

The Hindu Vision and World Problems

The worldly problems of humanity today need no special restatement. Poverty, social injustice, the very real threat of a nuclear war, a steady depletion of natural resources, all these among other things are challenges that have assumed formidable proportions as they confront humanity today. I do not think, frankly speaking, that I can answer a question like what specifically would be the role and relevance of Hinduism in resolving contemporary world problems. I shall attempt something more modest—take a closer look at the spiritual resources and reserves of Hinduism under the stimulus of the challenges of contemporary problems.

1. The Ambience of Modernity

There is no gainsaying the inescapable nature of the ambience of modernity or contemporaneity which surrounds us as men living in the world of today as Hindus or Christians or as belonging to other religions. The thinking Hindu is able to discern that it is an aspect of Western emergence which has, however, become global in character and thus also his own destiny as much as of the West. Modernity, or more specifically speaking, technology—under which rubric I would subsume all of today's worldly problems—is truly speaking a way of being, penetrating every aspect of civilization. Underlying our natural concern to grapple with the insistent problems of today with the help of the resources of religious traditions is the lurking assumption that what is posed by modernity concerns only externals and leave human purposes free to remain what they have been as defined by the great religious traditions of the past. Technology is only an instrument, which human beings can use for their own purpose, so that what is really needed is to reorient our understanding of our religious traditions or regain new self-definition. We must reassess the priority claims within the religious traditions and expose their misplaced emphases

all of which account for their reactionary and conservative role in the modern world.

It is needless to say that such assumptions are vain and even somewhat naive. It minimizes the power of modernity as a way of being, which implicitly and insidiously cast doubts on the very core-assumptions of religions, all religions East or West, and which it systematically seeks to replace. Let me, however, hasten to add here that Hinduism by becoming modernized, by entering the stream of history in the sense of 'world history' of the West, does not become less Hindu in character (despite what Weber says about the 'spirit' of Hinduism). The contemporary Hindu does not feel constrained to apologize for his tacit acceptance of modernity as a vantage point from which to approach his tradition and bring its beliefs and practices into relation with the intellectual habits and social aspirations of our times.

2. Original Insights of Hinduism

Coming face to face with ideas stemming from the Western ethos the Hindu turns around to explore the origins of his own tradition. He is motivated to study his own past more deeply and to reinterpret, recreate and 're-live' his tradition using it as a spiritual leverage for social and political programmes in a manner that, acknowledgedly, has no exact precedent in his tradition. Religious orthodoxy is often reduced to simply looking on helplessly in the face of the new forces within the citadel itself as it were. The Hindu is fortunate in facing up to this task because Hinduism, among other things, is a tradition which permits one to stand religiously both within and without at the same time. There is no built-in resistance in Hinduism, the posture of orthodoxy notwithstanding, to a self-understanding in terms of growth and regeneration in response to the changing requirements of living and thinking. It is in the light of its own self-interpretation in terms of its creative present, a present which is synthetically continuous with its past though not analytically contained in it, that Hinduism can prove resourceful as a spiritual reserve for the great task of coping with living in the modern world.

An inter-religious approach to spirituality is both laudable and indeed even necessary for us living in the world of today, but this does not have to be understood in terms of simple convergence of a formal

kind. (I am far from denying ontological convergence.) Diversity of approaches as well as of human goals that are aimed at, humanly speaking, constitute for me the very richness of spiritual resources available as religious, and are not incompatible with a holistic purpose of human life today which should be the common concern of all religions. Differences of approach or 'levels' can be very creative in terms of understanding in a spirit of freedom without the implication of interference either by control or by revolt.

The Hindu is no stranger to the zeal for making the social environment accord with the demands of the time, and as a Hindu he does not feel a lack of motivation for social change. Drawing strength from within his own many-splendoured and multi-levelled tradition, he can be authentically resilient in adjusting to the newness and interpenetration of 'one world' that stands underscored in the requirement of the 'holistic perspective'. The question here that I would like to ask is whether he has to relate it by a straight line to the centre of his religious life.

The question arises because the notion of historical process, of time as history does not represent a religious category to the Hindu as it does to the Christian or the Jew. Jews and especially Christians are religiously, that is, spiritually closer to the consciousness of a "dynamic of self-directed change" such as is exemplified in the enterprises of science and technology. I have always asked my Hindu friends who do not feel there is any conflict in allowing science to modify their life both in theory and practice, whether they can be said to live it also spiritually. "To live creatively the practical tension between science and religion", so runs the statement of the world conference of religions at Cochin, India 1981. Science has not posed any serious threat to the religious existence of the Hindu. Neither has technology necessitated a new moral orientation in the face of an anguish over disappearing values. The great changes that have been brought by science and technology are appreciated as such, but they have not struck at the roots of the wisdom which the Hindu looks upon as the spiritual core of his religion.

