Unity in Diversity: The Commonalities in the Three Diverging Paths of the Quest

“What you seek is seeking you”

-Rumi

India is a country to which millions of people throng daily in search of peace and tranquillity and sacred India is an essential part of it. The term ‘Sacred’ means something or someone considered worthy of spiritual respect or devotion; or inspiring awe or reverence among believers in a given set of spiritual ideas. In other contexts, even objects are often considered 'holy' or 'sacred' if used for spiritual purposes, such as the worship of the idols of Gods. It is often ascribed to people- "a holy man" of religious occupation, "holy prophet" who is venerated by his followers and a "sacred artefact" that is venerated and blessed.

Beneath the cover of modernization, Indians still are striving to preserve their culture and most importantly their religious beliefs particularly Hinduism. The teachings of Hinduism reached the West through many foreign explorers who reached India in search of Spirituality. Among such curious seekers, are categorised the present set of writers Helena Blavatsky, Paul Brunton and William Dalrymple.

The first two were ardent spiritual seekers who travelled the length and breadth of India in search of a suitable teacher who could guide them in their quest of unravelling the mysteries of the Universe. However Dalrymple’s search was for the spiritual seekers and practitioners who still exist in modern India. He was more of a traveller who reported his findings about Sacred India.

Upon the advice of her spiritual guide, Helena Blavatsky journeyed to India and obtained an insight into the lives of the numerous Yogis who lead concealed and secret
lives away from the hustle and bustle of the colonial rule in remote jungles or caves. Her travelogue, *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* gives a vivid account of the unusual experiences of Blavatsky and her companions.

Blavatsky’s meeting with her teacher (as she calls him) and his surprisingly miraculous appearances to save her life suggest a spiritual connection. Blavatsky was a gifted woman and had a strong inclination towards the esoteric sciences since her childhood. She belonged to the Theosophical Society and was one of its founders. Her extensive travels in India led her to establish the Theosophical society in Adyar, Madras. The motto of the Theosrophists was “There is no religion higher than truth.” According to Blavatsky, Theosophy is neither revelation nor speculation. It is portrayed as an attempt at gradual, faithful reintroduction of a hitherto hidden science, which is called in Theosophical literature ‘the Occult Science.’

According to Blavatsky, this postulated science provides a description of Reality not only at a physical level, but also on a metaphysical one. The Occult Science is said to have been preserved (and practiced) throughout history by carefully selected and trained individuals. Theosophy was considered by Blavatsky to be “the substratum and basis of all the world-religions and philosophies.” She explains this in her book *The Key to Theosophy*. Helena Blavatsky’s book *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* was written during moments of leisure and she mentions this in the preface to the book. This account describes her journey into India’s remote corners in search of various religious cults. As a theosophist, she took tremendous interest in the world religions.

Blavatsky encountered Hinduism as practiced by the Brahmins, was witness to the ceremonies of the devil worshippers, was introduced to the Yogis who practiced body control, and had escaped death miraculously twice, with the appearance of her teacher,
Thakur Gulab-Lal Singh who was her protector throughout her life. The teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism had a remarkable influence on Blavatsky and most of the theosophical doctrines were loaded with Sanskrit terminology. She studied the ancient scriptures of Hinduism in India under the guidance of Swami Dayanand Saraswati of the Arya Samaj.

India fascinated Blavatsky with its cultural diversity and its rich heritage. The theosophists imbibed the concepts of many philosophical and religious traditions and strove for the establishment of a ‘unified worldview’. The term refers to a wide world perception. Additionally, it refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual, group or culture interprets the world and interacts with it as a coherent description of the world as one objective reality.

Blavatsky’s spiritual journey into India was in search of the secrets that various sects of Hinduism concealed from the foreign mind. The theosophical society, which had many Indians as its members, had the advantage of gaining access into the remote hidden places of the Yogis and Rishis of Sacred India.

The main aspects which are highlighted in the book apart from the observations of Blavatsky on the historic monuments and the ancient traditions are the concepts of Spiritualism, the occult sciences and most importantly how these aspects as she found in India, differed from the tenets of theosophy. Spiritualism is considered a religion, and its followers believed in the spirits of the dead as capable of communicating with the human world. Spiritualism, also believed in mediumship where a particular spirit enters an individual’s body as an easy means to communicate.

