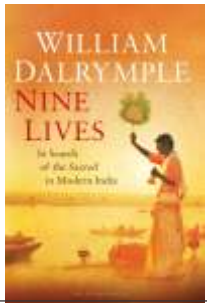
A review on

# Nine Lives-In Search of the Sacred in Modern India

Author: William Dalrymple
Publishers: Bloomsbury
ISBN : 978-1408800614




*** Ms. Shobhana N**

William Dalrymple is a British writer, historian, Curator, broadcaster and Critic who has written extensively on India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Middle East. His writings have spanned from travel to history and further to spirituality. Written in 2009, **Nine Lives-In Search of the Sacred in Modern India** , won the 2010 Asia House Award for Asian Literature. He has earned several other awards for his books, television and radio programmes and Honorary Doctorate from University of Bradford in 2012.

I was drawn to this book mainly for two reasons, firstly it is a travel book about India and secondly for it delved on not one but nine lives and not of one but many spiritual paths, cultures, traditions and much more that is a part of India. One may conclude that NINE LIVES- IN SEARCH OF THE SCARED IN MODERN INDIA by William Dalrymple is another one of those travel books. But this is a book of travel across time and space; it traverses across the spiritual realms of the subcontinent. He crosses at once the different states from Karnataka to Kerala, Rajasthan to Bihar, Bengal and beyond. He also crosses the spiritual, physiological and intellectual dimensions of the Indian thoughts. Further, he courses through the social context within which these thoughts exist, the traditions, cultures, castes, subversive

** Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Roshni Nilaya, Mangalore-575002. E-mail : shobiemanu@yahoo.co.in*

forces of theirs and their impact on the society and individual. Through the stories of the nine lives, namely: of Prasannamayi a Jain Nun; of Haridas the jail warder who is also a well digger and primarily for him a Theyyam dancer who is a Dalit; Daughters of Yellamma; The singer of the epic of Pabuji Mohan Bopa; Sufi Mystics of Sindh and the Red fairy Lal Pheri; Passang the Buddhist warrior monk; Srikanda Stapathy of Swamimalai who saw god in the bronze idols he created ; Manisha Ma Bhairavi, the Graveyard dweller who is a tantric Sadhwini ; Kanai the blind Baul minstrel; Dalrymple sketches the 'sacred' path chosen and the unwavering faith.

The book is an attempt at delving on why an individual leaves the entire known, familiar, convenient world one is born into and goes to a world devoid of all that one thought was his or her way of life. The author brings into focus nine individuals who set out in search of deeper meaning and the path that is available to them. The author pitches the tone whilst talking about how he got the idea for the book sixteen years before he actually did when he met Ajay Kumar Jha, a Sales Manager from Kelvinator who “just left everything” and became a Naga Sadhu. William Delrymple travels around India in search of the many worlds which unravel the different esoteric worlds of spirituality and faith. The book courses through the many layers of meanings that surface, the many ways to reach them.

The Nun's tale which is the first of the nine lives is about a Jain nun Prasannamati Mataji. She comes from a well to do Jain family, much loved and pampered by her family. She says it was when she was thirteen years old and the family went to meet a Jain Sadhu who stayed with them in the city for several months that she felt she should be like him. He tells them stories on how to live life surrounded by peace and without violence.

Before the life story of Prasannamathi opens we get a glimpse of Jainism. The ingrained philosophy is to work towards becoming a 'Jina'- a liberator; and for this one needs to follow the Thirtankaras who are the "ford makers'. He points out that the Jain Munis held three things as most precious, 'right faith, right conduct, and to take the five vows- no violence, no untruth, no stealing, no sex, no attachments. Mataji points out how as a wanderer she felt free and the unattached state liberated her. One of the core values of Jainism is Aparigraha - the belief that attachment causes suffering. In this context she explains how she too was attached to her companion Prayogamathi and after many years she still missed her.

