

THE PROBLEMS OF MODERNISATION IN 'HINDUISM'

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"WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the Nation

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION."

Thus reads the preamble to the Constitution of Modern India.<sup>1</sup> It also takes us immediately into the heart of our topic.

In India, modernisation still means primarily Westernisation, not only in socio-political institutions but quite comprehensively. India seems to aspire towards Western modes of thought in education, research and management, industrial-

isation according to the procedures and developments of Western science and technology, Western social values and goals, and Western institutions of government, information and warfare. No doubt, all of these institutions, procedures and modes of thought are quite modern within the Western world. But they show discernable continuities with earlier Western sensibilities and practices. Arising out of the Western soil, they are likely to be more in tune with the Western soul. However, either owing to military and economic pressures or because of the seduction of progress and success, these modern Western values and aspirations have been adopted by the whole world. Thus, although modernisation is a universal phenomenon, leading to some global promises and problems, in the non-Western world it still has a peculiarly alien flavour and quite external character.

From the point of view of India, the initiative for any change or innovation has been for two hundred years or so outside her borders and control. And what is true of India is, of course, true of what Westerners and following them now most Indians, call 'Hinduism'; for 'Hinduism' without India is an abstraction, as is India without 'Hinduism.'

Something needs to be said about 'Hinduism' and the reason for my unease regarding this word. I am not clear what 'Hinduism' is.<sup>2</sup> The title of this talk was suggested

to me by the organisers of the conference; my only innovation is the addition of the quotation marks around the word Hinduism. The word 'Hinduism' seems to suggest, at the very least, that it is a 'religion.' When I try to translate 'religion' into Hindi or Sanskrit, I cannot find any suitable word. In a recent paper,<sup>3</sup> I suggested that an appropriate Sanskrit word for 'religion' is yoga. This is so at least to the extent that we might assume that the Bhagavad Gītā and Patanjali's Yoga Sutra(s) have something to do with what is meant by 'religion', since their central concern is mokṣa (Liberation). Even the etymologies of 'yoga' and 'religion' have some close parallels in terms of 'uniting' (or making a bond between) what is human and what is divine, as well as in their explicit associations with 'diligence,' 'attention' and 'heedfulness.' The word 'yoga,' unlike 'religion', has an associated verb form which is commonly used, as for example in the Bhagavad Gītā, making its connotations closer to a process than to a doctrine. Since yoga is concerned with sat (being), jñāna (gnosis, knowledge) and karma (doing, action), it has as much to do with 'religion' as with 'science' as well as with 'art.' So, we might as well use expressions like 'Hinduyoga' and 'Christianyoga' for what we now label as 'Hinduism' and 'Christianity.' From a Hindu<sup>4</sup> point of view, even more appropriate would be relatively more specific

expressions, for different aspects within these traditions, like 'the yoga of Kaṭha Upaniṣad' or 'the yoga of Theologia Germanica'; or a set of expressions like 'mantra yoga,' 'karma yoga' and 'yoga of the prayer of the heart.' If these expressions were widely used in connection with various religions and their developments, many of the apparently peculiar characteristics of 'Hinduism' would not appear so strange after all. For example, one should not feel so odd in being a Hindu and a Christian simultaneously; certainly no more than in following karmayoga and jñānyoga at the same time. No easy eclecticism is advocated here. I am simply drawing attention to an obvious point, almost universally forgotten in practice, that our conceptual apparatus tries to cast all reality in its own mold. From another darśana (perspective, point of view), what appears very strange to us may seem quite normal. The chief value of comparative studies may lie precisely in their ability to make us aware of our presuppositions.