In Hinduism, the practice of tantra is akin to spiritualism where tantra, is a method of psychoanalysis, a way of integrating the body, mind, and spirit, and a way of using the
mind or will to cause change in one's external situations and circumstances, hence "magic". It includes amongst its various branches a variety of ritualistic practices ranging from visualisation exercises and the chanting of mantras to elaborate rituals. The three authors helped in the expansion of the philosophic and religious teachings and presented them to the West in as simple a language as possible. The spiritual teachings mentioned by these authors are similar. They have been practiced for ages and although they differ in names, they are linked to each other. The common spiritual techniques mentioned by the writers, are Spiritualism, Occultism and Mentalism.

Tantra, literally meaning "formula", "method", or "way", (parallel to the Chinese Tao, which also means "the way" or "the method"), and also having the secondary meaning of "loom", "thread", is the name scholars give to a style of religious ritual and meditation that arose in medieval India no later than the fifth century CE, and it influenced all forms of Asian religious expression to a greater or lesser degree. Alchemy, astrology, herbalism, Yogic practices, sex magic, and trance also together form the multifaceted and multilevel nature of Tantra.

Yantra, literally: "instrument" or "tool" are geometric diagrams are considered to be the subtle or finer representation of the psychological or natural powers that are the deities, the proper use of which would result in the Yantra becoming "activated" and infused with the particular powers and capacities of the said deity, for the practitioner or adept to put to his or her use. This concept of the Yantra was called ‘medium’ in Spiritualism. Spiritualism took its concepts from Tantra and hence is considered similar.

This technique is mentioned by Blavatsky in her book while she talks about the devil worshippers who worship the Kangalim or witch possessed by the seven sister goddesses. Another incident which is worth mentioning is the experience of Mr Y__
where he paints an illusionary scene only made visible to him by Gulab Singh. These techniques were used by the tantrics as part of the visualisation exercises where the mind of a particular person is controlled through the creation of delusions.

However the theosophists did not believe in mediumship and its practice was discouraged. Blavatsky was an occultist. The term ‘occult’ meant “something that must be hidden.” but for most practicing occultists it is simply the study of a deeper spiritual reality that extends beyond pure reason and the physical sciences.

The theosophical society’s tenets included the investigation of the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man. So Occultism, the study of occult practices was a main concern of the theosophist. Occultism for most practicing occultists is simply the study of a deeper spiritual reality that extends beyond pure reason and the physical sciences. But in general, Occultism is the study of occult practices, including magic, alchemy, extra-sensory perception, astrology, spiritualism. Interpretation of occultism can be found in the belief structures like theosophy.

Hence it was a part of the theosophical society. Occult concepts have existed in the Vedic stream too. *The Atharva Veda*, representing an independent tradition markedly different from the other three *Vedas*, is a rich source parallel to the Vedic traditions of the *Rig, Sam, and Yajur Vedas*, containing detailed descriptions of various kinds of magical rituals for different results ranging from punishing enemies, to acquisition of wealth, health, long life, or a good harvest.

Blavatsky gained the knowledge about the existence of occult practices and its techniques of divination and extra sensory perception in the Bagh caves. Her life was saved by the timely and unexpected appearance of Gulab Singh. The experience is worth quoting.
I vaguely realized that I had really fainted, and that I should die if not taken out into
the open air. I could not lift my finger; I could not utter a sound; and, in spite of it,
there was no fear in my soul-nothing but an apathetic, but indescribably sweet
feeling of rest,...then I experienced a new sensation: I rather knew than felt that I
was lifted from the floor, and fell down and down some unknown precipice,
amongst the hollow rollings of a distant thunder-storm. Suddenly a loud voice
resounded near me.\footnote{Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna. \textit{From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan}. Madras: Theosophical Publishing
House, 1892.244. Print.}

This experience had Blavatsky believe more strongly in the power of a spiritual
connection. As she mentioned in one of her letters, that she was constantly in touch with
her masters in Tibet through thought transference. The mysterious appearance of
scrawled answers right below the queries asked in letters were a work of spiritualistic
techniques (spiritualism) employed by the masters in order to communicate with their
disciples instantly.

The India Blavatsky saw was still rich in religious and spiritual values. There were
many paths leading up to god and many religious sects to choose from. The combined
teachings of all these sects and religions made the theosophical society stronger in
promoting universal brotherhood in terms of attaining spirituality.