Dalrymple paints his pictures truly, empathetically and openly. He is able to get to the gut of the individuals he wishes us to glimpse. We come to realise in each of the lives he touches upon that the brush at once sweeps and brings in context wider perspectives. It is not to do with a Jain muni or a Jain religion but of life, of search, of spirituality. The lack of pretense, the ease with which he moves from one schism to another, from one region of thought to another with absolute ease and the discipline to keep out subjective inroads is remarkable.

Even as one moves on from the first story to the next one realises how effortlessly he carries each of his previous stories. The effect this has on the whole book is interesting. It helps in throwing light on the gambit of religious experiences in India. Each of them we realise runs to the same end. For the Jains, Mataji says, death is not a word one embraces through 'Sallekhana', out of despair, but with excitement. The various tenets of the faith unfolds the idea where by the individual is drawn into the inner realm of the spiritual, in constant attempt to discipline and move beyond the physical self and reality. Both Prayogamathi and Prasannamati embrace Sallekhana, Prayogamathi when she falls ill and wants to "give up her body rather

than have it taken away" and Prasannamati, says when Prayogamathi left her body she wept bitterly even though the nuns were not supposed to. Prasannamati decides that she too would embark on the same path of 'Sallekhana' after visiting the holy places. This she says is the aim of all Jain munis, the "final renouncement" and she has commenced her journey towards that end by slowly giving up one after the other the intake of food.

He moves on to the next, 'the story of Haridas', a Theyyam dancer. Theyyam is a folk ritualistic dance that weaves around the Dalits (the performers) and who form the lower rung of the traditional caste ladder. Haridas who is otherwise a well digger and a jail warder becomes a revered deity for the three months from December to February. The story of all the Theyyam dancers is the same but in those three months, they move to a higher plane, beyond the real. All caste differences are forgotten and he is worshipped by even Brahmins. Dalrymple calls this an "inversion" of everyday life and the social norms which can otherwise be oppressive to the low castes. The philosophical resignation of Haridas is evident when he says that after these three months the actual world engrosses them, the ordeals and all intricately woven differences surface. There are challenges, but, to these dancers life is worth living, meaning and purpose returns each year when they commence their performances, then they become Gods, and Theyyam.

In this story, one can see the tradition, the faith, the beliefs**,** and the entire life of the Dalits coming alive. The drummers set the tempo on the auspicious night and the song telling the myth of the god to be incarnated is sung. In front of the shrine the dancer gets possessed; in this state he is seen as the god, a talking deity, respected by all. The deep faith and devotion to the gods is essential, remarks Haridas. He explains that he is very tense when the time to be possessed by the

gods arrives**,** not because the god is coming upon him but afraid that he might not come in case his devotion for the god has diminished. It is important that the mind is one with the god being venerated. The rendering of the Theyyam should not become a "routine" act or an "unthinking" one. The Theyyam binds the God, the dancer and the devotee into one and this bond they feel is essential to a certain meaning in their lives. Even people who have gone to faraway lands come to offer thanks by dedicating a Theyyam act.

Dalrymple, in his straight forward approach to the issues of faith discusses the caste system and the belief systems that operate in this context. The Theyyam dancers raise the issue of caste and how the oppression of the upper caste affects the lower ones and how in the eyes of God all are equal. This issue of suppression is the heart of many or most of the Theyyam dances. The Brahmins are the targets of the wrath and anger of the Theyyam god who stands to protect the Dalits from any oppressive or suppressive acts of violence is the subject of the story. Haridas says that the Brahmins on the night of the dance venerate them and prostrate too, but the next day reality resurfaces. If the same dancer goes to a Brahmin's house he can't enter the house, can't even drink from the well he dug. There is sadness, not acceptance, a resignation but much helplessness when Haridas tells this.

