

Rabia Al-Adawiyya : The Sufi Radharani

It was around 713 to 717 AD, nearly a hundred years after the Holy Prophet Muhammad physically graced the earth. As night fell across the edge of the desert on the outskirts of the city of Basra in Iraq, light cries of a new born baby rang out from the house of Ismail. His wife had given birth to his fourth daughter. So poor was Ismail that there was not even a drop of oil in his house for lighting a lamp or anointing the navel of the newly born girl. Neither was there a piece of cloth to wrap the baby with. The mother pleaded with her husband to beg for these from the neighbourhood. But Ismail had taken a peculiar personal vow—he would never to ask another human being for anything, remaining dependent only on God. So he went out and returned empty handed without asking anyone, explaining to his anxious wife that no one opened the door. While his wife wept bitterly in despair, the helpless Ismail put his head on his knees and fell asleep. In his sleep the Holy Prophet appeared before him saying, “Do not feel so sad. The girl born to you shall be a great saint who shall redeem thousands of true believers. Write the following message on a piece of paper and take it to the Amir of Basra tomorrow morning: ‘You have promised to offer Durood (invoking prayer) to the Holy Prophet a hundred times every night and four hundred times every Thursday night. But you failed to do so last Thursday. To atone for this, you must pay the bearer of this note four hundred dinars’.” Ismail woke up and wept in gratitude as he recalled his dream. He got up, wrote down the note as directed and went straight to the Amir. There he presented the letter to one of his assistants, who then passed it on to the Amir. The Amir’s unhappiness at his forgetfulness was overcome by the joy of

knowing that the Holy Prophet had kept his eyes on him. He immediately ordered that Ismail be paid four hundred dinars and also distributed ten thousand dinars to the poor. He called Ismail and said, “Though I would be delighted to meet you when you come to me, it is not proper for a pious man like you to come to me. Rather I should go to your place and rub my beard on the floor to purify myself. In any case, whenever you need anything let me know and I shall arrange for it.” Ismail returned home, after buying the necessary items for his newly born child, grateful to Allah and the Holy Prophet for their profound grace.

Though they remained poor, the next few years passed rather happily. But tragedy struck the family again. When Rabia was about eleven years old Ismail died. Soon afterwards there was a famine in the area. The family tried to flee towards Basra. Unfortunately their caravan was attacked by bandits. While the mother died, the daughters were separated and taken captive to different places and enslaved by the robbers. Rabia’s new master took her to Baghdad where he tried to make a profit out of her talents. He arranged to teach her to sing and dance including playing instruments like the flute and then used her to entertain people in order to make money. Rabia was by then a beautiful girl with a lovely voice. She was sent to various events like weddings and celebrations where people would pay for her performances. In this way she was forced to spend most of her growing years unhappily in the ambit of greedy wayward people of bad habits. This continued till Rabia attained the age of thirty-six years, when one day, a transformation came about within her. No longer could she sing worldly songs. Allah,

the All-Mighty had awakened her from within. From then onwards Rabia refused to sing and dance or play music for anyone else except for her beloved, that is, God. Naturally her worldly master, who had enslaved her for money, was furious. He began to torture her in many ways in his attempt to enforce her to do his will. But Rabia refused and continued to pray to her beloved Lord, beseeching Him to help her so that she could continue to serve Him. Her enslaver soon realized that she would not relent and so he had no more use of her. He put a rope around her neck, took her to the slave market in Baghdad and sold her there. Luckily the person who bought her was a much better person and though he made her do hard work, did not ill-treat her. Rabia would work the whole day in the household and spend the night in prayer. Once while she was in this service, she was sent out on an errand. On the way a man accosted her. Rabia tried to run away and during her attempt slipped and fell, breaking her hand. Praying to Allah she said, “O Allah, I am so sad and alone, I have no parents, no siblings, no friends. Now even my hand is broken. But all this I do not care for if I know that you are pleased with me. Please tell me whether you are pleased or displeased with me?” Soon an inner voice spoke, “My child, on the day of Judgement, even my closest angels will envy your position in the realms of the divine.” One night, the master of the house came to her room for some urgent work only to see her deep in prayer, surrounded all over by divine light. She was talking to her Supreme Divine God, “My Lord, you know that my only desire is to serve you with all my heart and soul. If I were free, I would pass the whole day and night in your thoughts and prayers. But how can I do this when you have made me a slave of a human being?” The master of the house immediately realized that she was a saint and it would be a sin to keep

such a holy person in his service. He called her the next morning and proposed that if she wished she could stay in his house with respect as the mistress of the house. However, if she desired to leave he would free her. Rabia thanked him for his kindness and consideration and was grateful to him for the way he took care of her when she was in distress. She also said that she did not wish to marry anyone and requested that she be allowed to leave the house so as to be able to constantly worship her Lord in solitude. This was granted and Rabia was finally a free person.

