



“Hare Krishna vs. Shiva Shiva”: Swami Agehananda Bharati, Drugs, and the Mystical State in Hindusim

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ABSTRACT

This paper will form an overview of Swami Agehananda Bharati's views about drugs as a catalyst for achieving the mystical state (in both a Hindu and general context), as well as his observations of the perception of drugs throughout the Hindu community, inside and outside South Asia. It will demonstrate that Bharati considered drugs a valid means toward achieving the mystical state, both as a scholar of Hinduism and as a practicing *sannyasin*.

KEY WORDS: mystical state, zero experience, drugs

The March 17, 1974, issue of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* carried an article by Agehananda Bharati entitled “Hare Krishna vs Shiva Shiva.” It was an account, written in true Bharati style, with little pretense to objectivity and loaded with acerbic wit, of a debate between two Western-born swamis: Bharati and one Hrdayananda, a representative of ISKCON. The question was whether or not Krishna Consciousness represented the only “true” Hinduism. Bharati himself was no sectarian Shaiva—the Dashanami *sannyasins*, to whose order he belonged, are Advaitins—but he had greeted some ISKCON devotees with

the exclamation “Shiva Shiva” merely to annoy them. His argument, both as a scholar and a Hindu, was that Hinduism cannot be reduced to one specific development of an already specific Bengali Vaishnava sect. However, what also hung in the balance, if just below the surface, was the theoretical fate of the vibrant Hinduism of the *Tantras*, the *bhang*-drinking devotees of Krishna, the *ganja*-smoking babas and flesh-eating Aghoris of Varanasi, not to mention the mass of rural practitioners of “little tradition” Hinduisms that, in fact, make up the vast majority of those whom most would call “Hindus.” Threatening this diverse milieu were the Hare Krishnas and their counterparts, those whom Bharati had deemed “fanatics” on more than one occasion¹, and whom he saw as a manifestation of the West’s desire for digested, condensed, step-by-step “Hindu” mysticism—a mysticism, incidentally, with a decidedly puritanical stamp. It goes without saying that the debate was inconclusive.

A March 5, 2015, article, posted to the *Times of India* website under the byline Brij Khandelwal, was entitled, “At Mathura, Vrindavan, be pilgrim at your own risk.” It carried the story of a 60 year-old woman, a “woman Iskcon devotee from Italy” who filed a police report against “ascetic Nitai Das” for harassing and making lewd gestures at her. A policeman, quoted earlier in the article, talked about different types of dangerous characters in Vrindavan, making sure to mention foreigners who are “high on drugs and keep the company of babas in ashrams.” Nearly thirty-one years to the day after an Indian publication carried the story of a confrontation between the Hinduisms of Hare Krishna and Shiva Shiva, it seems nothing has been settled. At the center of this confrontation are drugs, substances capable of exploding the contrast between the polite, clean-living Hinduism of the syncretistic devotees and the wild, antinomian Hinduism of the *vibhuti*-smeared babas. It is this paper’s goal to extract what can be learned about drugs in the context of Hindu mystical practices (i.e. systemized methods toward attaining *siddhis* and/or *moksha*), as well as the “mystical path” in general (i.e. any striving toward the “zero experience”), from the works of Agehananda Bharati.

Let us pause a moment to consider the term “zero experience.” Bharati himself chooses this term for the *summum bonum* of the mystical career for euphemistic, philosophical, and experiential reasons. Euphemistically, he likens it to the “zero” reached at the end of a rocket launch countdown: “all else has been preparatory in the Space Center.” Philosophically, he argues that “there is zero content of a cognitive sort in the experience.” Experientially, he says, “I would call any consummative experience a zero

¹ For example: the introduction to the second edition of *The Light at the Center*.

experience, within each universe of discourse” (BHARATI 1976:48). This last reason seems most compelling, in that Bharati seems to put the mystical zero experience on par with any other consummative experience from any other area of life, e.g., harvesting your potatoes, finishing a painting, or, if I may, attaining a doctorate. Indeed, this is precisely the point Bharati makes throughout his seminal work on “modern mysticism,” *The Light at the Center*: the zero experience of the mystic brings nothing more than itself. It does not bring all other zero experiences with it: one does not know all, achieve all, and overcome all by being a successful mystic, despite what any number of South Asian texts from any number of mystical traditions might say. The Scientologist (to draw on a popular example) says we should “go clear” because then we will have perfect health, total recall, and heaven knows how many other psychic abilities. Bharati would retort that we should go clear because then we go clear. *Res ipsa loquitur*: “there is zero content of a cognitive sort in the experience.”

