Nature and Characteristics of Mysticism in General

Nature

Mysticism, as the very name indicates, is a philosophy which is based on a **mystical method** (its nature will elucidated further) both in respect of its epistemology and ontology. Still we find that the term 'mysticism', in its common usage, is of very uncertain connotation. This is mainly due to the language used to express and describe the mystical experience which, as we see, is highly paradoxical, figurative and poetical. The term 'mystic' has several origins. It is derived from the Greek word 'Mythos' which is an initiate from the verb 'Mucin' which means 'to close the eyes or mouth and thus to keep secret'. The term was frequently used in connection with the Greek Eleusin Mysteries. In this sense it meant 'Hidden Truth', 'Esoteric Ritual' or even 'the Inner Meaning' of something. A mystic was one who had been initiated into the esoteric knowledge of divine things which the mysteries imparted to their converts. In recent times the word 'Mysticism' has been used as an equivalent for
two characteristically different German words, 'Mystizismus' which indicates the cult of the supernatural and a spiritualistic exploitation of psychical Research and 'Mystic' which stands for an immediate experience of a divine-human intercourse and inter-relationship. In modern times the word 'Mysticism' has been used and technically defined by Dean Inge as "the attempt to realise the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature or, more generally, the attempt to realise in thought and in feeling the imminence of the temporal in the eternal and of the eternal in the temporal". The late Prof. R.D. Ranade, a great mystic of India in modern times, has defined mysticism as "the philosophy of God-realization, which implies and involves the faculty of intuition", and the faculty of intuition in the context of mysticism, he says, "is a faculty of supersensuous experience which is aroused in us by proper spiritual intuition and practice".

Thus there have been numerous attempts to define mysticism, but they, as seen above, have been as diversified and as conflicting as the attempts to interpret and assess its significance. The word 'mysticism' was not in wide use until the Middle Ages and since then it has had many connotations. Some medieval theologians called the mystic's experience "experimental knowledge of God through unifying love". Goethe called it "the scholastic heart, the dialectic of the feelings". Evelyn Underhill, who was both a scholar and a mystic, described mysticism as "the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment". Another proposed definition of mysticism is that, "Mysticism is the study of everything non-physical, including the other world and their archetypal governance, as well as our spiritual bodies - the facts and relationships being known by the self-evidence of direct observation and not by reasoning or speculation". Nevertheless now,

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Fortunately, there is very little difference between the ways in which the word 'mysticism' is used by different competent authors, since the meaning of the word is now better understood than it was half a century ago.

Mystical experience plays an important role in the totality of religious experience. Mystical experience is not the acquiring of religious information but is often taken to be an encounter with the divine source of the world's well-being and of man's Salvation. Mysticism by its very nature forms a very strong ground for personal religion also. Although there is, to a certain extent, variation of mystical experiences within the frameworks of different religions, there is also a great deal of similarity between the languages and experiences of the mystics all over the world. A.J. Arberry emphasized the vast similarities as a proof for the perennial philosophy underlying all human endeavour. Prof. Arberry, the renowned Suti scholar, states his belief that mystical experiences are universal at their core as: "Mysticism is essentially one and the same, whatever may be the religion professed by the individual mystic, (it involves) a constant and unvarying phenomenon of the universal yearning of the human spirit.
for personal communion with God.  

Although traces of mysticism are to be found in almost all religions of the world, the spirit of mysticism marks a very essential aspect of the Upanishads and of the Hindu philosophical Schools. In Islam it makes its appearance in Sufism. And, though its development was due to oriental influences connected with the Greek mysteries, yet its origin in Greece may be traced to Plato and it reached its climax in Neoplatonism especially in the writings of Plotinus.

Another favourable soil for the growth of mysticism was that of Christianity. There it originated in the Pantheistic Society, known as "The Brethren of the Free Spirit" which flourished in the 13th and the 14th centuries. The watch word of this Society was "All that is God". Thus we can see that mysticism, being as old as humanity and not being age-bound is also not confined to any particular social stock or religion.

