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The Centrality of “Śānti” in Hindu Scriptures

I. Introduction

Even a casual visitor to India will be struck by the devotional songs and *bhajans* coming through the loud-speakers of a temple early in the morning. If he pays a little attention, it may be possible for him to decipher a few syllables, which are repeated again and again: “*Om, śānti, śānti, śānti*”, i.e., “Om, peace, peace, peace”. Yes, our Hindu neighbour is beginning his day with the chanting of ‘*Śānti-mantra*’ the prayer for peace. He is praying for order, harmony and peace in this world and also for the eternal and everlasting peace in the world to come. Without any exaggeration we can say that a devout Hindu will not only be beginning his day with the ‘*Śānti mantra*’ but will also be repeating the same several times every day.

Today’s world often speaks about peace. People conduct seminars on peace, study circles and discussion groups are organized on peace. ‘Live together’ meditate on peace, prayer-meetings are held for peace. What sort of peace do they all have in their hearts and minds...? Peace can be understood in different ways: Political peace, social peace, religious peace and above all the inner, spiritual peace and harmony. ‘To be at peace with oneself’ is undoubtedly the starting point and basis of all peace. In many cases, it is the personal, individual conflicts that is carried over to the other spheres of human life and activities. And that is why it is generally agreed that the religions of this world have a vital role to play in establishing peace and harmony in this world. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”¹ Here Christ declares that there is a peace which the world cannot give us.

The world offers us a peace based on power and might, money and influence. In such a situation, naturally there will be suspicion

1. Jn 14, 27.

and fear of the other, whereas Christ offers us a peace, where our hearts need not be troubled and where we can be fearless (*abhaya*). Such a peace can only be there, where there is mutual trust and love. The *Upaniṣads* also speak of a tranquil state, where one need not fear about anything. "He who knows that bliss of Brahman, fears not from any thing at all."² Even a cursory survey of the Hindu Scriptures, their religious practices and social customs will make it clear to us that 'Śānti', peace has a very central role to play in the Hindu Philosophy and religion.

2. 'Śānti' in the Vedas

The earliest sources of information regarding Hinduism is the vedic literature, and the earliest forms of Hinduism are found in the vedic religion. Popular vedic religion consisted mainly in the worship of gods that were mostly personifications of the powers of nature. Vedic religion presupposed the existence of *sanātana dharma*, which can variously be translated or explained as eternal justice, eternal duty or eternal religion. It stood for the fundamentals of religion and the ideal form of conduct, which is the foundation of a peaceful and harmonious living. *Sanātana Dharma* is constituted of six factors: *satyam* (truth), *ṛtam* (eternal order), *dikṣa* (consecration), *tapas* (austerity), *brahman* (prayer) and *yajña* (ritual). "Truth that is great, eternal order that is inviolable, consecration, austerity, prayer and ritual-these uphold the earth."³ The eternal order (*ṛta ugram*), which is being discussed here is eternal law that is fierce or inviolable. Etymologically '*ṛta*' means proper, right, fitting etc. In the religious context it has also several other related meanings: fixed, settled or proper order, sacred or pious custom, divine law or divine truth.

It is believed that originally '*ṛta*' was used mainly in the context of the vedic rituals. Scrupulous observance of the ritualistic order to the minutest details was considered as a must to obtain the desired result or favour. Order observed in the rituals was thought of as a symbol of the eternal order. Gradually, however, three phases were distinguished in the vedic concept of '*ṛta*':

(a) *Ṛta as Eternal Order*

We can imagine of '*ṛta*' as existing in itself, if we can think of a time when this visible cosmos did not exist. Even before the creation

2. Tai. Up. II: 9,1.

3. Atha. V. XII: 11.

there could have existed an orderly and harmonious plan in the mind of the creator. In this sense 'ṛta' could be considered as eternal. This 'ṛta' helps the creator to transform evil into good, darkness into light and chaos into order:

Having chased the wicked ones and the darkness
 Thou mountest thy effulgent car of *Ṛta*
 The awful car, O Brahaspati, that subdues the foe
 Slays the wicked, cleaves the stall and brings light.⁴

In this sense 'ṛta' is considered as an essential aspect of divinity. God is even called 'ṛtavan'. i.e., one who preserves 'ṛta'. Some times vedic sages go still further and identifies 'ṛta' with divinity.⁵ Occasionally we can find passages in the Vedas which even place 'ṛta' above the gods. "Gods chant the songs of *ṛta*."⁶

(b) *Ṛta as Cosmic Order*

Harmony and order in this universe is seen as the visible and concrete form of the divine, eternal 'ṛta'. In this context 'ṛta' becomes the immutable law of nature by which the universe becomes systematized and integrated and chaos and confusion is avoided. It becomes the basis of order and beauty in the world.

