

## Chapter 1 General Background

The present work completes a study of the *Spanda* school of Kashmiri Śaivism, the basic tenets of which I have presented in the form of a general introduction to Kashmiri Śaivism in a previous volume called *The Doctrine of Vibration*<sup>1</sup>. This volume contains translations of the basic texts of this school, namely, the *Stanzas on Vibration* with commentaries by Kallaṭabhaṭṭa, Bhagavadutpala, and Rājānaka Rāma. I have also included Kṣemarāja's *Essence of Vibration* which is a commentary on the first verse of the *Stanzas*. In a separate volume I have published a translation of the *Aphorisms of Śiva* with a commentary by Bhāskara.<sup>2</sup>

These texts and their commentaries were compiled in Sanskrit in Kashmir between the 9th and 11th centuries by learned Śaiva Brahmins reputed both for their scholarship and spirituality. They expound in the usual, at times disordered, manner of such works, a monistic Śaiva view of God, man and the world. Although the authors of these works stress the importance of reason and personal experience as a means to both realise and validate the doctrines they expound, they are not purely speculative but ultimately base themselves on divine revelation. The content of this revelation is transmitted in scriptures known as Āgamas or Tantras and by the oral tradition of those initiated into their cults who, having realised their truth for themselves, initiate others and reveal to them their esoteric meaning.

Unlike the major semitic religions, Hinduism, of which the teachings contained in these texts form a part, admits the existence of many scriptures. These scriptures are very extensive and extremely varied and, at times, may even appear to be in conflict with one another. Even so, none are attributed to human authorship but are all considered to be ultimately the words of one supreme divine being or, as some Hindus maintain in the case of the Vedas, the earliest Hindu scriptures, they are eternal, self-existing realities. The development over the centuries of a large number of revealed scriptures and many lines of oral transmission of their contents from teacher to disciple makes for the existence of the vast number of cults and sects that constitute the sectarian forms of Hinduism that look to scriptures written in Sanskrit as their primary authorities.

In addition to these sectarian forms of Hinduism, there are many other parallel religions, sects and cults that look to the authority of the sayings of teachers who taught through the medium of their local vernacular. The earliest and best known example is early Buddhism whose scriptures are in the language of a part of Northern India of the 4th century B.C. Another, much later, example is the religion of the Sikhs whose scripture—the *Gurugranthasāhib*—is a compilation of spiritual sayings, mostly in Punjabi and forms of Hindi, of Sikh teachers and others who lived in India between the 14th and the 17th centuries.

Again, accompanying the many forms of sectarian Hinduism are the innumerable, largely non-literate, folk cults found everywhere in India which focus on the worship of local deities and other divine or semi-divine beings that populate the towns, villages and countryside of India. These elements constitute, in varying measures, the personal beliefs and practices of each individual Hindu. But although they are often quite varied and even mutually divergent, they coexist, held together by the basic common beliefs that are the presuppositions of every form of Hinduism, at least in its more sophisticated developments. One such belief, and certainly the most important, is that each man is bound by his ignorance of the nature of ultimate principles, namely, God, the Self and *Māyā*—the shadowy world of daily life. Freedom, the attainment of which is the fulfillment and meaning of all of life's travail, is only possible by overcoming this ignorance by knowledge. How this knowledge can be attained and what it reveals may vary; nonetheless it remains a constant factor which serves to lend coherence to the wide diversity we find in Hinduism and hints at the underlying unity which Hindus generally feel lies at the base, not only of the many sects and schools of Hinduism, but of all religions.<sup>3</sup> This underlying unity allows for the existence of a large overlapping area of common belief and practice such as we find, for example, in the Hindu law books which, avowedly basing themselves on common practice, prescribe the manner in which each Hindu should behave according to his caste and social status. Finally, the great epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* of which the famous *Bhagavadgītā* is a part, the *Purāṇas* which, among other things, contain the stories of the mythical life of the Hindu gods, and the *Upaniṣads* and *Vedas*, form a common patrimony which every Hindu, whatever his caste or sectarian bias, reveres.

Inevitably, however, every Hindu cannot accept all scriptural authorities as equally valid. His attitude may vary. He may accept that some scriptures are of general authority but that there are others that are specifically authoritative for him. Thus, if they happen to contradict the more general authority, he will accept the later at the expense of the former.<sup>4</sup>

He may grade them in such a way that those he adheres to most specifically are understood to expound the most essentially point of view to which all the other 'lower' scriptures tend but do not make fully explicit.<sup>5</sup> Again, he may simply reject the authority of other scriptures saying that they are revealed merely to delude and mislead<sup>6</sup> or that they are not genuine scriptures at all but products of misguided human reason.<sup>7</sup> And even when different groups accept the authority of the same basic texts they are often variously interpreted. The diverse schools of *Vedānta* which base themselves on the authority of the *Upaniṣads* are a prime example of this phenomenon. There are *Vedāntins*, such as *Śaṅkara*, who interpret the *Upaniṣads* as teaching that reality is one only and absolute. Known as the 'Brahman', it is the Self (*ātman*) of every living being and the world of diversity, in relation to it, is an illusory appearance. While others, such as *Mādhava* or *Rāmānuja*, basing themselves on the same scriptures, reject, in different ways, the notion that ultimate reality is merely an impersonal absolute, and maintain instead that the *Upaniṣads* teach the existence of a material, finite world more or less distinct in some way from the immaterial and infinite but personal God, Who is also similarly distinct from the countless individual souls striving for union with Him.

