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WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S SEARCH FOR THE SACRED AMONG THE INDIAN SECTS OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM

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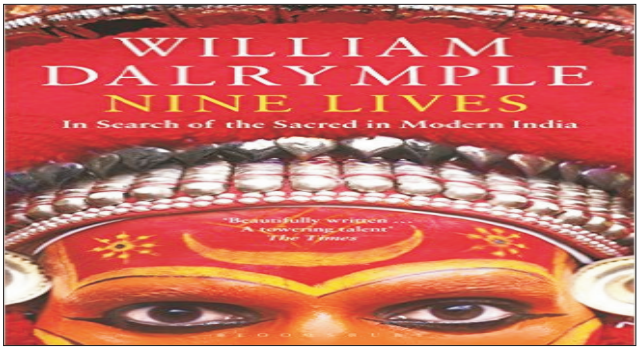
ABSTRACT

William Dalrymple's Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India, is a collection of anecdotes, which while celebrating India's cultural diversity, historical traditions, and varying manifestations of beliefs, also chronicles poverty, caste system, the family system and the friction between tradition and modern culture in India. Each story of the nine lives dealt with in the book has its own facet which makes it stand out from the others, yet, they all share a common theme of religion and culture bringing them peace and happiness into fulfilling their lives.

KEYWORDS:*Nine lives, ascetics, tantrik, singer of epics, dancer of Kannur, theyyam, maker of idols, devadasi, spirituality, Dalrymple.*

INTRODUCTION –

Nine Lives is a collection of linked non-fictional anecdotes of William Dalrymple's travel diaries and his search of some of India's prestigious legacies, slowly dying but once regarded as life sustaining spiritual traditions that were essential constituents of popular culture, the deep rooted beliefs of its people, and their struggle to stay afloat amidst the transformations the society is experiencing as a result of the relentless onslaught of modernity.Dalrymple's travel diaries are pen-portraits of the panorama of his sojournsfocussedon a discrete Indian religion albeit encompassing varying manifestations of beliefs with the exception of the mainstream Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity.



It is a narrative combined with an ethnographically styled description of the people. Dalrymple's narrative explores how traditional forms of religious life in South Asia have been transformed in the vortex of the sub-continent's rapid change.In his own words, *Nine Lives "... is conceived as a collection of linked non-fiction short stories, with each life representing a different form of devotion or a different religious path. Each life is intended to act as a keyhole into the way that each specific religious vocation has been caught and transformed in the vortex of India's metamorphosis during this rapid period of transition, while revealing the extra ordinary persistence of faith and ritual in a fast-changing landscape."*[1] While the lives of the nine souls are apparently discrete in terms of the backdrop, circumstances and characterisation, these are intertwined and connected by a common thread of Faith and Persistence - 'Faith' that the constant war they are waging within and outside to let their sole identity remain alive and would be successful,and 'Persistence' to remain afloat despite being displaced by the society.[2]

Although the diverse and syncretic world of the Indian subcontinent offers a stupefying spectrum of surviving

sects and practices, the religions most of us are familiar with have been largely standardised and homogenised, but this was obviously not so in the days of yore. The earlier versions of even the same religion had local accents, traditions and emphases that varied substantially from place to place. Left to defend themselves in the wake of the surges of the 21stcentury are the pockets of these powerful indigenous yet unimaginably diverse practices and beliefs. Facing the twin enemies of puritanism and modernism, devotees from a few of these threatened sects narrate their stories. At a time when religion is associated with dogma and fanaticism, an understanding of its complexities has never been more relevant. More than a collection of religious curiosities, Nine Lives portrays men and women whose practices are far outsideof the mainstream, yet they are non-fictional human beings, who in the author's own words, are *"suspended between modernity and tradition"*. They are survivors from a variety of worlds like the tiny villages of mud-built houses on flooded plains, or beside jungles – ascetics, *tantriks*, and mystics, the squatting *sadhus* sharing *chillums*, mendicant troubadours, and dancers who perform in tents by village temples, yogic initiates and outcasts. The lives are harsh and unromantic – a recurring motif is how a family can fragment and be lost when the breadwinner dies. But there is also a great sense of purpose and fulfilment of living, breathing spirituality and conviction.At the other end of the spectrum, these stories also highlight religious practices unknown to most city dwellers and the eyes that do not seek. There is no scientific reasoning that can be applied to these practices, because after a point of time science does fail.