In obedience to 'ṛta' the rains fall, fountains spring up, bubbling streams flow, seeds sprout, trees produce tender leaves, flowers and fruits⁷.

The lovely dawn, the youthful maiden breaks not the eternal law (*ṛta*) by coming day by day.⁸

Firm seated are the eternal law's foundations. In its fair form are many splendid beauties.⁹

(c) *Ṛta as Moral Order*

On the moral plane, it is 'ṛta' that leads to the triumph of good over evil. *Ṛta* as the norm of good life on the moral plane is closely compared with the cosmic law governing the order in nature.

4. Rgv.II: 23,3

5. Cfr. Rgv. IV: 40,5

6. Rgv. I: 147,1

7. Rgv. IV: 19,7

8. Rgv. I: 123,9

9. Rgv. IV: 23,9

"We will follow the path of goodness like the Sun and the Moon."¹⁰ One can attain happiness and peace treading the path of *rta*. Only a man of faith can understand and accept the eternal law, *rta*. A vedic prayer sums up beautifully the significance of *rta* in the vedic religious context: "Lead us beyond all pain and grief along the path of eternal law (*rta*)."¹¹

When we examine the vedic concept of '*rta*' closely, it becomes clear that it is very central to the vedic religion. It can be thought of as existing in four spheres: *Ṛta* existing in itself is the divine plan or eternal order; the proper order to be observed in the sacrificial rituals also is *rta*, through properly and correctly performed rituals the divine order (*rta*) is brought down to the cosmic and human planes—cosmic order and moral order. Thus *rta* becomes the principle of harmony and order in the visible universe and also maintains concord and peace in the society and in the relationships between individuals. Consequently harmony and beauty in this world and peace and unity among men is considered as a reflection of the eternal, divine order. Hence, in the vedic religious context, real peace can be attained only when the cosmic process synchronizes itself with the divine plan; and mankind is at peace only when it does not violate the natural order.

3. (a) 'Śānti' in the Upaniṣads

When we come to the Upaniṣads, we cannot find any clear or direct reference to 'Śānti' or peace in the ordinary or general sense of the term. The Upaniṣadic sages are mainly concerned with the ultimate tranquility and calmness, in other words they are more concerned with the problem: 'How can man be at peace with himself overcoming all apparent divisions and multiplicity?'

The basic assumption that underlines all philosophical speculations in the Upaniṣads is the Ultimate unity of all apparently diverse realities. "In the beginning, my dear, this was Being alone, one only without a second."¹²

Hence to have real, lasting tranquility one should realize this real unity of being. "For, where there is duality as it were, there one smells

10. Rgv. V: 51,15

11. Rgv. X: 133,6

12. Ch. Up. VI: 2,1

another, there one sees another, there one hears another, there one speaks to another, there one thinks of another, there one understands another.”¹³

Commenting on this text Dr. Radhakrishnan says: “Objectification is estrangement. The objective world is the ‘fallen’ world, disintegrated and enslaved, in which the subject is alienated from the object of knowledge. It is the world of disruption, disunion, alienation. In the ‘fallen’ condition, man’s mind is never free from the compulsion exercised by objective realities. We struggle to overcome disunion, estrangement, to become superior to the objective world with its laws and determinations . . . In the objective world where estrangement and limitations prevail, there are impenetrable entities, but in the knowledge where we have fullness and boundlessness of life nothing is external, but all is known from within.”¹⁴ It is needless to say that where there is estrangement, disruption, disunion and alienation, there cannot be inner serenity and tranquility. On the other hand, where there is fullness and boundlessness of life, there will be tranquility and peace. This fullness and boundlessness of life is found in the real knowledge. Thus according to the Upanisads real knowledge regarding the unity of being is the only true and sure means to real and lasting *śānti* or peace.