Rabia now spent the entire day and night absorbed in God. She scolded herself if she felt that even her sleep was not fully absorbed in God. The inner voice of the Lord would be her constant companion. Once she kept fast for seven days and spent the days and nights in prayer. On the seventh day someone came and gave her a bowl of milk. As she went out for a moment, a cat came and drank the milk. She decided to break her fast with water. As she lifted the cup of water, it slipped from her hands and broke. She cried to her Lord, “O Allah! Why are you doing this to me? What do you want?” The inner voice replied, “O Rabia! If you desire worldly bounties, we shall bestow it to you, but then we shall remove our love from your heart. Our love and worldly bounties cannot co-exist in the same heart.” Henceforth, Rabia cut-off all ties with the world and constantly prayed to her beloved God as if she were facing death every moment. She prayed, “O Allah! Please keep me fully absorbed in you and do not allow people of the world to divert me for even a single moment.” When asked for the reasons for her constant weeping for God, she would say, “I fear separation from Allah. I am afraid that if I am separated even for a moment, then at the time of my death, I may be told that I do not deserve to be with him.” When she

experienced the pangs of separation, the inner voice told her, “Those who finally reach within a hair’s distance of me, I push them far away to experience this separation. Even after that when they come back to me, I allow them to enter my hallowed realms for ever.” A broken jug, a straw mat and a brick for pillow were her only worldly possessions. A well-wisher visiting her felt sympathy and suggested, “I have many well-to-do friends. Shall I ask them to bring some things to you?” Rabia replied, “My friend, is the one who provides everything to the wealthy not your and my provider too? Do you think that he who knows everything has forgotten the needs of the poor and remembers only the needs of the wealthy? When he does not forget anyone, why should I take the trouble to remind him? My condition is what he has wished for me and I am satisfied with it because it is his pleasure.” An open heart full of love submerged in God was Rabia. She would say, “As long as one’s heart is not alert, the other limbs cannot find the path of Allah. An alert heart is a heart lost in divine absorption. It is a stage of annihilation of the individual self in God.” Once, Rabia overcome with tiredness fell asleep. A thief came in and took away her shawl. As he tried to leave with it, he lost his way. As soon as he kept the shawl back, he found the exit. This was repeated many times following which the thief sat down dumfounded, totally confused. He then heard someone say, “Why bring calamity onto you? The one whose shawl you are trying to take away has handed her whole self to someone else. Even the Devil cannot approach her and do anything. Keep the shawl and leave.”

She infused the path of divine love and transformed Sufi philosophy from one of worshipping due to fear or favour to one where God should be worshipped only by and for pure love. She prayed, “O Allah! If I

worship you for the fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship you in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship you for your own sake, grudge me not your everlasting divinity.” She came into contact with a holy man called Hazrat Hasan Basri, who was both her friend and spiritual mentor. Hazrat Hasan Basri was among the earliest saints in the Sufi lineage that stems from the Holy Prophet. Hasan Basri would not deliver his sermon if Rabia was not there saying to the people gathered there, “How will those who have the capacity of an ant drink the nectar that is meant to quench the thirst of an elephant (meaning Rabia)?” Her replies to Hasan’s questions are folklore and present deep spiritual philosophy with the simplicity that Rabia demonstrated by her life. When he asked her, “Do you wish to get married?” she replied, “The tie of marriage is for those who have being. But here being has disappeared for I have become as nothing to myself. I exist only through Allah for I belong wholly to him and I live in the shadow of his control. One who wishes for my marriage must ask for my hand from Allah and not from me.” When he asked her, “How did you come to know him (Allah)?” she responded by saying those famous words, “You know of the how, but I know of the how-less.” A famous story relates to how one day, Hasan saw Rabia near a lake and threw his prayer mat on the top of the water saying, “Rabia, come let us pray here.” Rabia threw her prayer mat in the air and flew up on it saying, “Hasan, come up here to pray so that people can see as well as hear us better.” Then she told him, “What you did, fish can do and what I did, flies can do. But the real business is outside these tricks. We must apply ourselves to the real business.” There are many legends about Rabia including stories of the Holy Kaaba moving from its site to her because she was unable to come there. Much of the

inherent appeal of Sufi philosophy through the Doctrine of Divine Love can be sourced back to this great woman saint. She is referred as among the earliest true saints of Islam, not merely because she represented ideals of a woman, but because as someone said, “When a woman walks the way of Allah like a man, she cannot be excluded out as a woman.” Her life and sayings became a source of deep inspiration and over a period of time a large number of people became her followers - of the path of love, to serve without thought of return. About seven years before the end of her life she moved on to Jerusalem and built a small house on top of the Holy Mountain with Olives. There she stayed, prayed and taught till she left her mortal coil in around 801 AD. When she left the world, she told her Sufi friends, “My beloved is always with me.” Her tomb still exists there and is a pilgrimage for many.