Another word which is sometimes used to render 'religion' into Sanskrit is dharma. Dharma has in it the connotations of 'order,' 'law,' 'responsibility,' 'obligation,' 'duty' and 'righteousness.' No being is exempt from the workings and demands of dharma. Every aggregation of the constituents of prakṛti, which we can understand to be the agency or the

force responsible for making anything that can be an object, whether gross like a stone or subtle like thoughts and feelings, is subject to laws. But no manifestation whatsoever is wholly an object.<sup>5</sup> Every existence has a self, which partakes of the Self, and therefore has obligations in the general maintenance of the cosmic order. This interplay of order, law and obligation is what determines dharma for any creature. Thus, we act in accord with dharma if we respond to the obligations laid upon us by right order, as we understand it according to our capacity. Bees, snakes, trees and stars all act in accordance with their dharma, perhaps without conscious understanding and without complication. The dharma of a human being in any given situation is not easy to be sure about, as is amply illustrated by the complexities of the vast Mahābhārata, and may require immense subtlety of thought and feeling to be understood. But Hindus seem to revel in these complexities, and none of their creations -- mythologies, philosophies, arts or literature -- are ever simple or straightforward. Since several large forces, cosmic, planetary, social and individual, make their demands simultaneously on a human being, each according to its own law, a precise understanding of his responsibilities in a given situation requires discrimination, dedication and effort.

This point is dramatically brought out and elaborated in the Bhagavad Gītā. From the very first word in this remarkable text, the whole dialogue, as Kṛṣṇa himself says towards the end (18.70), is about dharma. The root meaning of dharma in the Bhagavad Gītā is much the same as in the R̥g Veda, the earliest work known to India, and also as in the writings of Sri Aurobindo in our own time, namely, the upholding of the orderly relatedness of all that is.<sup>6</sup> In this tradition, which has been continuous for at least three thousand years, dharma is said to be eternal (sanātana) since it is based on truths which are timeless and therefore valid for all time, although no doubt our interpretation of them and response to them may vary in time. This sanātana dharma is not made by any man or any god; it is prior to them, it is the support of the entire creation. It is the ordering principle of all that exists; it is the first and the highest principle of manifestation. There are tendencies and forces which aid the maintenance of dharma and there are others which oppose it. The whole cosmic drama is played out between these two large currents; one may choose to be in one current, or the other, but no one may opt out of the game. No one, that is, who is bound by manifestation (māyā), gross or subtle. But it is possible for man to be free of all

specific dharmas, if he is able to identify himself completely with the highest puruṣa (spirit, person).<sup>7</sup> Then he is bound by nothing, higher or lower. According to the Bhagavad Gītā such a person participates in Kṛṣṇa's own mode of being, that of unconditioned freedom (mokṣa). This is the end of human dharma, and the goal of man. The means appropriate for this end are called yoga.

Dharma has a large community component in it, whereas yoga refers to a more individual search. The contrast can be understood by the examples of 'marriage' and 'love.' Marriage is discussed at length in the dharmaśāstras, but only a yoga corresponds to love, namely the bhaktiyoga. However, we can exaggerate the separation of yoga and dharma a little too much, for they are quite related to each other. Mythologically, sometimes Yoga is personified as the son of Dharma and Kriyā (action and performance). From the traditional Hindu point of view, the purpose of any specific dharma is to lead beyond itself. Therefore, the purpose of the whole manifested cosmos is, and of all social organisations and of all human activities like philosophy, ritual and art ought to be, to help every creature realise the identity of its self (ātman) and the Great Self (Brahman). Thus art is not for the sake of art itself; it is, if it is any good at all, a way to what is beyond art and beyond any manifestation. Similarly,



a society functions properly only when it enables its members to engage with concerns which are higher than social. On the individual level, a mind is healthy when it is able to know its proper place and is able to listen to what is above it.

According to the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (VI.I.1-4), when Śvetaketu Ārunaya was twelve years old, his father Uddālka asked him to live the life of a student, for no one in their family was unlearned and a brahman only by birth. He returned at the age of twenty-four, having studied all the sciences, greatly conceited, thinking himself well-read. His father then said to him, "Śvetaketu, since you now are so greatly conceited, think yourself well-read and self-important, did you ask for that instruction by which the unhearable becomes heard, the unperceivable becomes perceived, the unknowable becomes known?" Śvetaketu wondered, "How, Sir, can there be such teaching?" The generic name for all such teaching is yoga. A society functioning rightly according to dharma makes yoga possible; but only a society which heeds its integrated (yukta) men, can truly know what dharma is and function according to it.