Which brings us to drugs: the assumed *nobility* of the mystical zero experience, particularly in South Asia, means there can be no shortcuts. *Moksha*, *nirvana*, *marafat*—these cannot be chemically induced. At most, the chemicals may serve as an aid, and most urban South Asian followers of “syndicated Hinduism” (THAPAR 1997) would shrink in horror even from this idea. Bharati points out the urban, educated South Asian’s tendency to spiritualize any mention of drugs in a rather dramatic anecdote: “On a crossing of the British Channel a young bearded Pakistani psychology student got into a conversation with me. The talk turned to drugs, and when I suggested that some Muslim saints, some sufis, had talked about *ganja*, he burst into an angry tirade against ‘loafers who do not understand the meaning of *marafat*; *marafat* is very high and holy thing, not for these useless people’; and then he proceeded to metaphorize the sufis’ use of *ganja*, applying the dialectic of all non-mystical apologists for their own specific mystical tradition : when saints talk about the pleasures of sex, the beauty of a woman, the intoxication of wine or *ganja*, they don’t mean sex, women, and *cannabis*, but something much loftier, subtler, more ethereal, totally unphysical” (BHARATI 1976:112-113). This comes after Bharati disabuses us of the notion that only South Asians are offended at the idea of something as gross as a chemical reaction inspiring a genuine mystical zero experience: “The respectable and orthodox do not like to hear about people who have had mystical experiences after taking a psychedelic drug. R.C Zaehner, in his introduction to *Mysticisms Sacred and Profane*, actually tells us that he wrote the book in order to rebut Huxley who claimed to have had mystical experiences under the influence of mescaline” (Ibid).

To corroborate Bharati’s diagnosis of the religious South Asian’s simultaneous dismissal and hyper-spiritualization of drug references in his tradition, it can be useful to go back to what the modern Hindu claims as the genesis of his *dharma*: the Vedas, and

particularly that elusive and ancient drug, *soma*. I would like to look at a passage from the first book of Robert Svoboda's *Aghora* trilogy, in which his narrator, the mysterious Vimalananda, expounds on the nature of the true *soma* plant. It is particularly interesting because the Aghoris are one of the most iconoclastic, antisocial traditions in all of Hinduism. When they talk about wine, women, and *ganja*, they supposedly mean exactly what they say. Yet the mystical zero experience is no less noble for the Aghori than for any other mystic, Hindu or otherwise, and thus even Vimalanada, self-professed guzzler of Scotch and smoker of chillums, cannot help but spiritualize, at least in some degree, the substances he uses. In this case, it is not by insisting they are some sort of metaphor or analogy, but rather by insisting that most humans do not understand the physical substances, or else they use them improperly. The most dramatic incidence of this sort of spiritualization lies in Vimalananda's explanation of *soma*:

"The Rishis used to take *soma*, which is a type of leafless creeper. Some people today think *soma* was the poisonous mushroom *Amanita muscaria*, but that was also merely a substitute for the real thing. Only the Rishis know what the true *soma* is, because only they can see it. It is invisible to everyone else. Before taking the plant the Rishis would first worship it on an auspicious day and take its permission. If the plant refused its permission it was left alone. If it said "Yes," if it was willing, then they would make sure the plant would take birth as an animal after its demise. Then they would gather it with the appropriate mantras" (SVOBODA 1993:176).