In this context the Upanisads distinguish between lower knowledge (*aparā vidya*) and higher knowledge (*parā vidya*). “. . . two kinds of knowledge are to be known, as indeed, the knowers of Brahman declare—the higher as well as the lower.”¹⁵ The reality or the unity of being is perceived not by logical reasoning nor by the force of intellect but by spiritual contemplation, *adhyātma-yoga*. Once this unity is realized, “the wise man leaves behind both joy and sorrow.”¹⁶ To leave behind joy and sorrow or to go beyond joy and sorrow means to be of undisturbed and calm mind and that is real peace according to the Upanisads. The same idea is confirmed by Br. Up. “. . . Therefore he who knows it (Brahman) as such, having become calm, self-controlled, withdrawn,

13. Br. Up. II: 4,14

14. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads*. Fourth Impression, 1974, p. 98.

15. Mund. Up. I: 1,4

16. Katha. Up. I: 2,12

patient and collected sees the Self in his own self, sees all in the Self. Evil does not overcome him, he overcomes all evil . . ."17

Proper mental disposition is an essential prerequisite for the attainment of this highest wisdom which leads to real *śānti*. This is beautifully illustrated through a dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreī in Br. Up. II. 4. Yājñavalkya wanted to renounce the householder's life and go to the forest to lead a life of austerity and prayer. So he called his wife Maitreyī and told her that he wanted to divide his wealth between her and his other wife Kātyāyani. Then the spiritually enlightened Maitreī asked him "If, indeed . . . this whole earth filled with wealth were mine, would I be immortal through that?" Yājñavalkya thus recognized the mental aptitude of his wife and taught her the true wisdom.

This highest wisdom regarding the Ultimate Reality of being is expressed and explained by the Upaniṣadic sages in different ways. The mahāvākyas like, "*aham brahmāsmi*"¹⁸ (I am Brahman) *Tat tvam asi*¹⁹ (That art Thou), etc. are some of the well known examples. In fact, this unity of being exists there, but we are not aware of it. It is this ignorance that leads us to the experience of separation, division and disunity. Where there is division and disunity, there is pain and sorrow. And this in turn will destroy the inner peace and tranquility. Once we remove this ignorance and come to the realization of the ultimate unity, the experience of separation and division also vanishes. This leads to the cessation of pain and sorrow, and that is equal to a calm and tranquil mind. "Even as a mirror stained by dust shines brightly when it has been cleaned, so the embodied one, when he has seen the real nature of the self, becomes integrated, of fulfilled purpose and freed from sorrow."²⁰

This experience of the unity of being has certain specific characteristics:

i) The realization of the unity of Being gives one peace and calmness not only in this world, but also in the other world because this realization is the final release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

17. Br. Up. IV: 4,23

18. Br. Up. I: 4,10

19. Ch. Up. VI: 8,7

20. Sve. Up. II: 14

“... But those who depart hence, having found here the self and those real desires—for them in all worlds there is freedom.”²¹

ii) The realization of the unity of Being brings happiness and bliss. A realized person has no wants and no desires to be satisfied. “*Aum*. The knower of Brahman reaches the Supreme. As to this the following has been said: He who knows Brahman as the real, as knowledge and as the infinite (satyam, jñānam, anantam), placed in the cave of the heart and in the highest heaven realizes all desires along with Brahman...”²² “He knowing thus and springing upward, when the body is dissolved, enjoyed all desires in that world of heaven and became immortal...”²³

iii) It is a state where all sorrow and pain cease to exist. “It is that which transcends hunger and thirst, sorrow and delusion, old age and death...”²⁴ “... It is the self free from sin, free from old age, free from death, free from sorrow, free from hunger, free from thirst whose desire is the real, whose thought is the real...”²⁵

iv) It is a state of fearlessness (*abhayaṭva*). Where there is no multiplicity and division, where everybody and everything is seen as One, what is there to fear and whom is to be afraid of. “Whence words return along with the mind, not attaining it, he who knows that bliss of Brahman fears not from anything at all.”²⁶

b) ‘*Śānti-Mantra*’ in the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*

The popular and widely used *Śānti-mantra*, i.e., “*Aum, śāntih śāntih śāntih*” appears in the *Tai. Up.* twice: at the end of I: 1, 1 and II: 1, 1. In the first case, it occurs at the end of a rather long invocation addressed to different gods to remove all the obstacles in the pursuit of true wisdom. In the second instance it comes at the end of a short but beautiful invocation: “May he protect us both. May he be pleased with us both. May we work together with rigour: may our study make us illumined. May there be no dislike between us. *Aum, peace, peace, peace.*”²⁷