In 'Life of Yellamma', the attention is drawn to the pain and penance in the name of religion for the women who have been dedicated to Yellamma, the goddess of Saundatti. Their home is their workplace. Here they solicit customers, sometimes eight men in one day, and farmers from the Deccan Pleateau of Karnataka. The temple of Yellamma is an ancient shrine just as the Virupaksha temple in Bijapur where the Devadasi system exists even today. In ancient times, Devadasi's were women dedicated to worship and service of

the temple and also performed dance and music an inherent part of temple worship. The girls who are dedicated to Yellamma state that they are different from other sex workers as they neither dress nor procure customers the way other sex workers do; They feel what they do has dignity as well as the blessing and protection of their mother goddess Yellamma.

The stories in 'Nine Lives' is told along cultural and traditional planes. He takes into account how certain aspects within the family and society which is central to the way an individual functions in order to arrive at their spiritual destination. He draws the time line, taking care to show how they were in the past and as they are in the present. He points out how there are ancient poetry and sculptures which show the Devadasis as vastly sexualised. They show them as having power and status considering providing sexual gratification as a sacred duty. He points out that the reaction of the reformers in response to the taunts of the European missionaries saw a fall in their status and criminalisation of the same. He finds it ironic and points out that the signboards warning that girls should not be dedicated to the goddess only demean them and in no way helps them. He seems to suggest that it wrenches the possibility of dignity and his understanding squarely lies with the daughters of Yellamma. The reason why even today we have the Devadasi system existing he suggests is because of poverty. Many a time they are mere girls of six or nine and it is not one or two, ten or twenty but thousands of them who are dedicated each year to Yellamma. To people like Kaveri, Yellamma is a benevolent mother who takes care of them.

When one looks at their lives one wonders if there can be anything spiritual in what they are doing now and if the system has in anyway manipulated them another question arises about our own lives and if our stance is one of hypocrisy and double standard of an educated,

elitist snobbish thought. The author deliberates on how these women such as Kaveri and Rani live and feel both the disappointments and triumph in what is destined not by birth or their effort or will but what their parents or elders decided for them. Their moment of consolation and triumph is in their thought that they are respected by the society, they are invited on occasions and revered as gods, which they don't dress up like prostitutes but in grand sarees and jewels. Dalrymple does not lay out his point of view or question the system in vogue. He tries to present the picture with a directness which makes us see them for what they are prodding us to accept them without judgement.

'Singer of Epic' depicts the sheer joy of the Bopas as they render of the story of Pabuji which is a 600 year old poem of heroism and honour, struggle, loss, finally martyrdom and Vengeance. They are hereditary singers from the Nayak community of Rajastan which is very close to Delhi but stays untouched by the modern ways even today. They consider their role as singers of Pabuji a spiritual journey and great blessing. The temple at Pabusar is a newly built marble edifice in a simple village, with an ancient 'hero stone' which has the profile of Pabuji with sword held high. The story of 'Pabu' who dies protecting the goddess's herds from the demonic rustlers is only one of the many stories of Pabu, there is even one of him protecting the herd from the ten headed Ravana.

The 4000 line poem in full can take all of five nights. The epic is performed in front of a 'Paad' which is a narrative painting made on a strip of cloth as well as a portable temple of Pabuji; the picture here becomes the incarnate 'Murthi'. People have great faith in Pabuji, the Paad and the ritual of singing. They seek the singers to appease, to cure their herd if they fell sick, thank and ask questions that troubled them, "Pabuji is also very good at curing any child who is possessed by a Djinn" (evil spirits). The singer is an ordinary man till he begins

to sing the epic of Pabuji, thereafter he gets possessed by the spirit and gets the power and is thus sought after by Thakurs, Herdsmen and simple village folk.

Mohan Bhopa and Batasi, husband and wife, render the epic with piety and reverence. Mohan understands the need for this ancient oral tradition to be passed over from father to son and reminisces how he himself was drawn into it at a very young age. He points out how a wife with the same dedication and singing voice would be a blessing as it was for him. If a wife's voice is not good, as his eldest son's is then there is no way that person can be a singer. Mohan now waits and hopes another son will follow him (later, when Mohan passes away his older son and wife sing together). The place of the family in this age old inheritance of a tradition is very crucial and they understand that they are custodians of a tradition that is god given. At times the worry that the modern ways might take away the prominent position that Pabuji has in their lives and the life of many in the far away villages in Rajastan is voiced.