Paul Brunton was a seeker from the West in search of a true spiritual teacher or a
\textit{Guru}. He undertook the journey to India in search of inner peace. The perseverance of the
spiritual seeker is mixed with the spirit of the traveller in both the writers, Helena
Blavatsky and Paul Brunton. \textit{A Search in Secret} India is the story of Brunton’s journey
into the secret India where spirituality is manifest in a rare amount of highly revered
\textit{Yogis} who had reached the stage of spiritual elevation.
Brunton’s search for a Guru is sincere and filled with caution. He continued his search with a sceptical approach in *A Search*… Brunton was not ready to place his faith in any of the Spiritual masters he met without gaining a convincing experience that would provide him with some proof of the existence of a God in the human soul. He received a profound experience in the ashram of Sri Ramana Maharishi, but decided to take a chance and continue his journey. The conflict taking shape in his mind, and his inability to choose whether to accept the Maharishi as his Guru or to continue on his path is highlighted remarkably. After meeting various Yogis and after gaining an insight into their teachings and practices, he returned to the abode of Ramana Maharishi on the Arunachala hills.

A few of the spiritual teachers stand out because of the unique experiences and descriptions of Brunton about their remarkable lives. Among them were, Sri Shanakaracharya of Kumbhakonam, the spiritual head of south India, “the Sage who never speaks,” “the Wonder Worker of Benares” and the spiritual head of the Radhasoami Faith, Sir Sahabji Maharaj and Brunton’s own teacher, Sri Ramana Maharishi.

They practised different forms of Yoga and formed their own places of retreat far from the busy life of the cities. The various forms of Yoga encountered by Brunton as techniques for self-discipline are mentioned to be, the Brahma Chinta, the Yoga of body and mind control (Hatha Yoga) as practiced by the “Sage who never speaks”, the Surat Shabda Yoga which he came to know of in “the Garden of the Lord”- Dayalbagh- which meant Yoga of the Spirit and Sound current.

Though he was impressed by the practices of these Gurus and their disciples, Brunton, was not ready to get initiated unless he was made aware of the nature of the practice. But, he was told by Sahabji Maharaj, that the master revealed himself to the
disciple when the time was right, and hence he should not give up his search for a true master. Of all the experiences, Brunton’s wakeup call came to him in the Ashram of Sri Ramana Maharishi.

The basic lesson taught to him by his Guru was to contemplate on the question of one’s spiritual identity, i.e. to ask oneself the question “who am I?” this quest for the inner self is the subject of Brunton’s next book A Hermit in the Himalayas. Brunton undertook a journey into the Himalayan ridges in search of the Universal soul which is said to be latent in man and Nature. He coined the term ‘Overself’ which is his term for the Higher Self, Soul, or Ātman. It is a literal translation of Adhyâtma. “At its most personal, it is present as ‘the God within us’ of whom we can become one during meditation and in life. The living, conscious human being is the child and student of the Overself, sent forth to evolve, learn, and create in the great field of Creation that the World-Mind provides. Throughout our lives, the Overself is ever present as our inner light, guide, and protector.”

It was on the quest for this Overself that Brunton took residence in the Himalayan ranges near the Tehri area. His original plan to visit Tibet became impossible after he was denied access from the Indian border to reach Lhasa. Lhasa was home to many monasteries and Tibet was also home to the most sacred Mountain in the Himalayas, i.e. the Kailas. It was considered to possess divine vibrations as it is said to be the abode of Lord Shiva who lay in eternal Samadhi on its summits.

Mentalism was a concept coined by Paul Brunton and he says the following of Mentalism:

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2 <http://www.paulbrunton.org/termsandteachings.php#mentalism-and-philosophy>
Because I am a conscious being I am aware of physical sensations and mental thoughts; but the consciousness which enables such awareness to exist itself existed before sensation and before thought, and this is as true of new born babies as it is of dying adults. This is what the materialistic anatomist dissecting the body fails to perceive, and this is the great secret which mentalism unveils for us.\(^3\)

Basically mentalism also is akin to the above mentioned concepts and it also involves solving the mysteries of the universe and its practice helps one to demonstrate highly developed mental and intuitive abilities. All these aspects were familiar to the authors and all of these aspects originated from Hinduism.

Brunton’s Himalayan retreat was close to a jungle and was located amidst the most beautiful scenes of nature. The Himalayas were a choice of retreat for spiritual enlightenment since the ancient times. The epics talked about *Rishis* and *Yogis* living in the extreme temperatures on the Himalayan summits performing severe penance to please the Gods.

Brunton himself had a few visitors who were mostly *Yogis* on their way to Tibet. The Hindu monks were allowed access to cross the border; it was the Europeans who were denied the privilege to visit the monasteries as there were not many sincere seekers among them.

Brunton’s discussion with one of his visitors, *Yogi Pranavanada* is fascinating as he narrated the tale of his *Guru Swami Jnanananda* who with the help of Hatha *Yoga*, meditated at a height of eleven thousand feet near Gangotri. The visits of various *Yogis* helped Brunton during his meditation sessions and according to him elevated the energy

forces of the atmosphere. Brunton, was advised to ‘sit still’ by his master in order to harness the flow of the universe.