Returning now to 'religion,' we can perhaps say that from the point of view of the Hindus it may be more appropriately described in terms of dharma and yoga, neither of

which need to have any exclusivist or sectarian meaning, nor any churchly implications. Also, both dharma and yoga are much more holistic than 'religion,' particularly as the latter has come to be in the modern West, where it has become a matter of course to separate 'religion' from 'philosophy,' 'science,' 'politics,' 'education' and 'art.'<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, and most importantly, dharma and yoga are not ends in themselves; their whole point is transcendence. Nor do they serve any 'social' ends. In the terms of dharma and yoga one cannot even properly raise the question similar to 'Is religion socially useful or relevant?' In the Indian context, the question is more: 'Is a given society sufficiently in accord with dharma that yoga can be practised for the sake of mokśa (Liberation)?'

To the extent 'Hinduism' means dharma and yoga leading to mokśa, it is not really a 'religion', for all human aspirations and efforts towards transcendence can be so described. And, if it does not mean dharma and yoga leading to mokśa, from the point of view of the above metaphysical perspective, 'Hinduism' is quite pointless, whatever it stands for. Perhaps, then, by 'Hinduism' is meant that cluster of understandings and forms of dharma and yoga which had their main inspiration and development in India. I say 'perhaps' because I am not really sure about this,

especially because in the vast and ancient culture of India so many different forms and interpretations have emerged that with sufficient ingenuity most major ideas and practices can be discovered there. And given the general Hindu tendency to think that every form, however twisted and perverse it may seem to the majority, derives ultimately from Divine energy and is likely to elevate its sincere devotee, and given a very high level of tolerance among the Hindus for conceptual and aesthetic chaos, no form is ever completely eliminated. There is such an exuberant riot of imagination, cults, practices, gods, mythologies, philosophies -- and everything on a stupendous scale -- that no one addicted to logical and clear formulations in all spheres of life is likely to find 'Hinduism' satisfactory or palatable.

With these hesitations present in the background, we can come back to modernisation. Mokśa is, by definition, not analysable in terms of any rational categories, nor any other temporal forms. Although it is the goal of 'Hinduism,' and of any other path in time based on sanātana dharma,<sup>9</sup> mokśa refers to a timeless state, not opposed to time but independent of it. Yoga being a teaching "by which the unhearable becomes heard," is subject to change in time, but only in its beginning stages where the outermost personality of a seeker is predominant and the teacher adapts the teaching

to suit the pupil's particular predilections. This outermost personality is what is most affected by social conditioning and therefore by contingencies of history and geography. To the extent that a given yoga is able to lead to truth it is an instrument that transforms an aspirant from his time-bound outermost self to his time-freed innermost Self. The varieties of yoga, which here means path or teaching for transformation, correspond to the different basic types of men and do not essentially change with time in their inner content, although it is true that in any given period of history a particular type of man may be in ascendancy requiring the corresponding yoga.

What is most affected by history is cultural dharma which changes by a constant interaction of external and internal forces of innovation and preserving tendencies of the tradition. At the risk of being extremely simplistic, we may choose the traditional metaphor of the wheel: the centre, which exists everywhere, indicates mokṣā, the spokes are like various yogas leading to the centre and the rim is cultural dharma touching the road of history, but drawing its integrity and strength from inside. Mokṣā is neither personal nor social; nor, of course, non-personal or non-social. Yoga is personal in the beginning of a spiritual journey, and dharma is social.<sup>10</sup> This dharma is now subjected to a rapid

change, largely initiated by strong external forces.

We may now return to the preamble to the constitution of modern India, a constitution which we "give to ourselves," and which has no transcendent reference. This constitution comes neither from heaven as śruti (revelation) heard by the sages, nor from the ancestors as smṛti (tradition) incorporating the cumulative experience of the community, dependent on sanātana dharma as perceived, understood and interpreted by the wisest among those whose social dharma the constitution attempts to represent. The constitution is, both in spirit and origin, entirely Western. "We wanted the music of Veena or Sitar," remarked a member of the Constituent Assembly responsible for approving the draft constitution, "but here we have the music of an English band."<sup>11</sup> In a reversal of the traditional order, the constitution self-consciously takes its stand on earth and not in Heaven. Its fundamental notion of social justice, liberty and equality were developed in a culture, the alien nature of which by itself is not at all an important issue, during the period when the centre of gravity of that culture was unrelated to, if not in opposition to, transcendent concerns.