3. True Spirituality

Although I myself am spiritually inclined to a more holistic and 'integral' understanding of 'spirit' and 'spirituality', one has to acknow-

ledge that there is a genuine spiritual orientation that runs through the myriad manifestations and forms of spiritual understanding underlying the Indian religions. Spirituality to be genuine must be free of any worldly connotations. No aspect of the spiritual, even its religion and especially the concept of God, can be tinged with, intimately related to, involved with or expressed in terms of the physical and the worldly. Otherwise the spiritual loses all independent and intrinsic status. From this perspective humanism and humanitarianism, limited as they avowedly are to man and the world are not genuine expressions of the spirit. True spirituality likewise will spurn all outwardness of perspective as, for example, characterised by man's interest in Nature, his conquest of Nature for use by man and in the social life of man. Morality, again, cannot be related to ultimate spirituality without reducing that spirituality to the worldly. Morality in its spiritual relationship is indeed only a preparation for spirituality, necessary, but nothing more.

Spiritual life judged by this rigorous standard is not a worship of value's and much less a belief in the absolute and eternal values as the most real things in the universe, as Platonism would have it. As Sankara, the greatest advocate of this form of pure spirituality argues, all animals have within them a principle by which to distinguish good from evil since their existence and welfare are furthered by some circumstances and acts and are hindered by others. Self-knowledge with a little experience of the world will suffice to set up easily the Socratic standard of values natural and inevitable to any man or to any society. Who would say that spiritual life is at all concerned with asserting these human and local values to be alone valid or supposing that they were 'divine'? True spiritual life, indeed, consists of disintoxication from their influence. George Santayana says:

The great masters of spiritual life are evidently not the Greeks, not even the Alexandrian Greeks, but the Indians, their disciples elsewhere in the East, and those Moslems, Christians and Jews who surrendered precisely that early unregenerate claim to be enveloped in a protecting world for their benefit or vindication, a claim of which platonism after all was but a refined vindication.¹

1. George Santayana, *Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York : Harper Torchbooks, 1957) p, 247.

To cling to one's possessions and affections is human but is not particularly spiritual. Spirituality consists precisely in the surrendering of this need for comfort and cuddling in the universe and substituting for them pure intelligence "perfect candour" and 'impartial vision'. Having no private motive of its own to make it spiteful, spirit is nothing if not merciful and tender; yet it is unflinchingly austere. It need have no scientific or artistic pretensions. The proudest dreams of science or theology are no better for its purpose. About the lilies of the field it can say literally 'In as much as ye did it unto the least of these, ye did it unto me'.

Spirit, strictly, is no respecter of persons or worlds or things. On such manifestations of being as happen to be unrolled before it, it looks with a clear and untroubled sympathy. As it loves the non-human part of what is before, behind and above, so it loves the human parts and is in no way hostile to the natural passions and to the political and religious institutions that happen to prevail. If spirit is to make its appearance at all why should it quarrel with its earthly cradle?

4. Spirituality and the Worldly Environment : The three goals.

This is of course not to say that all circumstances are equally favourable to spiritual life. Almost always its world is too much with it. To see things as they come in its way under the form of eternity, in their intrinsic character and relative value, in their transitivity and necessity, in a word in their 'truth' is the proper function of the spirit. The contemplative habit which is the spirit's mood finds free scope in solitude, rather than in society, in art rather than in business, in prayer rather than in argument. It is stimulated, one may say, by beautiful and constant things, more than by things ugly, tedious or uncertain.

Here, I am afraid, we have somewhat overstated the case for the spiritual orientation, which by no means is a dispensable or distorted understanding of Indian spirituality. What is presented is very typical of the spiritual Psyche of India, but by no means the only picture of the Hindu landscape, as any student of Indian religious history knows. The picture of a 'pure' spirituality outlined above approximates to a normatively typical understanding of the ultimate spiritual

end of *moksha* or fulfilment in total exclusion of other ends of life—*dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*. But an integral concept of spirituality has to include also these ends of life as well as *moksha*. The formula of, 'pure' spirituality, viz. 'one without a second', should be reflected upon along with the other formula 'all this is Brahman', to gain the proper corrective that is needed for this integralist perspective. Sri Aurobindo Ghosh states the underlying need here in a language which is closer to a depiction of spiritual life as one of 'growth': "The passionate aspiration of man upward to the Divine has not been sufficiently related to the descending movement of the Divine leading downward to embrace eternally its manifestation." (*The Life Divine* p. 24).

There is a sense in which all the *purushārthas* (human ends) can be taken as 'spiritual' and I can say this even on the basis of Scriptural texts. I have in mind a Tamil text of antiquity standing at the intersection of Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism contemplating them—virtue, wealth and love and only obliquely speaking of the fourth end, *moksha*, as an aspect or dimension of them. The outlook of this unique text equating good life with the life of the spirit is by no means confined to this work, but is tacitly the presupposition also of the classes of Sanskrit writings described by the labels *dharma śāstra*, *artha śāstra*, and even *kāma śāstra*.