The next journey of Dalrympel is to Rural Sindh, which has seen little development and is still in the clutches of Serfdom and all its ignominy. Untamed, swarming with dacoits, rugged and rocky is the region which provides sanctum to a heterodox religious sect. He points out that under these not so conducive conditions thrives a synchronic cult of Hindu and Muslim faith. This culmination has evolved from the 'Sufi shrines' which believes that all religions are one. The search for god to them is in “the immersion in the absolute-quest for Fana”, an escape from the narrow confines of orthodoxy. It combines the simplicity of the village folk with the intellectual mysticism and philosophical ponderings of sublime minds. An evidence of sectarian ambiguity is found in the renderings. The famous Sufi mystics were Shah Abdul Latif who hailed from an

orthodox muslim family. Latif joined the Nath Yogis who were considered to possess many powers through their yogic exercises. Suffism dabbles with every aspect of spiritual and philosophical thought that is forbidden by orthodox Muslim faith.

Dalrymple's meeting with Lal Pheri the Red fairy and Dhammal which was a devotional dance in Sehwan Sharif got him to the core of Sufiism. The dance which commences at the meditative, moves on to a wild frenzied pace and reflects an outlet of all their in strife. It acts as a vent for the suppression endured by the inner self in the narrow confines of a conservative society. A dream heralded Lalpheri to the shrine of Sehwan Sharif and she has remained here far away from the world of violence and hatred since then. Lal Pheri hails from Bihar where she saw Hindus and Muslims, Bengalis and Biharis butchering each other. Her younger days in the midst of personal tragedies and the increasing wrath between Hindu and Muslim communities forced her to journey to a better, meaningful world devoid of differences, towards a spiritual realm.

Lal Pheri enumerates the different stances taken by the Muslim sects such the Wahhabis, Maulanas and the Madrasas who opposed what to them was un-Islamic. They argued that the 'Dargah' was the center of idolatry, immoral and superstitious practises. She assays that the two shrines, the shrine of Latif and the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalander protected her and now she should see that they are protected from the fundamentalists. There are many stories behind the reason for the reverence earned by the shrines, each a tableau of the synthesis of the two faiths Hindu and Muslim. Orthodox Islamic bodies found Sufiism un-Islamic because it saw god through poetry, music, revered them alongside women and worshipped tombs. Dalrymple describes Lal Peri who venerated every aspect of life and the world, who feels “everywhere there is beauty, the sand, the foothills, the

mountains in the distance: these are all different manifestations of God, every place has the name of God in it. Many people do not realise or see these things which are written in even Quran which says- I have my signs everywhere.

Next, in the Monk's Tale, Passang a Buddhist monk recounts his story of how he took to violence; That he was forced to kill Chinese soldiers in order to protect the ways of the lord. It took him much time, contemplation, and guidance from the Dalai Lama to accept that what he did (killing Chinese soldiers) would be forgiven. Dharamshala which rests on the foot hills of the Himalayas is the resident temple of the Dalai Lama in exile. It is a refuge for the Buddhist monks and people who fled from the Chinese rule from Tibet and came to India. Passang who came from a family of Herdsman enjoyed the freedom of the hills. He chose the life of a monk on the promptings of one of his uncles and underwent much training and discipline of body and soul "to remove the world from your heart". His childhood was a normal one, his youth at the monastery also fine until the Chinese came into Tibet and destroyed the monasteries and forced the people to give up their faiths and join the modern Chinese ways; then all changed and he says "you had to choose to take upon yourself the bad karma of a violent act in order to save that person from a much worse sin." The fight by the monks who only knew to tell the beads was a fiasco, far outnumbered by the thousands of Chinese soldiers, the monks had to flee.