Characteristics of Mystical Experience:

The following are generally accepted as the chief characteristics of mystical experience:

Mystical experience consists of a direct and immediate consciousness of the presence and the nature of God or of the ultimate essence of Reality such as Brahman or the Absolute. As K.P.S. Choudary puts it, "Mysticism is the ineffable intuitive experience of or direct union with the divine one 'here and now'; a mystic is a person who has himself attained the incommunicable experience of mystic union in greater or less degree and not one who speculates or philosophises about it."¹ Again, as Pringle-Pattison puts it, "Mysticism appears in connection with the endeavour of the human mind to grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the highest. The first is the philosophic side of mysticism, the second is its religious side. God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience."²

to say: "Among the psychological characteristics, special mention may be made of continuity. Spiritual experience must not be discontinuous. If it comes once in a while and leaves you off and if you do not get it again and again, it is no spiritual experience at all. This continuity is also attended by the process of growth". Thus mystical experience, though generally transient, is yet continuous and it admits of growth and development. As we saw above, William James also accepts these two features. Explaining the process of growth and development of mystical experience Ranade further says: "...... that experience must grow from day to day and from year to year, and the ultimate result of the growth of this kind of super-sensuous experience would be a sort of an asymptotic approximation to Reality. The hyperbole never meets the asymptote, but goes on approaching it continually and meets it in infinity. It is in this way that the Śādhaka or the spiritual aspirant tries to approach God".

2. Ranade mentions here another important characteristic of the mystical experience, namely the characteristic of super-sensuousness.
6. **That it is a Passive State**

William James, Heiler and some other Western scholars of mysticism mention 'passivity' as one of the core characteristics of mystical experience. Of these William James adopts a positive view of mystical passivity and also gives a positive and constructive account of it as a constituent of mystical experience while Heiler adopts a totally negative view of this passivity and also assigns to it a totally negative role both in the mystical experience in particular and in our attitude towards this life in general. First, let us consider William James's account. Speaking of the passivity in mystical experience James says: "Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performance, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. This latter peculiarity connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance"¹. Such traits of secondary

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or alternative personality do not, admits James, generally make any difference to the usual inner life of the person showing such traits. They act, he says, as mere interruptions to that person's usual inner life. Then James also goes on to say "Mystical states, strictly so called, are never merely inter-
ruptive"\(^1\). Thus James, happily for us, inadvertently admits that such traits of secondary or alternative personality can not, in the strict sense, be regarded as the traits of a genuine mystical personality. This difference is clearly recognised by many of us here, in India, where we do not mistake a merely mediumistic or a temporarily God-possessed person for a genuine mystic. We recognise a clear-cut difference between a temporary though periodic - mediumistic trance at a god-possessed person and a philosophical spiritual transce or Samādhi of a genuine mystic. While the former are mere interruptions of the usual inner life of the concerned person, the latter are not interruptions of the usual inner life of the mystic, they are spiritually integrated into the mystic's inner life. The frequent Samādhi States of the great mystic Ramakrishna Paramahamsa illustrate this point. The distinguishing feature of a genuine mystical trance or Samādhi is

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given by James himself when he says of such trances that they "modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence". Now we have to see whether it is proper to characterise the mystical states, in general, or even the state of Trance or Samādhi, in particular, as being merely passive. First of all, all mystical states are not trances; trance comes only as a culminating point of mystical realisation. And the non, or rather, the pre-trance aspects of the mystical states are mostly even outwardly active. William James also, as we saw above, has recognised this fact. Now the question remains only as regards the Trance or Samādhi. It is true that a mystic, when he is in the mystical trance or Samādhi, does appear passive to the outer world. As a matter of fact, he becomes totally obvious of his external surroundings. But this is because all his mental and physical energies are totally but actively involved and engaged in the inner spiritual activity and state of his Trance or Samādhi. It only means an inward diversion of his energies and not a passive cessation of them. Even the state of abeyance of his individual will and of its surrender to the divine will are states that are brought about through a

rigorous and intensive spiritual activity. And even in the state of Samādhi a mystic continues to be a reservoir of inner strength and internal spiritual activity. Hence it is wrong to characterise mystical trance or Samādhi as a mere passive or inactive state. And it is more wrong, nay, blunderous to characterise mysticism as being merely "passive, quietist, resigned, contemplative" or as a "religion of feminine natures" and as the one that "flees from and denies the natural life and the relish of life in order to experience an infinite life beyond it", as characterised by Heiler in his book on Prayer 1

The Three Stages of Mystical Ascent

Evelyn Underhill in her book on "Mysticism" (1911) indicates three stages for the preparation of mystical experience. They are: (i) The purgative stage, (ii) The Illuminative stage and (iii) the Unitive Stage. The purgative stage is that which consists in emptying the self of those things which may distract or obstruct the mind. Only when desires are omitted by the suppression of sensuality and when there is complete detachment from the life of the senses, then only contemplation of the Absolute is