21. Ch. Up. VIII: 6

22. Tai. Up. II: 1,1

23. Ait. Up. II: 1,6

24. Br. Up. III: 5,1

25. Ch. Up. VIII: 1,5

26. Tai. Up. II: 9,1

27. Tai. Up. II: 1,1

These are the only instances in the earlier Upaniṣads where the Śānti-mantra occurs in this form. Is the author of Tai. Up. telling us that mental equanimity and peace, unity and concord are necessary for the pursuit of true wisdom, which gives us everlasting peace? In other words, is the sage reminding us that eternal peace in the other world can be sought after, only if there is peace and harmony here in this world?

Śankārcrāya in his commentary on these passages says that śanti is repeated thrice to refer to the three spheres: ādhibhautika, related to material beings; ādhyātmika, spiritual and ādhidaivika, related to the world of gods. Thus the repetition of śanti three times shows that all the beings need 'true śānti' to pursue the goals assigned to them.

This brief survey of the Upaniṣads shows us that the Upaniṣadic vision of peace centres around the idea of the basic unity of all beings. If we become convinced of this unity, then there will not be disunity and discord among beings and peace will reign in the universe.

"The one eternal amid the transient, the conscious amid the unconscious, the one amid many, who grants their desires, to the wise who perceive Him as abiding in the soul, to them is eternal peace and to no others."²⁸

'Śānti' in Bhagavadgītā

The Bhagavadgītā in its original form is a part of *Mahābhārata*, the great epic of India. Chapters 25-42 of the *Bhisma Parvan* constitute the Song of the Lord. It contains thus 18 chapters. Bhisma Parvan is the 6th Book of *Mahābhārata* and it contains a total of 122 chapters.

Today scholars speak of the impossibility of such a long poem (700 verses) being recited by the Bhagavan on the battlefield just at the time when the two opposing armies were about to begin the war. At the most Krishna might have given a few insightful principles to Arjuna to persuade him to fight, such as Gita II: 11-38, which might have been later elaborated into an extensive work.

If the reader were to approach the Gītā with the assumption that it contains definite views in support of peace and arguments against

28. Katha. Up. II: 2,13

war for the very reason that it was supposed to have originated in the context of *Mahābhāratayudha*—the great Bhārata war—, he is bound to be disappointed. On the contrary, Krishna, an *avatār* of God is persuading Arjuna to plunge into the war. Arjuna was, in fact, quite unwilling to fight and was prepared to give up everything to avoid a bloody battle and to support his position he brought forward apparently convincing and weighty moral and common sense arguments:

“... I do not foresee any good by slaying my own people in the fight. I do not long for victory, O Krishna, nor kingdom nor pleasures ... Why should we not have the wisdom to turn away from this sin, O Janardana (Krishna), we who see the wrong in the destruction of the family?”²⁹

All the forceful arguments put forward by Arjuna could not convince Krishna. He did not let Arjuna go and insisted that as a *Kṣatria* it was his sacred duty (*svadharma*) to fight. He argued that this despondency and anguish was all due to ignorance:

Again, looking at your own duty as well, you should not waver; for there is nothing more welcome to a Kṣatriya than righteous war.

But if you will not wage this righteous warfare, then forfeiting your own duty and honour, you will incur sin.

Treating alike pain and pleasure, gain and loss, victory and defeat, engage yourself in the battle. Thus you will incur no sin.³⁰

This does not mean that Krishna was an insolent and intolerant war-monger. In this connection we have to go a little wider into the context of the *Mahābhārata* story. The Pandavas had faithfully fulfilled all the hard and difficult conditions imposed on them for their defeat in gambling, although they had been treacherously defeated. Hence the period of exile was over for them. Now they were entitled to get back their kingdom. But the covetous Kauravas, their cousins, were stubbornly refusing to concede even an inch of land to them. So Sri Krishna was requested to act as a mediator. In spite of all his strenuous efforts, the Kauravas remained adamant and unyielding.

