

## HINDU BIOPHILIA: THOREAU'S INDIA OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

Ashwini Joshi<sup>1</sup> & Sonal Dixit<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, RKDF University, Madhya Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, RKDF University, Madhya Pradesh, India

---

Received: 22 Mar 2018

Accepted: 20 Apr 2018

Published: 30 Apr 2018

---

### ABSTRACT

*Hindu texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Laws of Manu provided Thoreau with an additional vehicle for conceptualizing a relationship between the divine and the natural. In Walden, Thoreau articulates a view of nature that differs from the norms of his day by elevating it to the status of a God. Thoreau uses Hindu, and other religious, structures and formats to express a conception of nature as worthy of reverence.*

*This paper examines Thoreau's deployment of some of the structures and themes of Hindu texts in Walden. Thoreau has a biophilic view of nature, that is to say, his approach as a writer and amateur naturalist is animated by an innate love of life. Walden frequently and in a wide variety of ways- suggests that some kind of biophilic relation between the human organism and the non-human natural environment is, and should be seen as, fundamental to human existence. Thoreau's literary expression of this biophilia often combines the scripture and natural observation, suggesting that religion can be used to understand and appreciate nature, and that nature can fill a role similar to God in a religious tradition. Additionally, the paper examines how Hinduism's view of the role of God in nature appealed to Thoreau's absorption with the wild, topic cognate but not identical to nature itself, which led him to write Walden.*

**KEYWORDS:** Thoreau Hindu, Other Religious, Scripture, and Natural Observation

### INTRODUCTION

#### Serendipities

On July 14, 1845, a 27-year-old Henry David Thoreau moved into a cabin near a lake called Walden Pond in Massachusetts, north-eastern United States. His goal, he wrote later, was "to live deliberately, to [con]front only the essential facts of life". We learn of these and other words that speak of Thoreau's intentions from the writings he left behind. His journal tracked his life from October 1837 to November 1861, eventually filling up 47 manuscript volumes.

The most famous of his books was *Walden*; or, *Life in the Woods*, an assemblage of sustained thinking about life in a rural setting, deeply felt psychological insights amidst everyday life and some sharp criticisms of the society around him. All of these are sketched out in an artful prose that is extraordinary in its attention to the sensuousness and specificities of reality. As a book that has survived generations, *Walden* lives on in the cathedrals of American literary consciousness as a sort of moonlit gargoyle, tucked away, sitting vigil over modernity and discontents.

Besides Emerson and Thoreau, four other distinguished Americans of the period Alcott the Teacher, Whittier the Quaker, Melville the Rover and Whitman the Mystic showed an interest in the Indian philosophic thought and

in turn were influenced by it. But Emerson and Thoreau are invariably paired as the two leading Transcendentalists. Thoreau was the younger of the two. He was also the more energetic and impulsive and the more frankly admiring of Vedic thought. There is no record that he read any Indian literature while at Harvard but in Emerson's library he found and read with passion Sir William Jones' translation of *The Laws of Manu* and was fascinated. In his Journal, he wrote: "That title (Manu)... comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindustan... They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted from those old times, and no more to be refuted than the wind. When my imagination travels eastward and backward to those remote years of the gods, I seem to draw near to the habitation of the morning, and the dawn at length has a place. I remember the book as an hour before sunrise."

During his stay in 1838 with Emerson's brother, Thoreau had unrestricted access to Emerson's library which contained the great works of India such as *The Vedas*, *The Laws of Manu*, the *Hitopadesha* of Vishnu Sharma, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Thoreau reads the Hindu scriptures with delight and with each reading; he was raised into a rare region of thought.

He not only read books on Indian Philosophy from Emerson's library, but also from his borrowings from the Harvard College Library during 1849- 1854. On 11 September 1849, he borrowed '*Mahabharata*, *Hariwamsa*, *On Historic de la famille*', and Garcin de Tassy's '*Histoire de la literature Hindoui*'. In 1850, from January 28th to April, he read Wilson's translation of the '*Vishnu Purana*', IcvaraKrsna's '*The SankhyaKarika*', '*The Samveda Samhita*' translated by Stevenson, Rammohan Roy's Translation of passages of the *Veda*; and vol. IX of the works of Sir William Jones. (This volume contains '*Sacotala*, or, the Fatal Ring' and Sir Jones' translation of Kalidasa's '*Abhijyana Sakuntalam*,' Charles Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* - '*Bhagvat-geeta*, or, Dialogue of *Kreeshna* and *Arjoon*' was borrowed by Thoreau on 9th October, 1854).