We can see this even in the effect that Christianity has had in India. It is true that many Christian missionaries, more pious than wise, had quite fantastic and absurd

impressions about 'Hinduism,' often resulting from their definite, but innocent, convictions about idols, sexual symbolism and polytheism. Of course, as was said earlier, it is not easy to remain unconfounded in front of the gargantuan multi-dimensionality of 'Hinduism' in which everything from the most sublime to the most bizarre has its place. The venomous serpent Kāliya who had caused much panic and discomfort to everyone around the place in the Yamunā river where he had lodged himself, on being overpowered by Kṛṣṇa claimed to have acted in accordance with his snake dharma in spreading his poison around. Kṛṣṇa found this explanation quite acceptable and spared Kāliya's life, merely banishing him to the ocean, a more appropriate place for the serpent's activities. If one has a more straightforward notion about right and wrong, one is likely to be bewildered by all that can go on under the umbrella of 'Hinduism.' Many well-intentioned European Christians were quite scandalised by 'Hinduism,' and said some quite uncharitable and silly things in connection with it. Here is a remark made by the eminent missionary, Reverend Alexander Duff, who lived in India from 1830 to 1863 and did much to promote education and social reform: "Of all the systems of false religion ever fabricated by the perverse ingenuity of fallen man, Hinduism is surely the most stupendous . . . Of

all systems of false religion it is that which seems to embody the largest amount and variety of semblances and counterfeits of divinely revealed facts and doctrines."<sup>12</sup>

In spite of all this, and largely because the above is hardly the whole truth about Christian activities in India, no external force has contributed more to the purification and reform of the Hindu society than Christianity. All internal reform movements among the Hindus in the last one hundred years or so had their explicit or implicit reference to Christianity, and came into existence in opposition to it, in imitation of it or in accommodation with it. Christian scriptures and many Christians dedicated to the care of the sick<sup>13</sup> and the poor leavened the awakening of conscience among the Hindus about the plight of the down-trodden in their own society.

It is difficult to exaggerate either the necessity of these social reforms or their desirability. The understanding and practice of cultural dharma had gone awry and needed to be corrected, as it still does now. (And the constitution is also a necessary corrective.) Nevertheless, to the extent that Christ's "kingdom is not of this world," social reform, even at its best, cannot be considered as man's highest end. What gives religion significance, from the Hindu point of view, is beyond social good, although clearly not opposed to it. Christianity in India did not provide, what in any case

would have been an astounding achievement anywhere, a functioning model of active engagement with social welfare and with transcendent concerns. It is difficult to escape the impression that in the modern world, in the West or the East, Christianity on the large has been basically a social force, which by itself could hardly be undervalued, and that its transcendent yearnings have not been able to challenge a society about its own raison d'être. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that in the modern times, nominally Christian societies are basically secular in their aspirations.

Another aspect of modernisation and the accompanying secularisation needs to be mentioned, namely science and technology, for yesterday's 'rice Christians' in India are today's 'wheat technologists'. Science has been the major intellectual and social influence in the modern West, owing to its close relationship with technology, and therefore with military and economic power. And this sort of power is all that matters in the world, unless there is some moral or spiritual power in opposition to it or pointing in a different direction. Even within the Western world, modern natural science has driven itself like a wedge in the history of thought, creating a deep cleavage in the intellect of man.<sup>14</sup> It is a fact of Western intellectual history that



every major poet and artist, since Newton's founding of natural science on a firm footing, has felt uneasy about the assumptions, procedures or results of the scientific enterprise. However, perhaps because of the separation among the domains of truth, beauty and goodness that prevails in the mind of the modern Western man, science has moved on, wholly indifferent to these critics, like a large iceberg unaffected by the thrashings of small fish.