The concept of the Overself is realised by the author in the Himalayan range as the silence of the mountain and the distribution of natural surroundings helped the author to ‘become one’ with the universal power. As he says in the end, “the ultimate message of Himalaya is SILENCE, that silence which carries the breath of God in its hush. In that silence mankind may find its proof of the existence of God, of the reality of a Universal Power behind Nature which is ever present and ever-working. To me life shall ever after be bigger and nobler because I have lived here.”

His quest for the answer to the question of who am I? is also answered. Brunton says that the phrase of the Psalmist, “Be still and know that I am god” can be reversed to “Be still and know the I Am- God.” The presence of God within one’s own self and its relation with the universal soul His books describe the quest for a true spiritual teacher which is successful in the end, and also his search for the Overself which he pursues at the foot of the Himalayas, Brunton’s journey into Sacred India turned him into a spiritual seeker and he later became a well renowned mystic of the West and grew in popularity for bringing the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharishi to the West. The experience of Timothy smith is quoted for a better understanding of the extent of achievement of Brunton in his spiritual journeys.

The way I put it to someone today was that being in his presence didn’t make the rest of life meaningless, but rather it revealed to me a plane of Reality in which meaning simply didn’t—and doesn’t—apply. I felt an odd disappointment. The disappointment was the inner death of my secret (and unrecognized) hopes that

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other goals and avenues of life besides the quest were worthwhile and legitimate in their own right. In the presence of the Sage, in his Silence, in his Radiance, that was manifestly not the case, for I now knew that the Sage, in this case PB, is at the centre of life… I could see that an earlier visit would have unbalanced me, filled me with too much pride or shame, too many questions or too many answers. If, now, in these latter years, I am ever able to communicate these facts—the FACT of enlightenment, and the fact of the extraordinary wisdom involved in the unfoldment of our own spiritual experiences—I will indeed feel that I’ve done something to repay PB, and the Overself, for that moment.5

William Dalrymple’s love for India started with his arrival in the sub-continent when he was eighteen years old. He arrived as a backpacker and never left the country. Dalrymple admits that India fascinated him in every way as he says in an interview, “As a writer and a reporter I find there’s a deep well of subjects to write about, whole worlds to explore in India and its neighbouring countries, subjects my contemporaries in many places can only dream of.”6

Dalrymple was not a spiritual seeker; he travelled Modern India in search of Spiritual seekers and presented their stories to the world. Dalrymple not only presented the facts but also, he presented to the world the existing spiritual practitioners who lay hidden in Sacred India, leading a life of ascetics far from their families and friends. The two faces of India are discussed in his books Nine Lives and The Age of Kali. These books


are travelogues written by the author after extensive journeys undertaken to the remote corners of the country. The first book *Nine Lives* is an account of the remarkable lives of nine individuals who are termed sacred due to their renunciation of the world.

Their spiritual journeys are presented in the form of stories which are real and based on facts. Dalrymple after writing his book, journeyed the world accompanied by the *bauls*, the *theyyam* dancer and also the singer of the epic of Pabuji Maharaj, Mohan Bhopa. The other book was written much before *Nine Lives* and gives an account of the deteriorating human values in the Kali Yuga.

Dalrymple explains the situation of the political structure, the social problems and most importantly the ray of hope which is present behind the cover of materialism in the form of various sacred institutions like temples and the presence of *Yogis* who are striving to bring back the spirituality man is losing in today’s world.

Dalrymple is a traveller, a historian and a reporter, who recedes into the background and lets the characters tell their own stories. The stories are presented as interviews to the reader, who is provided an insight into the spiritual lives of the characters. The author’s motive was to project the fact that the growing insecurities in the world are driving man towards spirituality. Even after the passage of thousands of years, Hinduism continues to exist in the twenty first century in the form of these sacred individuals who believe in the power of the soul and most importantly the power of God.

These three authors chose travelogues as they were quoting their personal experiences. The travelogues of Blavatsky and Paul Brunton appear to have been written in Diary form. The narrator is the author himself narrating his experiences on the course of his/her travels. The content is autobiographical, and written in first person narrative.
Dalrymple however is not autobiographical, he writes in the reporting style, where his travels and encounters are described with the character in the focal point. The author, retreats to the background and the character whose life story is being projected, becomes the narrator of his/her own story. Dalrymple is merely the interviewer. The spiritual journey is not his own, but of the character. All his encounters are supported by facts and are the stories of real persons. Dalrymple called this technique “non-fiction short story.”