Postscript: It was sometime before the Bengali New Year in 2009, during the Navratri period, when the Supreme Divine Mother Durga is worshipped in her natural *shanta* (calm) form as compared to her *rudra* (fiery) form in which she is worshipped during *akal bodhan* (untimely invocation) in Autumn. It is known that the Autumn Navratri invocation, made popular by Lord Sri Rama, is the form in which she is invoked and worshipped in all her activated glorious power, especially when some special transformation is required in the world, while the Spring Navratri is when she is worshipped as she is in her calm ever loving natural form. One day as I travelled towards Kolkata, I tried to reconstruct (in my mind) the various forms which the Supreme Divine Mother has taken, both Puranic as well as historical. It is a sort of pleasurable intellectual pastime for me. Starting with Niyta Radharani beyond creation, I traversed from the the Dasha-Mahavidyas (Ten Divine Forms of

Knowledge) on the one hand through Paramakshari Gayatri Mata on the other, moving on to the consorts of the great Lords of the Universe (Narayana/Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva) and then to the great transformational sadhana of Parvati, Sandhya, Vedavati and Arundhati, it soon became quite a mind boggling affair. I figured out that she has been a key figure in every Avatara Leela and the central force for the required transformation in every era. In many cases she has appeared simultaneously in different forms at the same time to manifest different aspects of Shakti to balance the process of transformation and maintain its equilibrium. I traversed through various spiritual revolutions including those that came about in documented history and concluded how her presence has influenced the major spiritual paths in the world today, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. The details of these inner musings are kept aside for a future story. As I began to research into Islam, I could not make much headway from my memory due to my own lack of knowledge of Islam. Also by this time my journey to Kolkata was over and I got into more mundane work. Late night I reached the Ashram to the ever smiling radiant presence of Sree Sree Maa and her delightful children. Maa was observing Navratri and keeping to mostly herself for these few days. As I quietly sat near her, she remarked, “Partha, have you heard of any Sufi saint called Rabia?” When I nodded negatively, she remarked, “Maybe you will get something in the Internet. Let me know.” I returned to Kharagpur the next day and immediately looked up the Internet. There I found to my delight, the marvellous life of Rabia, the great saint of early Islam, who had transformed Sufi philosophy by her life and teachings. Much of what I have written about her life in the story above is taken from these sources namely Wikipedia and other sites

(like sufimaster.org) where some details of this wonderful saint's life are available. It was now clear to me why Maa had asked me to look for Rabia - she knew what was going in my mind that day and where my thoughts had remained incomplete due to my lack of knowledge of Islam and its great saints.

But I was still not satisfied. The life and nature of Rabia looked too very familiar for my comfort. I now had my next set of unanswered questions and a fairly self-convincing hypothesis. When I reached Ashram the next time, I was lucky to be alone with Maa for some time. During this period I took her interview to satisfy my curiosity and balance my equations. I started softly, "Maa, I have found out about the life of Rabia. It is extraordinary." I related it briefly as above. She smiled and quietly replied, "Yes, she spread the faith of divine love in the desert lands. I remember her life vividly." I asked, "Maa, when did you first come to know about Rabia?" "It was some time ago, when one night a divine light came to me. It soon took the form of a woman saint, wearing the Islamic veil covering her face, except her eyes. She was saluting me. I asked her 'Who are you?' and she replied, 'I come from Chittagram (Chittagong) in Bangladesh and reside near the Chattershwari Temple there. I practice Islamic Sufi sadhana. I have come to take your blessings. After so long a time I have found you again. I wanted to come and meet you physically but I am unable to do so due to my age. You are my real leader.' I then asked, 'How am I related to you?' She replied, 'You were the one who led us in ancient times in the ancient valley of the Tigris and Euphrates. Your name was Rabia. Your face has not changed. You are still so divinely beautiful, like you were when you were our Rabia.' Later, when our own Imtiaz

(Sufi Saint Imtiaz Bhai Saab) met me after a trip to the sacred Ajmer shrine of the great Khwaja, he told me that his Guru told about three of my lives, one of which was Rabia. His Guru is a powerful disciple of the legendary saint, Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti or Garib Nawaz, the most famous Sufi saint of the Chisti order in South Asia, in whose memory the Ajmer shrine is built. The great Khwaja is amidst us in his divine body even today and has come to me a few times. He told me that he had also taken a birth as a Sufi saint during the time of Rabia and it was he who had initiated her in the Sufi spiritual path. When I later meditated on all this, the whole life of Rabia came up in front of my eyes like a cinema. I realized that it was the will of the great Mahatmas that a spark of Radharani is born in the community of Islam to live a life that demonstrates the doctrine of pure, divine love that is such an important element of any spiritual path. I knew this long ago, but mentioned it now in public only when such a thought came into your mind." To the satisfaction of my curiosity, one more unknown was resolved from my set of equations with infinite unknowns. But a deeper image of Saint Rabia remains imprinted in me, that of—"one set apart in the seclusion of holiness, veiled in the veil of sincerity, enflamed by love and longing, lost in the union of God" - an image of the same one I know as my Eternal Divine Mother, whose human envelopes include among others, the spotless Mary, the peerless Meera, the matchless Sarada and now, ... —well, no prizes for guessing.

References: Rabia Al-Adawiyya, Wikipedia and Rabia Al-Adawiyya's teachings available at Sufimaster.org

—Her Blessed Child
Dr. Partha Pratim Chakrabarti