His steadily growing interest in Indian philosophy led him to study Colebrooke's '*Essays*', and Burnouf's '*Introduction an "histoire du Buddhisme Indien"*'. An article, '*The Preaching of Buddha*', based on his study of Burnouf's book, selections from '*The Laws of Manu*', and selections from the Oriental scriptures, were also contributed by Thoreau to the '*Dial*'. In the Prefaces to the selections, Orientalists like Colebrooke, Hodgson, and Wilkins are frequently cited by Thoreau. All this shows his interest in India. In January 1843, Thoreau published selected passages from the *Laws of Manu* from a French version of the Sanskrit *Harivansa* in *The Dial*, Thoreau also translated a story, "The Transmigration of seven Brahmans", and in *The Dial* of January 1844, he published excerpts from Buddhist Scriptures under the title "The preaching of Buddha". Hindu scripture tells us that the central core of one's self (*antaratman*) is identifiable with the cosmic whole (Brahman). The *Upanishads* state: "The self within you, the respondent, immortal person is the internal self of all things and is the universal Brahman". Concepts similar to this cardinal doctrine of vedanta appear in the writings of the Transcendentalists. But there are many ideological similarities among Oriental literature, the Neoplatonic doctrines, Christian mysticism, and the philosophy of the German idealists such as Kant and Schilling. And, since the Transcendentalists were acquainted with all of these writings, it is not always possible to identify specific influences. Nevertheless, the striking parallels between Transcendentalist writing and Oriental thought make it clear that there was a spiritual kinship.

When Thoreau began his intensive study of Hindu scriptures, he wrote in his journal, "I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindu's without being elevated upon the table-land of the Ghauts ..... The impression which those sublime sentences made for me last night has awakened me before Cock-crowing ..... The simple life herein described confers on us a degree of freedom even in perusal ..... wants so easily and gracefully satisfied that they seem like a more refined pleasure, repleteness". Later, in his first book, he said any moral philosophy is exceedingly rare. This of Manu addresses our privacy more than most. It is a more private and familiar and at the same time a more public and universal work, than is spoken of in parlor or pulpits nowadays. As our domestic fowls are said to have their original in the will pleasant of India, so our domestic thoughts have their prototypes in the thoughts of her philosophers ..... Most books belong to the house and street only and in the fields, their leaves feel very thin ..... But this, as it proceeds from, so it addresses, what is deepest and most abiding in man. It belongs to the noontide of the day, the midsummer of the year and after the snows have melted, and the waters evaporated in the spring, still its truth speaks freshly to our experience.....".

Thoreau, like other Transcendentalist, had a breadth and catholicity of mind which brought him to the study of religions of India. From the beginning, he was disillusioned with organized Christianity as he never went to Church and like Emerson showed great interest in Hinduism and its philosophy. In comparison to Hebraism, Thoreau found Hinduism superior in many ways. The following passage demonstrates Thoreau's disenchantment with Hebraism and his love for Hinduism: In 1853 he wrote:

"The Hindoos are most serenely and thoughtfully religious than the Hebrews. They have perhaps a purer, more independent and impersonal knowledge of God. Their religious books describe the first inquisitive and contemplative access to God; the Hebrew Bible a conscientious return, a grosser and more personal repentance. Repentance is not a free and fair highway to God. A wise man will dispense with repentance. It is shocking and passionate. God prefers that you approach him thoughtful, not penitent, though you are chief of sinners. It is only by forgetting yourself that you draw near to him. The calmness and gentleness with which the Hindoo philosophers approach and discourse on forbidden themes is admirable."

He also admitted that, "the religion and philosophy of the Hebrews and Christians are those of a wilder and ruder tribe, wanting the civility and intellectual refinements and subtlety of Vedic culture." Thoreau's reading of the literature on India and the Vedas were extensive: he took them seriously. Quoting the man himself here as an evidence of a true Transcendentalist, he said, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer", to reveal a Thoreau's belief that every man must transcend the current sociological ideals.

## REFERENCES

1. UmeshPatri. "Hindu Scriptures and American Transcendentalists" p 98-240 and *India and Her People* - By Swami Abhedanandap. 235-236)
2. Stephen Knapp. "The Secret Teachings of the Vedas". *The Eastern Answers to the Mysteries of Life* Vol. I, p 22. 11.
3. The Secret Teachings of the Vedas. *The Eastern Answers to the Mysteries of Life* - By Stephen Knapp volume one, p. 22

4. Albert, David H. "Thoreau's India: The Impact of Reading in a Crisis." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 125.2 (1981):104-09. JSTOR. Web. 27 July 2016.
5. Baym, Nina. "Thoreau's View of Science." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26.2 (1965): 221-34. *Articles Plus*. Web. 27 Sept. 2016.
6. David H. Albert. "Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society", Vol. 125, No. 2 (Apr. 30, 1981), pp. 104-109
7. V.Meenakumari. "Thoreau's India - An Outsider's View". VOL. 7 No. 2 July 2011.
8. Satsvarupa Dasa Goswami. "Back To Godhead- On Thoreau and Vedic Thought". p.10-21, 1986