However, despite these many differences, we can distinguish three major streams of Hinduism to which virtually all Hindus belong. One stream consists of those sects, cults, myths and theologies which represent the one supreme God (*parameśvara*) as *Viṣṇu* or one of His incarnations or forms. To the second stream belong those who venerate *Śiva* in one or other of His forms as the highest God. The third stream, although in a sense independent of the other two, is always to a greater or lesser degree aligned in some way with one or the other. Those who belong to this current of Hinduism venerate the supreme deity not as the male God but as the Goddess. Although not infrequently represented iconically (in one of Her many forms), as alone and theologically understood by her most ardent devotees to be the supreme principle, the Goddess is,

nonetheless, invariably associated in some way with the male God of which she is mythically the spouse and metaphysically, the divine power—Śakti.<sup>8</sup> The devotees of the great Goddess—the Śāktas—stress that the male God is powerless without Her. Devoid of His divine power He is as if dead, as far, in other words, from being God as He could be. Thus, She is His most essential attribute (*dharma*) and, indeed, His own most authentic nature (*svabhāva*).<sup>9</sup> The votaries of the male God for their part insist that, if there is power (*śakti*) a possessor and controller of that power (*śaktimān*) must exist to direct it. Otherwise we must postulate the existence of another power to control the first and so on. In the absence of any ultimate controlling principle, reality would collapse into a chaos precluding all possibility of an ordered cosmos.<sup>10</sup> Thus, although both God and Goddess may be represented independently, we do in fact find that, just as metaphysically the two are inseparably related, they are also inextricably bound together in the history of Hinduism. As a result, there are both Vaiṣṇava Śāktas, who worship the consort and power of Viṣṇu or of one of His incarnations, and Śaiva Śāktas, who worship the equivalent goddess associated with Śiva, notably Kālī.

Accompanying these morphological distinctions there are, inevitably, differences in metaphysical standpoints. Indeed, despite basic similarities, it is staggering how many variant views exist concerning the nature of reality in the numerous Hindu traditions. This diversity, often discernable in the scriptures themselves, is developed and highlighted further by the schools that look to their authority, all of which, naturally, claim and concretely attempt to present their own view as the most synthetic and hence the most representative of them all. Even within the same school of thought, we notice that different exponents may present it from the point of view of their own peculiar perspective. The net result is that the entire range of metaphysical topics including cosmology, ontology and soteriology are each subject to as many subtle and substantial variations as are the innumerable divine forms which populate the Hindu pantheons.

And yet, these many diverse views can be reduced to basic types. Firstly, we have dualisms that posit the eternal existence of two or more principles. The most important representative of this group is the Sāṃkhya which can be said to furnish one of the most basic metaphysical models for Hinduism as a whole. This philosophy, in its classically formulated form, posits the existence of two principles, one spiritual and the other material. The former is known as *Puruṣa*, meaning literally the 'person'. This Person is essentially the individual living soul (*jīva*) of which there are countless numbers, each a timeless, non-spatial center of pure consciousness that passively witnesses the activity of the second principle, *Prakṛti*, literally meaning 'Nature', that constitutes all that lies in the objective sphere along with the sensory and mental instruments the Person requires to perceive it. This form of Sāṃkhya is atheistic and formed the theoretical basis for the practice of Patañjali's classical Yoga system which teaches how the yogi can discover his purely spiritual identity as a Person by detaching himself from the restless activity of Nature. Other forms of dualism are theistic and, more often than not, adopt a modified form of the Sāṃkhya. They generally maintain that God, the world and individual souls are three distinct realities that are beginningless and eternal, although the latter two are governed and sustained by God. This is very basically the view of an important Śaiva tradition known as the *Śaivasiddhānta* which calls the first principle '*Patī*'—'Lord', the second '*Pāśa*'—'fetter' and the third '*Paśu*'—the 'bound'.

To the second group belong qualified dualisms that posit same kind of basic identity between these fundamental principles while maintaining that they remain distinct. Examples are the theistic Vaiṣṇava forms of the *Sāṃkhya* that posit the existence, among the countless infinitesimally small individual Persons, of one that is infinitely great and hence stands above them all as the one God, Who is the Supreme Person (*purusottama*) that emanates both the lower Persons and Nature out of Himself, as does the sun its rays. This is basically the view supported by perhaps the

single most well known Hindu scripture: the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Finally there are the non-dualist schools that maintain that there is no essential difference between the fundamental nature of these principles or indeed of anything else that might exist in any way. Reality is one, although the nature of this unity can be variously understood. The *Aphorisms of Śiva* and the *Stanzas on Vibration* present a form of monism in which Śiva is said to be that one reality. He is not merely a purely transcendental, passive absolute beyond all diversity but, as God, actively manifests Himself through His divine powers as the countless forms of the universe at each moment to then withdraw them back into Himself. This recurrent cyclic activity is Śiva's divine vibration—*Spanda*—from which this school draws its name.