While the notion of '*artha*' enjoys an incredible polyvalence in the popular and technical treatments of the subject there is also a core meaning which serves both to align it with *kāma* on the one hand and *dharma* on the other and also differentiates it from them, a sense which also significantly makes it the polar opposite of *moksha* while also in a humanly existing manner paves the way for it. The core structure of *artha* is 'being owned as mine' (*mametaṃ*). In this primordial sense of having something as one's own *artha* is equivalent to State. Through State and its coercive might (symbolized in Indian moral and legal texts by the sceptre or *dandaṃ*) is rendered possible not only 'owning something as mine' (*artha*) but also the step that one takes in one's quest for what is beyond *artha*, while also presupposing it, viz. *dharma*. A State (as distinguished specifically from a non-State) is the condition of the possibility of *dharma* in all its different senses namely, belief, ritual, conduct, law, justice, duty etc. Manu speaks of *danda* as the instrument for keeping even the gods and demons to the straight path. Thus one may see from texts like *arthashastra* that '*artha*' is de-

fined in its secular sense in terms of political, economic and cultural values and also in terms of its sacred or religious dimensions.

I may cite here an Upanishadic passage (*Brihadaranyaka Up.* 1. 4, 14) which identifies law (*dharma*) with truth:

“Brahman was not strong enough; so he created still further the most excellent *dharma* . . . There is nothing higher than the Law (*dharmādparamnāsti*). Thenceforth even a weak man rules a stronger with the help of the Law, as with the help of a king. Thus the law is what is called the truth. And if a man declares what is truth they say he declares the law and if he declares the law he declares what is true. Thus both are the same.

The correlation of *dharma* in the sociological sense of one's own station and its duties and the State and its sanctions needs no demonstration. *Manu* says (VIII, 365):

“Neither a father nor a teacher nor a friend nor a mother nor a wife nor a son nor a domestic priest should be left unpunished if they do not keep within their duties. The State elevates man above the law of the beasts by instituting legislation and the enforcement of duties, not only secures ‘ownership’ but acts as a means to the furtherance of the highest good of man.

It is worth emphasizing that moral and material standards are not categories opposed to one another in the minds of the authorities of either the *artha* or the *dharmasastras* (except perhaps of the Buddhists). *Artha* material welfare, and *dharma*, morals are not independent sciences. They are distinguishable but are not divorced from each other. *Arthashastra* says that *dharma* and *kāma* are rooted in *artha*. The contrapositive of this point of view, one may say here, is that of the Buddhist to whom politics appeared to be a corrupt science.

The questions over the relative priority of the threefold aims or ends of existence have been existential issues and have therefore led to a great deal of ambiguity in the minds of the writers. To a distant outsider the scene may even seem perplexing. Remember Marx's comments: “Hindustan is an Italy of Asiatic dimensions . . . yet in a social point of view Hindustan is not the Italy but the Ireland of the

East. And this strange combination of Italy and Ireland, of a world of voluptuousness and of a world of woes is anticipated in the ancient traditions of the religions of Hindustan”.

We should not make false generalizations. Surely it has always remained an unanswered question namely the resolution of the rival claims. Yuddhishtra (Mahabharata 12, 161) asks his brothers: “The course of the world rests upon *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. Which of these is more important and which the second and which is the last? The reply of Bhimasena, one of the brothers is interesting: “One without *kāma* does not strive for the *artha* and one without *kāma* does not wish for *dharma* and one without *kāma* does not strive for anything.” It is significant here to see that what is presented as an existential issue admitting of no consistency here is only with regard to the first three ends and not about the fourth, namely *moksha*.

5. Conclusion: What is it to be Spiritual?

In brief, we have to be satisfied with a rather modest meaning for the term spiritual as when we talk about Man’s spiritual nature. The spiritual nature of Man means that side of his make-up which gives him a love of the non-material things of life such as natural beauty, art, music, moral values and even of material well-being as part of what he can lawfully possess as his own. From love of one’s own we move on to the love of the good (which would be a rendering of the sense of *moksha* in platonic language). There can be no universal horizon such as is entailed in the vision of pure spirituality uncontaminated by particularity or relationality even of a potential nature, unless you start with your own familial, social and human collectivity. One comes to love the universal good only in terms of loving what is near and close to oneself. What makes one’s ‘own’ so important spiritually speaking, is its availability for being known by us and known as good, not the element of possession, which one easily outgrows as one matures. This is the spirituality of the Hindu scheme of *purusharthas* which accommodates the austere claims of pure spirituality with its insistence on inwardness, non-action and detachment with an equally spiritual call which in effect makes man and the entire human life central for spiritual life.