29. Gita I: 31,32 and 39

30. Gita II: 31,33 and 38

Thus this was a just war forced on the Pandavas by their blatantly unjust cousins:

"Happy are the Kṣatriyas, O Pārtha, who obtain such a warfare that comes unsought as an open door to heaven."³¹

In the context of the whole of the *Gīta*, we may view the *Mahābhārata* warfare allegorically. The *Mahābhārata* is not to be taken as the account of an ancient war waged for a piece of land or even for an empire, rather it is to be understood as the depiction of the never ending struggle between *dharma* and *adharma*—justice and injustice—in the individual itself, in the society and in the world as a whole. It is in this context that we have to understand the role of Krishna as an avatār of Viṣṇu in *Mahābhārata* and especially in the *Gīta*.

"Whenever there is decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata, then I incarnate myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age."³²

Thus it should be clear to us that the *Bhagavadgīta*'s main concern is not war and peace in the general sense as we understand it, although it is presented to us in the context of a war. On the contrary, its main concern is the war against injustice and disharmony in the individual itself and also in the society at large. The *Gīta* is convinced of the fact that, if the individual is at peace and harmony with himself, he will radiate that peace and harmony into his surrounding world. That is why the *Gita* propounds, as its main theme, the three classical *Mārgas* or ways of spiritual realization: *Karma*, *Bhakti* and *Jñāna* i.e., the ways of action without attachment, loving self-surrender and true wisdom.

Selfless action or action without attachment to its fruits is a necessary precondition for undisturbed mental calmness and tranquility. It is one of the simplest facts of our every day experience that very often it is our overconcern and undue worry regarding the success or failure of our actions that destroy our mental peace. We become tense and worried because we are not sure whether everything will go

31. *Gita* II: 32

32. *Gita* IV: 7-8

smoothly according to our plans. In this connection the Gīta's advice will be, do your best in whatever task you undertake and hope for the best:

To action alone you have a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be your motive; neither let there be in you any attachment to inaction.

For the uncontrolled, there is no intelligence; not for the uncontrolled is there the power of concentration and for him without concentration, there is no peace (*śānti*) and for the unpeaceful, how can there be happiness.³³

The Gīta XII; 13-20, which describe the characteristics of a true devotee also make it sufficiently clear that mental calmness and equanimity is a necessary precondition for true devotion (Bhakti-mārga).

He who has no ill will to any being (13), he who neither rejoices nor hates, neither grieves nor desires . . . (17), he who is alike to foe and friend, also to good and evil repute . . . pleasure and pain (18), he who holds equal blame and praise, who is silent, . . . that devotee is dear to me (19).

And such a devotee will undoubtedly attain supreme peace. "Flee unto Him for shelter with all your being . . . By His grace you shall obtain supreme peace (*parām śāntim*) and eternal abode."³⁴

The Gīta is very clear on the point that the way of true wisdom, *Jñāna mārga*—also is meant for attaining supreme peace: "He who has faith, who is absorbed in it and who has subdued his senses gains wisdom and having gained wisdom he attains quickly the supreme peace (*parām śāntim*)."³⁵

33. Gīta II: 47 and 66

34. Gīta XVIII: 62

35. Gīta IV: 39

From what we have seen, it should be amply clear that the main concern of the Gīta is interior peace and tranquility. I do not think that anybody will dispute the fact that, where there is mental peace and harmony, there will also be unity of minds and hearts.

Conclusion

We made a brief survey of three typically representative Hindu Scriptures, the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, both from the *Śruti* group of literature, and the third model, the Bhagavad Gīta from the *Smṛti* group. These three works belong entirely to different historical and cultural backgrounds. Their religious outlook and philosophical vision also are not identical. But from our analysis of these Hindu Scriptures one thing emerges, namely that the concept of peace (*śānti*) and the search after it has striking similarities and that there is even a basic unity in it. All the Hindu Scriptures more or less hold the view that internal peace is the starting point and basis of all other sorts of peace. As the saying goes, when one's own house is in order, the whole world would be in order. Hence, not only these three Scriptures, but all the Scriptures of Hindu religion endeavour to teach the ways and means for mental peace and harmony. And as we know from our own experience in India, millions of people find in these invaluable sources of wisdom, consolation and strength, or in one word '*śānti*'. I cannot find any better witness than Mahatma Gandhi to support this view. In 1925 he wrote in young India:

I find solace in the Bhagavad Gīta that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face and, all alone I see not a ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad Gīta. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies—and my life has been full of external tragedies and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gīta.³⁶

36. R.J. Venkateswaran, *Bhagavad Gita For Peace of Mind*. (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1982), p. 75.