Another note on *soma* comes from Frits Staal, who is in turn quoting Daniel Ingalls. In comparing the Rigvedic Soma hymns to the Agni hymns, Staal writes, "Soma poems are different: they concentrate on an immediate experience: 'There is no myth, no past, no need for harmony. It is all here, all alive and one'" (STAAL 2008:101). In other words, the god Soma—and, by extension, the plant *soma*—brings what Staal calls "ecstasy and insight" (Ibid); it lifts the devotee above the confines of his discursive tradition, which is of course at the root of the mystic's typical conflict with the established religious tradition in which he tries to work. This also brings us back to the experiential sense of Bharati's use of the term "zero experience": it is experience for experience's sake. Even if one approaches a mystical tradition with the intention of becoming one with God, or the universe, or the *tathagatagarbha*, when the experience is happening, all intentions and discursive elements go out the window (of course, they may return later to help us *interpret* the experience). Bharati, who claimed to have had mystical zero experiences of his own, wrote of his disbelief when the disciples of Ramana Maharshi assured him that their guru was in a constant state of *samadhi*: "Mystics are not always in the state of oneness, for during the

periods, short or long, when they are in that state, they cannot function: they cannot talk and teach, take notes, listen to arguments and to petulant queries” (BHARATI 1976:47).

Ramana Maharshi is a perfect example of the tenuous connection between mystical experiences and those traditional austerities that are supposed to produce them. The introduction to a well-known and widely available English collection of Maharshi’s sayings has this to say about his “realization of the Self”: “Normally this awareness is only generated after a long and arduous period of spiritual practice but in this case it happened spontaneously, without prior effort or desire” (GODMAN 1992:1). For most religiously inclined people, Hindu and otherwise, this creates a theodicean or cosmodicean predicament. The Hindu at least has a convenient explanation ready: *karma*. If a sixteen year-old Brahmin can fall into *samadhi* constantly for no apparent reason and with no preparation—and Maharshi’s initial *samadhi* is supposed to have lasted two or three years, during which time insects chewed away parts of his legs and he was kept alive by being fed by devotees—then it can only be the consummation of countless lifetimes of storing up good *karma*. However, as Bharati points out, this explanation can only work in an *emic* context, and thus the social scientist cannot consider it. There is another possible explanation, however, that will vex the pious to no end: “The scientific, boring, *etically* valid explanation runs somewhat like this: a certain psychosomatic readiness was there—perhaps by inheritance of a conducive physique; more likely by environmental syndromes of conflict and cohesion. [. . .] There is a fair chance that this thought-chain [of oneness with the All] occurs to many more non-mystics than to mystics², that it might conceivably occur to the majority of people either when they are very young, or when they are under stress—but the difference between them and the mystics is that they do not heed it” (BHARATI 1976:113).

The author cannot resist interjecting at this point and emphasizing Bharati’s inclusion of the “very young” in those who are likely to experience a feeling of “oneness” with the “All,” which may be either a zero experience or else a “thought-chain” that, if followed to its conclusion, could lead to a zero experience. From as early as I can remember in my childhood, up until sometime in my teenage years, I was prone to more or less frequent reveries wherein I would feel a queer “detachment” from myself and my environment. In

² It might be appropriate here to define “mystic,” at least as it should be understood in the context of this paper. A mystic is a person who habitually seeks out the mystical zero experience and identifies himself as such. Whether or not he ever has a zero experience is immaterial. This is, roughly, Bharati’s definition as well (BHARATI 1976:25).

those instances—usually lasting anywhere from a few seconds up to a full minute—everything, even myself as observer, would appear as if it were illusory, or could be illusory, or *should* be illusory. I found these states to be quite pleasant, but troubling because I could not communicate them to others. I remember the only time I ever gave it a try: I must have been about seven or eight years old; I was riding in the car alone with my mother when I asked, “Don’t you ever feel like there should be nothing?” As I recall, my no doubt startled mother pretended not to hear me, and I let it drop. These reveries of mine could come suddenly, or I could produce them in myself, as I often did. Their frequency and intensity reduced gradually as I aged, until they stopped altogether. Now, try as I might, I cannot experience them again; I can only remember what they felt like. Again, the pious Hindu would insist that, if these reveries were indeed states approximating *samadhi*, my ability to experience them so effortlessly was the outcome of some karma or another, but the social scientist cannot afford to be other than brutal with Occam’s razor: it is common knowledge that children learn many things more easily than adults, so why not entering *samadhi* as well? In the author’s case, the ability was shallow, but in the case of someone like the young Ramana Maharshi, it was the talent of a prodigy.