Uniting their stories are powerful themes of persecution, poverty, and the unlikely community. Exploring the various cults and sects, their rituals and practices, while attempting to understand the essence of each of these faiths and how they continue to persist amidst the country's fast changing landscape,Dalrymple'stapestry provides glimpses into the vicissitudes of the life of transformation from 'ordinary to sacred'. In some sense these are infrequently visible, not well known and unappreciated forms of living that are rooted in the nook and corners of India and Dalrymple ferrets them out with great care, affection and enormous sympathy. [3]

Dalrymple narrates the journeys he makes to encounter these soulsliving at the farthest corners of religious ecstasy, approaches them with an equal measure of reverence for each one. Nine chapters structured in a clear pattern: an introduction to the person, then he gives a brief historical and theological context of each variant of belief, and then sits down with the individual to discover their life stories, and comes back to the current time – often a festival of religious event, allowing each to speak with minimal authorial intervention. It shows that there are not simply four religions in India (Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity), but a much more complex mixture, with links and crossovers.He presents the nuances of complex societies these individuals inhabit, to investigate the warp and weft of history, politics and religion. Historical fact and religious doctrine are often interwoven through the stories.

The regional outlook of some of his subjects is summed up by Mohan Bhopa, 'The Singer of Epics', one of the last hereditary singers of an ancient, locally-based epic poem that is so long that it takes five eight-hour nights, dusk to dawn, to perform. Bhopa explained Dalrymple that,though they are careful to propitiate gods like Shiva and Vishnu, who control the cosmos, for their daily needs it made more sense to pray to the local god-kings and heroes who understand their farming life in a way the great gods could not. Cable channels and DVDs are already threatening others of his calling, yet he believes his future is assured by the devotion of the audience. His epics, he explains, are attended by their god-hero, resident in a narrative scrolls unfurled when he dances. Dalrymple attempts to figure out the elements that have kept the oral tradition alive in Rajasthan, while in the Western world, the grand epics like *The Illiad, The Odyssey, Beowulf*, and *The Song of Roland* have just remained the legacy only of academics and literature classes. [4]

Dalrymple punctuates the chapter 'The Dancer of Kannur' with rich episodes from history, folklore and mythology. And as is the case with all the stories in the book where the social context plays an important role in the formation of a faith, the *theyyamform* was a reaction against Kerala's oppressive and rigid cast system.*"For three months of the year we are gods,"*Hari Das, the theyyam dancer says. *"Then in March, when the season ends, we pack away our costumes. And after that, at least in my case, it's back to jail."*[5] Hari Das is no criminal - he works as a jailer, terrified though, at the weekends, which involves walking round the prison with a *lathi*, trying to avoid getting knifed by the criminals. During the week-days he digs wells while avoiding getting caught if one

collapses.[6] But from December to February, the length of the season, he becomes a theyyam artist in Kerala. His face is made up, he dons an enormous, intricate costume, sings the story-song that invokes the deity, and to the wild drumming of the musicians performs the steps, the gestures and the facial expressions to narrate a story. And somewhere in this long ritual, a trance-like state transforms him into the living incarnation of a god. For the *theyyam* turns the world of caste privilege on its head – these gods incarnate are *Dalit's*, the stories they tell are of deities scandalised by injustice perpetrated by the ruling castes, who then immortalise the poor Dalit victim. Confirming this, Hari Das says, *"Though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and casteist Namboodiri Brahmins worship us, and queue up to touch our feet."* [7]The *theyyam*, he says, has completely altered the power structure: he draws his self-esteem from the performances he gives and assumes that this self-confidence has spread to the whole community. [8]But when Hari Das takes off his costume and returns to work as a well-builder, the Brahmin who reverently touched his feet just a week before, no longer recognises him, offers him food with a long-handled ladle so as to stay at a safe distance, and gives him a plantain leaf as a plate so that he can throw it away when he's finished. [9]

