of interpreting within the framework of the *Brahma Sutras* has facilitated Hindu sages to propose, Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita and other theological and philosophical schools of thought. The method followed by Ravi in interpreting his father may, perhaps, be called the 'Tiwari School of Indian Christian Theology'. It is no wonder

that Dr. K. Rajaratnam made his perceptive remark about Ravi as the Son-Disciple<sup>15</sup> of Yisu Das Tiwari.

### Conclusion

This Indian tradition will perhaps add fresh insights and spiritual depth to John's own experience concerning the Word of Life:

Which was in existence from the beginning,  
 which we had heard and beheld intently with our own eyes  
 and touched (handled) with our hands.  
 We declare to you (the Church in every generation)  
 what we had seen and heard  
 so that you may have fellowship with us (the disciples)  
 Our fellowship is with the *Father*  
*and his son Jesus Christ*  
 and we write this to you that our *joy*<sup>16</sup> may be complete.<sup>17</sup>

### NOTES

1. This is the title of Chapter 21 of the Rev. Dr. Ravi Tiwari's book, *Yisu Das: Witness of a Convert*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), pp. 222-274.
2. Cecil Hargreaves, *Asian Christian Thinking*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1972), p.65. Cf. Also Robin Boyd, *Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1969, Rev. Ed. 1975, 5<sup>th</sup> Reprint 1998), p.1, quoting from Eddy Asirvatham, *Christianity in the Indian Crucible*, (Calcutta: YMCA, 1955), p. 188. Several others have written on St. John, including Bishop A.J. Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhaktimarga*, (Madras: CLS, 1928), but not interpreting it in terms of ones conversion experience, relating it to the Hindu Scriptures, Indian thought forms and theological categories.
3. So Dr. K. Rajaratnam designates Dr. Ravi Tiwari, in his foreword to this book, *Witness of a Convert*. Ravi Tiwari is the Professor of Religions and Dean of PG Studies at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai.
4. Yisu Das originally wrote this section in Hindi and is translated into English by Ravi Tiwari.
5. The sage Sri Vyasa is also known as the wise Badarayana and Sri Krishna Dvaipayana. He is considered to be an *avatara* of Vishnu (Swami Sivananda, *Brahma Sutras*, Delhi, Banarasidas, 1949, 2<sup>nd</sup>. rev. ed. 1977), p.2 and the author of the great epic *The Mahabharata* and the *Brahma Sutras*. (The *Bhagavadgita* is part of the *Mahabharata*).
6. *Brahma Sutras* are the codified teachings of the *Upanishads*. They deal with the Vedanta philosophy. Vedanta is the end or the gist of the Vedas. It is not mere speculation. It is the 'authentic record of the transcendental experiences or direct and actual realization of the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality by the great Hindu Rishis or Seers and their study of the scriptures - the Vedas.
7. The title of Ravi Tiwari's Doctoral thesis is 'A Comparative Study of Paul Tillich and Sankara with Special Reference to the Concept of Being.'
8. Dr. D.G. Kilpatrick was the Dean 'Ireland professor of exegesis of the Holy Scripture' at the University of Oxford.
9. The family name *Tiwari* is said to come from the word *Triveda*, indicating that the family belongs to the authoritative teachers of the three Vedas — the *Rig, Sama and Yajur Vedas*. They trace their ancestry to the great sage Bharadwaja.
10. Yisu Das also translated the New Testament for the Bible Society of India with the title *Naya Niyama*, commonly known as the Tiwari Version.

11. Tiwari strongly objects to Hendrick Kaemer's and Barthian emphasis on a radical disunity between Christian revelation and the other ancient ancestral religions (p.15).
12. Similarly, Sadhu Sundar Singh left the Seminary not satisfied with the lack of spirituality in theological training.
13. *Swedish Missiological Themes (SMT)*, Vol. 89, No. 3, (2001), pp. 417-430.
14. Ishta Devata is the god whom one likes to worship as his own, not rejecting the existence of other gods. This is often called henotheism, as opposed to polytheism and monotheism.
15. Cf. Note 3, p.1 above.
16. In this opening verse of the First Epistle of John we may discern the Trinitarian formula. According to Sankaracharya the one absolute Brahman is *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. Keshub Chander Sen and others have identified the Trinity with this Advaitic doctrine of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. Ananda is 'joy' associated with the Holy Spirit. St. John in his epistle almost gives expression to this aspect of the Trinity in terms of the *Sat-Chit-Ananda*.
17. My own free translation to bring out the Trinitarian emphasis of these verses (1 John 1:1-4).