Passang had to go through many privations; the Chinese tortured his mother, beating her brutally when they heard he was not to be found. It resulted in her death. Passang could not reconcile with all that had happened; He relinquished monastic life, and spent many years in the Tibetan unit of the Indian army, but left it unable to bear the inner trauma. As an act of atonement he built a small wooden hut and sold

wooden blocks and prayer flags which he made and lived a reclusive life. Much later, prompted by the Dalai Lama he got back to monastic life, took fresh vows assured that he will be forgiven, “why not he queries with renewed faith, 'when Angulimama who had killed ninety nine people and wanted the hundredth to be the Buddha's, was forgiven?' The nostalgia of the home that was theirs, the dream of reaching their motherland still lingers but he avers “it wouldn't be right to go back alone, after all this time it just wouldn't be right” so he waits along with the many Tibetan monks and ordinary people hoping they will be home, thankful for the land that gave them shelter when they needed, India.

‘The Maker of Idols' is the story of Srikanda in Stapathy who makes idols, he is ”twenty third “ in the long hereditary line stretching back to the great bronze casters of the Chola empire. Dalrymple describes how these idol makers spend their life time in complete submission to creating them. They believe what they make are not just an idol, a piece of art, not even the spirit of god but god itself. The immense faith that delivers them to this task, the devotion and realisation and communion with their inner selves is stressed upon. He deliberates upon the how in the study of sculpture, eroticism plays an important role. It is necessary that the idols represent a certain aspect of sexuality and Chola painting and poetry are explicit in what is called the 'Sringara rasa'.

The work place where the idols are initially conceived is guided by the norms of 'Shilpa Shastra'. He takes the reader through the many stages where each body part of an idol is deftly cast in wax mould first and the process where metal is poured, the metal casting of the idol to the final “ eye opening” ceremony where the eyes of the gods is carved. This to the sculptors is the most poignant and spiritual experience. They believe that this is when the gods would enter the

sculpture. The making of a sculptor, his evolution towards becoming a 'Stapathy' seems like a rebirth. Srikanda Stapathy points out that the process of each idol that is made is also reminiscent of the birth of a child from the womb of its mother.

'The Lady Twilight' is the life story of Manisha Ma Bhairavi who dwelt in a cremation ground in Tarapith. This is reputed to be an "eerie" place with notorious and unsavoury Tantric rituals. He has attempted to elicit how the Sadhus live in the graveyard, practices of Tantric Sadhus, and their belief systems. He describes the ash smeared Sadhus, some naked, some semi-naked, surrounded by skulls and bones. Manisha Ma explains how and why their way of Tantric worship is not accepted by many sections of mainstream Hindu belief systems and is seen as superstition. To the Tantrics such as Manisha, living in the graveyard, following the tantric way is nothing but a call from Tara Ma, the divine mother. The mother Tara takes many forms and Manisha hopes to see her vision in her dreams and lives in graveyard where they believe the goddess resides not in the temple, the "Lady Twilight", the cheater of death, Tara, a form that is terrifying which Manisha says is the mother`s wild side "But all this just means she can fight the devils on your behalf. The tantric world is an inverted world of schisms which otherwise would be repulsive; and is in the threshold between the" divine and the demonic". "Tantra according to ancient texts, deals with yogic practices, magical rites, metaphysics and philosophy". It draws its essence from Hindu Vaishnavite and Shaivite philosophy, from Jainism, Mahayana Buddhism as well as Chinese Daoism and even some forms of Sufi Islam.