In another of the chapters, 'The Maker of Idols',Dalrymple visits SrikandaStpathy, the twenty third in a long hereditary line stretching back to the great bronze casters of the Chola Empire. He and his two elder brothers make gods and goddesses in exactly the manner of their ancestors. Dalrymple is intrigued by the question of that magical transformation of a bronze figure into a god. Srikanda says: *"God is inside us. It is from our hearts, our minds and our hands that god is formed and revealed in the form of a metal statue…. Once the eyes are opened by having their pupils chiselled in with a gold chisel, once the deity takes on the form of the idol and it becomes alive, it is no longer mine. It is full of divine power and I can no longer even touch it. Then it is no longer the creation of man, but a god only…. It is a god, at least in the eyes of the faithful. It's the faith of devotees that turns it into a god."* [10]Srikanda mentions three quite different ways in which an inanimate statue could become a god: by the channelling of divinity via the heart and hands of the sculptor; a ceremony of invocation when the eyes were chipped open; and through the faith of the devotee. At a certain point a miracle took place and the statue he had made became divine. [11]

Some of Dalrymple's subjects like Hari Das the dancer of Kannur, or the bard and shaman Mohan Bhopa of a desert village of Rajasthan believe themselves shielded from change, or have adapted to it. In contrast, a longstanding victim of change is the old profession of the *Devadasis*, the temple courtesans once honoured as divine bearers of fecundity. Early targets of Victorian missionaries and Hindu reformers, they are nowadays often dedicated as children by their impoverished *Dalit* families. They no longer work from temples or mansions but from humble homes, and the wages of their dangerous trade support their parents and inevitable children. Frequently there are bitter personal stories behind the more extreme renunciations. Manisha Ma Bhairavi, a mystic who worships the demonic goddess Tara, fleeing her violent husband and deserting even her children to find refuge among sadhus in a Bengali cremation ground. Dwelling in a landscape of mortal transience, she seeks comfort among other tolerant outcasts in the goddess's care. Ash-smeared and naked, they sip tea and listen to cricket on the radio. *"Ma Ganga is very powerful, but Ma Tara is stronger and more compassionate. The greatest pleasure we have is here, with her. It is here in this place of death,"* she tells Dalrymple, *"amid the skulls and bones and smoking funeral pyres, that we have found love."* [12]

In India where gods and spiritual teachers are a part of everyday life, and millennial old traditions rule destiny, these nine lives are not just seeking sacredness. They may be efforts to wriggle out of the unduly harsh caste system, attempts to add some dignity to their lowly lives, escape from poverty and abuse, claiming the pride of fulfilling the duty set on oneself by society or just making a living. Sacredness is induced on all possible acts ranging from extreme harmlessness where not eating roots as they will kill trees, up to auctioning the daughter's virginity in the name of god. Behind most of these stories, there is some complex social crisis.

The book is more about spirituality, truth, belief, complexity, hope, faith, principles, values, conviction and less about religion. These stories show the struggle of the old and the new and changing face of India, the diversity from north to south and east to west. The subtitle *"in search of the sacred in modern India"*, is exactly what the author does with his nine stories. Dalrymple's presentation of the almost clinical transcriptions of the proponents' monologue bring forth interesting subtexts: the ever-present duel between rationality and religion,

modernity and history, evolved fringe versus anaemic mainstream, and finally the evolution from once-mainstream to now-anachronistic: but these are predictable given the dynamic flux that India has been under for the last few centuries.

One of the most striking commonalities among these cults is the happiness, almost ecstasy, their adherents claim. This refrain returns again and again in Dalrymple's interviews, as if no degree of suffering or deracination can quench the devotees' conviction of the benevolence of their gods or dim their joy in taking to the road. This is the India we seldom see, populated by obscure people whose lives are made vivid by their eloquent troubles and reckless piety.The various cults in India are very complex but also interesting and it is a country full of contradictions.

Notwithstanding the subsumption of that India's heterodox and pluralistic religious traditions by the mainstream, Dalrymple still finds that "older India endures," as, for example, holy men continue to agonise over classical questions. *"The water moves on, a little faster than before, yet still the great river flows,"*Dalrymple writes about religion in India. *"It is as fluid and unpredictable in its moods as it has ever been, but it meanders within familiar banks."*[13] Indeed, India's pluralistic religious traditions will continue to swirl, subside and sometimes even surge. And Dalrymple'sNine Lives has made that water more clear.

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10.Ibid, 'The Maker of Idols', p. 179
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