So far, we have seen that Bharati relativizes the religious element in the achievement of the mystical zero experience by essentially de-theologizing the experience itself. The zero experience is anarchic: gurus, methods, and teachers are an *expedient*, not an *essential*. It all comes back round to Hare Krishna vs. Shiva Shiva. In an interview with Steven J. Gelberg, an ISKCON devotee, A.L. Basham describes one of the reasons young people in the West are attracted to ISKCON: “I think one of the things that they find subconsciously difficult to get on with is the ‘permissive society,’ the notion of ‘do your own thing’ [. . .] But, everybody has a different ‘own thing.’ *They are no longer a group; they don’t really belong to anybody. They are isolated. Moreover, their life lacks direction. They drift.* And for this reason, among others, we have a great growth in the use of dangerous drugs nowadays” (GELBERG 1983:168-169).³ I have italicized four sentences because they remind me very much of the traditional description of a *sannyasin* given to Bharati by Swami Vishvananda at his *diksha*, particularly Vishvananda’s answer when Bharati asks for advice on where to go: “I have told you already that all this is up to you. What do I care? You are a sannyasi like myself. You are on your own. What difference does it make where you go?” (BHARATI 1962:155-156) One thing the clean-living, pious syndicated

³ The reader is advised that this interview was published in 1983.

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Hindu (in India) or neo-Hindu (abroad)—the Hare Krishna Hindu rather than the Shiva Shiva Hindu—never is on his own. Everything is mapped. Everything has direction.

There is no place in this religious direction for drugs. The free-loving, LSD-dropping hippies of the 1960s, who were convinced that “Eastern” religions could turn them on in ways the Christianity of their youth had so clearly failed to do, quickly found that LSD and free love were not on the neo-Hindu menu. Not only was this the case with ISKCON, but, as Bharati writes, “almost all the roaming sadhus are dead set against drugs. [. . .] Mahesh Yogi, of course, lost the Beatles and some other disciples, in part at least because he insisted that LSD and marijuana were bad” (BHARATI 1976:185). To give a more concrete example, the penchant of American bohemians, be they hippies or otherwise, for both drugs and “Eastern” religions resulted in at least one ban on foreigners entering a temple to Rama in Vrindavan, which caused some friction with the ISKCON expatriate community there. As Charles R. Brooks notes in *The Hare Krishnas in India*, “at one time this temple allowed ISKCON devotees to enter, but the policy was discontinued when the priests decided it was too difficult to discern which foreigners were devotees and which were ‘hippies’” (BROOKS 1989:128). In contrast with this neo-Hindu, puritanical export variety of religious thought, which springs directly from the attitudes of educated, urban Hindus in India, Bharati paints a different picture of cannabis use in rural India: “The Hindu attitude toward these drugs [*bhāṅg*, *ganja*] is much more lenient than toward alcohol consumption, and in fact *bhāṅg* (*cannabis sativa*) is part of certain village and city based calendrical rituals, and is felt to be quite compatible with, and even conducive to religious states of mind” (BHARATI 1981:44).⁴ The Hare Krishna/Shiva Shiva dichotomy often manifests itself as the old great tradition/little tradition or, lamentably, high tradition/folk tradition dichotomy.

In this vein, I would like to devote some space to the observations of Michael Muhammad Knight, a young American author and Muslim convert who in many ways carries on Bharati’s legacy and complements his thought: both came to traditions they were

⁴ Bharati notes on the same page that use of cannabis is mostly concentrated in northern and central India (indeed, the Vrindavan temple mentioned above that was terrified of accidentally letting “hippies” inside was a branch of the South Indian Shri Vaishnava sect). For dramatic depictions of *bhāṅg* use in a religious context, I invite the reader to see McKim Marriott’s classic essay on celebrations of Holi in the village of Kishan Garhi in Uttar Pradesh in the 1960s, which can be found in *The Life of Hinduism*, John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan, eds. (pp. 99-112). A more recent, livelier treatment of *bhāṅg* use at an Islamic shrine in Lahore can be found in Michael Muhammad Knight’s *Journey to the End of Islam* (pp. 62-69).