Dalrymple sketches the life of a tantric which is in opposition to society`s convention; it encourages the individual to develop an inner contact with Kama or sexual energy, This according to them is the

core through which one can liberate oneself. The body thus becomes a channel for salvation. The intriguing role of the Yoginis in the sexual congregation with the yogis and the way sex was used to "awaken the latent energies from the base of the body" is explained. The subversive heterodox concept, the mystical anarchy is the life of the 'divinely mad' Sadhus and Sadhwinis. The stories of each Sadhu and Manisha's too, show how theirs was a world which to them was far better than the world they left behind. Here they were all one, neither violence nor biases existed; they cared and consoled each other. They lived with nothing and had the whole wide world too, to traverse and be a part of. They were bound to no one yet everyone they looked upon as their child. Thus Manisha holds all that she left behind within her palms (caring for her daughters who she has got back) and, all that she has found too and this keeps her steadfast in the faith that Tara Ma is by her side. As Tapan puts it, "the life of renunciation, of Sanyas, is a life of joy, in the life of every Sadhu some pain is there. The longer you live the life as a Sadhu, the more you enjoy the life, and the more you forget your past. Then something happens to remind you and you weep". Manisha's wish "is to finish my days in the arms of Tara, and that she takes me in a good way, with all the other rites" and thus the tantric world seems a haven for those deserted and lost for they find a better one, a spiritual one.

'The Song of the Blind Minstrel'- this is the last one; a story of the wandering Minstrels, the 'Bauls' which means mad or possessed in Bengali. The story opens with the feast of Makar Sankranti when thousands of saffron clad wandering minstrels gather at Kenduli, West Bengal. Over 5000 years, the Bauls have lived a life defying convention, and caste the conscious Bengali Society. They have evolved their spiritual teaching into a vast volume of "melancholic and often enigmatic teaching songs which help map out their path to

inner vision". To the Bauls, god is not found in stone or bronze or heaven or in afterlife but in the present, in the body of man and woman. The belief system of the Bauls is drawn from Tantra and the influences that the Tantrics have evolved out. The goal of the Bauls is to discover the divine inner knowledge. To Dalrymple, the near atheism and humanism of these "singing philosophers" is not departing from "Indian" thought but one which dates back to 5th century BC to the Charavaka School against the materialistic tendencies. Dalrymple believes the agnostic, aesthetic uncertainty of the divine is one that dates back to the tenets of Rig-Veda, which asks "who really knows?", "who will here proclaim it?" Thus the story of blind Kanai who found his soul mate Debdas who was himself lost in the train, unfolds with the Tara the Dugi drum, Do-tara and their songs. They each trace their journey into the divine. The trio kanai Debdas and Paban are not just three men alone but is depictive of the world of the Bauls, the world which they came into. They are a part of a system which questions the world they were born into which tormented their outer and inner being so much so an escape was the only way. Here, through their songs they build a bridge between individuals and the divine.

The wild music concerts which they participate in Kundali with rum and ganja is in no way akin to the serene ordered piety within orthodox Hindu dictum of worship or god realisation. The sexual practices which their gurus teach them is yet another anomaly but one which they believe is a path towards self realisation for which marriage is very important to the Bauls. To be a fully initiated Baul you have to have a partnerwith whom you can practise Tantric Sadhana. With music by their side they are ready even to die, as Lalitha puts it "it makes everything in life seem sweet", Subhol agrees and responds, "thanks to music, we live our old age in great

peace." And Kanai "it makes us so happy that we don't remember what sadness is".

The journey of Dalrymple through the spiritual psyches of nine different minds is a revelation of nine worlds they are a part of. Each spiritual world is a realm very unique, very different but all significant of the same deep search. An inner quest of the intellect which finds neither peace nor meaning in the day-to-day world they are born into. An escape or running away which ensues in the realisation through a world which might seem cruel, bizarre, mad, eccentric and vulgar is where they find their peace, their haven, their meaning. Their search is for a resting place for the spirit; a better use of the body and mind towards realisation of God. Every individual that he speaks of in his book seem to have found their ideal place and seem happy and at peace, happy by and large, sad sometimes over some past memory that still haunts them, at no time wanting to go back to what the rest of us think is the world to be a part of.