In any case, modern science and technology have not arisen and developed in a metaphysical vacuum. Underlying their development there are many cultural values and metaphysical assumptions about the nature and purpose of man, the cosmos and knowledge.<sup>15</sup> These assumptions are products of Western European history and philosophy. Modern science and technology, notwithstanding the recurring large scale uneasiness with them, are as European in character as European music or sculpture. Western science is as distinct from Indian science, in its fundamental attitude and purpose, as Western harmony is from the Indian rāga. It is not often remarked that modern natural sciences represent one among many possible ways of approaching nature. This way is no more unique or exclusively God-given than Christianity was claimed to be by its adherents.<sup>16</sup> There can be, and have been, different approaches to the study of nature and man,

informed by different purposes and yielding different results. An example of a branch of science developed in India is yoga, with its quite different basis, intention and consequences, as contrasted with its counterparts in Western science, namely physiology, psychology and medicine. One should have added, because of the discussion earlier in the paper, 'religion' also as a Western counterpart to the science of yoga. But 'religion' and science are wholly separated in the modern West, and whatever 'religion' may be it is not considered knowledge. One result of this situation is that modern science is completely divorced from any transcendent concerns, and has been the chief force of secularisation in the modern world.

The major problem faced by 'Hinduism' now is: How to reconcile the demands of time and the demands of what is timeless? or, to use a more individual language, how to meet the needs of the body as well as of the spirit?<sup>17</sup> This question has a different pathos in India whose poverty has become proverbial. There, among the intelligentsia and among those with some social conscience, where the awareness of the problems and needs of the manifested world is so overwhelming, any concern for the unmanifested reality is beginning to look indecent, immoral and even insane. And an important factor in the situation is the awareness of

the presence of the Western culture with its immense material prosperity, military might, technical knowledge and virtual control over most global institutions and resources. This enormous worldly power of the West makes all its cultural styles and practices desirable and worthy of emulation in the eyes of a people who have not had a demonstrable worldly success in recent history. Whether drawn to the liberal democratic style or the Marxist-communist mode, almost everyone among the educated youth in modern India seems to consider social ideals as ultimate, and science and technology as the basic means.

Clearly, needs of the body cannot be denied; a starving man cannot attend to the spirit. The cry of the earth cannot be ignored. The West has obviously made, and will continue to make, significant contributions to human welfare throughout the world, and not the least in India. Still, if the body of the Hindu society were to survive and prosper, but without being at the same time a temple of the spirit, it would be an existence without significance. As long as modernisation in India continues to be primarily Westernisation, it is difficult to be sanguine about the triumph of the spirit. Not because the West is 'alien' (the time for such parochial sentiment is past in the emerging planetary culture), but because the modern West does not

speak with the power of its own spiritual depths. For the sake of the whole planet, India and 'Hinduism' need to grow a new body for their ancient spirit to make a new response to the demands of the earth. The realm of technique and materiality cannot be neglected without the risk of subjugation or starvation. But the very purpose for which one exists, society exists, can be easily forgotten in the midst of social concerns and worldly success. If 'Hinduism' ceases to make room for those among men, the wild geese (hamsa), who respond to the call of the other shore, how would the world hear the dance of Śiva, the Divine Outsider? The whole herd of starving lions in search of food and security may well be lured into cages, and be tamed to perform worldly tricks, forgetting the jungle-reverberating roar of a free lion like the Buddha. Arjuna the archer is needed for the protection of dharma, but he must always submit himself to the purposes of Kṛṣṇa, the lord of yoga. In the imagery of the Rg Veda, our mother is Earth and our father is Heaven; who among the children will dare to hold Heaven and Earth in a new embrace?