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not born into and both subsequently maintained ambiguous relationships with their adopted traditions. Knight is a prolific writer, who lately seems to publish about a book a year. One of his most recent books, *Tripping with Allah: Islam, Drugs, and Writing*, was published in 2013. It concerns his experiences as a Muslim with the taking of ayahuasca, a drug traditionally used by South American shamans. The book is full of insights into how drugs can both benefit and challenge religious traditions, many of which could have come from Bharati himself. For example, after paraphrasing Max Weber's classic theory of the regimentation and institutionalization of an original charismatic message in religion, Knight gets right to the heart of institutionalized religion's ambivalence toward mysticism, especially mysticism aided by drugs: "The only question, then, is form versus spirit: whether following the new church is the best way to follow the dead prophet, whether you want to stay safe in the well-constructed house of your prophet's words or follow the prophetic heart and drive clear off the bridge. The house is always the safer bet; then again, your hallucination could birth the next great mosque. You never know" (KNIGHT 2013:103). In an Islamic context, it is easy to see how the possibility of a new charismatic revelation is problematic—one need only ask the Druze, Baha'i, or Ahmadis. In the Hindu context, however, historically this has not been a problem. The charismatic leader need only gather enough followers and his group becomes accepted as another *sampradaya*, which over time usually becomes another caste. However, the great push toward consolidation of "Hinduism" as a "world religion," a push which comes almost exclusively from urban, educated (and usually Brahmin) Hindus and their neo-Hindu counterparts outside India, threatens this natural tendency toward ever increasing diversification—Hare Krishna vs. Shiva Shiva, indeed.

Though naturally his major concern is with Islam, Knight does have some poignant comments on Hinduism. One passage that struck me was when Knight meets with his contact in the church of Santo Daime, the religious organization through which he gains his first opportunity to take ayahuasca. When talking about their religious beliefs, his contact, a woman whom Knight refers to rather derisively as a "New Ager," makes "a comment about 'high Hinduism,' which she understands as the intellectually advanced, systematized, and 'universal' version, as opposed to 'low Hinduism,' the regular folk religion of the masses. It sounds like an idea that white people would invent to privilege their Orientalist study of Hindu texts above what brown people do in real life; or it could be a reformist reading of Hinduism's 'essence' that can't help but be colonial, defined by a British measurement of how 'religion' is supposed to look, as in the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj movements.

But if the idea of ‘Hinduism’ itself was a product of British domination, which Hinduism is authentic?” (KNIGHT 2013:170-171).⁵ A fair question, but I have no doubt that, even as he asked it, Knight was very much aware of the problematic nature of “authenticity” in general. As he writes elsewhere, “orthodoxy is only a popularity contest. If I could get enough Muslims into ayahuasca, then ayahuasca-Islam would become the new orthodoxy” (KNIGHT 2013:10). For my part, I would wager that the “high Hinduism” to which this lady was referring was Advaita Vedanta in one form or another.

In the true paradoxical nature of so many Hindu traditions, not least of all Yoga and Tantra, we must resign ourselves to the likelihood that the Hare Krishna/Shiva Shiva dichotomy will always exist as a thorn in the side of scholars of South Asian religions, while those whom Knight’s “New Ager” would refer to as “low Hindus” (and make no mistake: “low Hindus” are by far the majority of Hindus) merely shrug at the problem, perhaps while indulging in a chillum or a *bhang lassi*.

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⁵ The author is, rather embarrassingly, reminded of his own days as an undergraduate, flirting with “Eastern religions” in a desperate attempt to liven up his Christian fervor, which was steadily going stale. At that time, the Taoism of Chuang Tzu seemed just what I needed, and I used to spout a lot of rubbish about being a “philosophical Taoist” rather than a “religious Taoist,” an absolutely baseless dichotomy which needs to be jettisoned posthaste, and which I blame the late, great Huston Smith for foisting upon generations of unsuspecting religion majors.

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