Dalrymple confirmed in an interview that he did believe in God. In his own words, he says that India made him aware of the existence of many paths towards attaining God. “If there is any lesson that India teaches, it is pluralism. That there are many mountains; there are many ways of looking at a mountain; there are many ways up it.”

Even though the paths and approaches towards spirituality of the three authors are different, they are in many ways similar to each other. First, all three of them made use of the travelogue as the means to convey their experiences in the course of their travels. The type of expression differs. Helena Blavatsky employs the narrative style and narrates her experiences offering detailed descriptions of the particular place and its historic significance. The wisdom of the sacred scriptures is also ingrained into the text.

Paul Brunton also employs the narrative style, with occasional reflections on the Indian way of life and the Indian’s idea of spirituality. His books are entirely

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autobiographical and leave a profound spiritual message. The book *A Search in Secret* India is considered as a bible for the spiritual seeker who is in search of a *Guru*. The subtitle of the book itself is “the classic work on seeking a *Guru*.”

The books of both these writers contain vivid descriptions of nature. The beauty of nature and the important role it plays in enhancing one’s spiritual abilities is discussed. Both the writers had spiritual masters who were Indians and most importantly Hindus.

All the three writers are from the West and hence they saw India from the perspective of an outsider. But Dalrymple has made India his home and resides in the country. The other two writers also lived many years in India and eventually returned to their respective countries. But the influence of the place remained in their works. Their analysis of India is objective and facts are presented as they saw them.

William Dalrymple stands apart from the two writers, as he is not on a spiritual quest, but he presents the existence of spirituality and is striving to help the sacred traditions which are on the verge of extinction like the epic of Pabuji Maharaj, which is considered not scared by the Rajasthani bhopas.

“On one matter, the older generations both in the East and the West are agreed, and that is, that there was more true religion and real piety when they were young than is to be found today.”

Through the works of these writers, we can trace the differences in the scenario of Indian Spirituality. When Blavatsky and Paul Brunton were writing, India was under the colonial rule and was averse to the western practices.

The foreigners were considered infidels and were denied the privilege of studying the sacred scriptures of India. This was more prevalent in colonial India as the British rule

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left some deep scars in the Indian mind. The Indians did not trust the foreigners and refused to give up their most treasured secrets. Paul Brunton also faced a similar problem but the intensity was much less.

As time progressed with the advent of the Westernization of the Indian mind, globalisation became the need of the hour. In the twenty first century, with the rapid progression of the New India, where materialistic life is adopted by the average Indian, the essence of the Old India or in this case Sacred India is still being preserved by the few who have made spirituality a prominent part of their lives.

These few Indians have started to strike a balance between the spiritual and material aspects of life.

In some ways India has become even more mysterious as it becomes better known. It has developed even more problems than it already had…these problems have mostly to do with the emergence of a form of Hinduism that is militant, minatory and regressive, and that never existed before. Travel writers today have a new theme to explore, and their journeys will have to be into the Indian mind and psyche.⁹

This is exactly the main crux of the book *The Age of Kali* where Dalrymple highlights the problems which arise when religion is mixed with political motives giving rise to many atrocities which take away the essence of that particular religious value.

India has been home to many religions, sects, and cults since the beginning. It has adapted all the world religions into its land. The diversified branches all lead to one specific goal i.e. salvation attained through mediation and spirituality.

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The bonds of the East and West are much stronger in today’s world than in any other time in history. The past is a significant aspect of the present in India. The scriptures of the Vedic era are still treated with veneration. “In Europe the past is the past. But in India, the past is in many ways also the future.”

Another significant aspect of the three writers is that they do not exoticize the East. They attempt to humanize the exotic. Dalrymple even admitted that he tried to remove the impression among people western and eastern alike that these individuals who have attained spiritual progress in life are real and so are their practices. They are presented as people from the normal world that chose to renounce the material world on their own accord.

“The modern Sannyasi, in the West as in the East, wears the garb of ordinary men, mingles with them as one of themselves, and yet inwardly is the renouncer.”

Sacred India is today in harmony with Indian modernity, and religion and modernity are marching together towards a greater good. The soul and mind are reconciled and their efficacies are embedded into every Indian. The quest for spirituality is the dream of every individual who has strong religious values.

“As brain is more productive in the long run than hand, so is soul more productive than brain. It is this non-economist conception of the individual which is ingrained in every Indian.”

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12 Ibid. 117.Print.