1. Heiler: Prayer (E.T.); 1932.
The next stage is that of Illumination, where the inner eye of the Soul is opened and there comes an insight into the heart of things. It is that faculty of apprehension by the whole of one's personality which gives an insight into the inmost nature of the reality. The third and the final stage, which is the result of the concentration of the Soul on the Absolute, is intuitive absorption in the One. It is the unitive stage. This is the consummation in which the contemplative life of the mystic culminates. The identification or the union with the Divine is the goal of Mysticism. The renowned European mystic, Eckhart says: "If I am to know God directly, I must become completely He and He, I". This statement of Eckhart is similar to the Upanisadic Statement 'Iam Brahman' (Aham Brahmasmi) or 'That thou art' (Tatva-masi)'

Atman is Brahman (Ayaamatma Brahman) and the Plotinus' statement "The union of the Soul with the One is a union of the alone with the Alone" 1.

The Language of Mysticism:

Although mystical experience is, in its essence, inarticulated, most of the mystics adopt the language of paradoxes to give expression to their mystical experiences. There are according to W.T. Stace, four theories of paradoxes possible:

(i) The Theory of Rhetorical Paradox,
(ii) The Theory of Misdescription,
(iii) The theory of Double Location, and
(iv) The Theory of Ambiguity or Double Meaning.

1) The Theory of Rhetorical Paradox: According to this theory of paradoxes are merely verbal and do not reflect the thought or experience. It is seen that mystics use paradox either to enhance the beauty or poetry of their language or for the purpose of causing the reader to stop and think. And Stace says, there is no reason at all as to why a mystic should not make best use of the resources of language to make his utterances effective.

But, then this theory, he says, is quite inadequate to account for the facts hidden in the following passage;

he claims to have, one may say that he is making a mistake and that he is unintentionally misdescribing his experience. But then we cannot hold such a view with regard to the descriptions that are not based on the evidence of one single person but are based on the corroborative evidence of the many. For instance, the paradox of the dissolution of individuality, in which the 'I' both disappears and persists, is reported in all ages and cultures by countless independent witnesses. Therefore, although the theory of misdescription remains a possible hypothesis, yet the case against it shows with a high degree of probability that it is false.

iii) The Theory of Double Location:

Ordinarily we say that to speak at one and the same thing as being both square and circular is a contradiction. But, according to the theory of Double Location, this contradiction will be removed if we can point out that the predicate "Square" and the predicate "Circular" are, in reality, applicable to two different (Hence the name "Double Location") objects or to two different aspects of the same object. The apparent contradictions of the mystical paradoxes, it is suggested, can be resolved in a similar way. Although we may
concede that some mystical paradoxes may be resolved in the above manner, we can not be sure that all mystical paradoxes are similarly resolvable.

iv) The Theory of Ambiguity:

In the theory of Ambiguity or Double Meaning it is suggested that the apparent contradictions of the mystical paradoxes are due to using one and the same word in two different senses and that when this is pointed out the contradictions disappear. But this theory also does not seem to lend itself to the dissolution of all mystical paradoxes. For instance this theory does not appear to be capable of resolving the paradox of Dissolution and Non-dissolution of the Individuality of the Self.

Thus, one can conclude that the mystical paradoxes in fact are incapable of rational solution and that the contradictions which they contain are logically irresolvable. This is what mystics in all ages and all over the world have with one accord affirmed. They have declared with one voice that their experiences are "above reason" and are thus beyond the laws of Logic.

A general philosophical objection is sometimes levelled against mysticism by saying that mysticism
is anti-intellectualism and hence anti-philosophical, as all philosophy rests on reason or intellect. But here we should note that all philosophy can be said to rest on reason or intellect only in the sense that the exposition and the defence of a philosophical position or theory rests on reasoning of intellect and not in the sense of all philosophy either originating or ultimately culminating in only reason or intellect. As a matter of fact all philosophy, like all species of knowledge originates in experience and experiences are numerous and of various sorts although sense-experience forms the common and the chief species of them. No doubt reason or intellect is necessary for the analysis and interpretation of the different elements of our experience. Reasoning also aids the process of communication although communicating itself is not reasoning. In view of all these we can say that it would be good for mysticism if it can adopt reason or ratiotination to expound and defend its experience-based position and also to aid its communicability.

Finally, we have also to note that there is an essential as well as a non-essential element in the mystics experience. The essential fact is that unmistakable expansion of the spiritual consciousness -
the dawn of a new insight which overwhelms the subject. Mysticism differs from ordinary theistic religions in that, they are mainly concerned with the practical problems of life and the development of a moral atmosphere. But a mystic, drunk with divinity in a State of intoxication with Divine-Love, rises above all practical concerns of life — to that realm of reality which is all glorious and divine in itself.