Notes

1. Quoted in B. M. Sharma, The Republic of India: Constitution and Government (Asia Publishing House, New York, 1966), p. 154.
2. My eminent colleague, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, has written extensively, and with great insight, about this and other related matters. In particular, see his Meaning and End of Religion (Mentor Books, New York, 1964), Chapter 3, Section V, and footnote 25 to Chapter 5. I have arrived at my opinions independently, more from instinct than from research. We have both more than once remarked to each other about the uncanny congruence of our opinions and conclusions given our very different cultural and intellectual backgrounds.
3. R. Ravindra, "Is Religion Psychotherapy? An Indian View"; paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Fredericton, May-June, 1977. (To be published in Religious Studies, Cambridge University Press.)
4. Even the label 'Hindu' is quite problematic. Until fairly recently it seems to have been a synonym for 'Indian.' Even these days it is often understood by exclusion as 'non-Muslim, non-Christian . . . Indian.'

5. See, for example, Bhagavad Gītā, 13.26.
6. For the thesis that the root meaning of dharma as established in the R̥g Veda has a demonstrable continuity in the Bhagavad Gītā, see P. W. R. Bowlby, The Lotus and the Chariot: A Study of the Root Meaning of Dharma in the Indian Religious Tradition, Ph.D. Thesis, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 1975. The importance of this thesis lies in its challenge to earlier Western scholarship which long accepted the opinion that, contrary to the conviction in the Hindu tradition, there is no discernible continuity in the fundamental concepts of the tradition from the śruti texts, of which the R̥g Veda is the earliest, to the smṛti texts to which the Bhagavad Gītā belongs.
7. Christ for whom "I and my Father are one" (John 10.30), "is the end of the law for righteousness" (Romans 10.4).
8. In medieval Christendom also it would have been considered strange to think that one could engage seriously in any sphere of life without reference to God and thus to 'religion.'
9. One must not imagine that 'Hinduism' is synonymous with sanātana dharma. 'Hinduism' is at best an instance of sanātana dharma as understood, expressed and practised in time and space. Even if the whole of India were to

disappear, along with 'Hinduism,' from the surface of the earth, sanātana dharma would still remain. The eternal remains, even if at any given moment it may not have any visible illustration. When Hindus say that all religions are essentially the same, what they are referring to is the transcendental unity of religions, and not to the unity of religious forms. It is their belief, and with someone at the level of realisation of Ramakrishna it was a knowledge, that to the extent that a religion leads to transcendent reality it is because it is a form of sanātana dharma which is like a tree with its roots in heaven and with many branches on earth.

10. It is appropriate to say, as the Bhagavad Gītā clearly implies, that an individual's dharma relates his social dharma and personal yoga. In our metaphor of the wheel, an individual human being is situated at the meeting point of a spoke and the rim. From other points of view, the whole wheel, including the spokes although rarely the centre, can be spoken of as representing dharma.
11. Quoted in G. Austin, The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1966), p. 325.
12. Quoted in R. C. Majumdar (ed.), The History and the Culture of the Indian People, Vol. X, British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1965), Part II, p. 155.

13. Even these days the one person who immediately comes to mind in this connection in India is Mother Theresa whose saintly selflessness in caring for the dying is exemplary.
14. See my review of Visionary Physics: Blake's Response to Newton by D. D. Ault (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974), published in the American Journal of Physics, Vol. 43, 1975, pp.1114-6.
15. Some of these assumptions are discussed in R. Ravindra, "Experiment and Experience: A Critique of Modern Scientific Knowing," Dalhousie Review, Vol. 55, 1975-76, pp. 655-674.
16. There are many interesting parallels between organised science of the twentieth century and organised Christianity of the nineteenth and earlier centuries, including the unilateral insistence on being the one true way. 'Pious' practising scientists cannot even understand that somebody can seriously raise a question about this. However, this topic cannot be pursued further here.
17. By 'spirit' is not meant 'mind' or 'heart.' According to the Hindu ideas, mind and heart, unlike the spirit, are in the realm of prakṛti (nature, materiality, objectivity). Since creation is from above, at birth the spirit takes on a śarīra (body, including mind and heart). At death, the spirit gives up the 'body'



(śarīra tyāga) rather than the body giving up the ghost. For some discussion of this point, see R. Ravindra, "Is Religion Psychotherapy? An Indian View," op. cit.

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