

Editorial

**HINDUTVA:
CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSE**

Religion is an existential entity emerging from the coming together of people with the intention of realizing their deepest yearning for a communion among themselves culminating in a communion with the Transcendental Reality; it results from their continued attempt to establish a holistic communion among nature, human beings and the Supernatural. This seems to require a perspective different from that which they normally cultivate in dealing with the natural course of events. This has been a constant phenomenon from the inception of humanity, and, in the course time, has become a vital element in the transformation of human psyche as well. The yearning for a lasting communion – natural (human) as well as supernatural – is so deep to human beings so much so that the internal dynamics and the external forms of religion that have evolved over the ages exercise a great emotional appeal among the adherents of any religion. Since religion is so natural to the human society, it must be admitted that this emotional aspect of religion has been a positive and creative force in vitalising and renewing the human spirit in different civilisations and political identities, and instrumental in bringing forth lasting and effective transformation in human society. We shall not ignore, at the same time, the fact that the same force has played havoc in setting persons, families, communities, cultures and civilisations against each other, orientating the human spirit diametrically against its deepest need for communion among human beings. Both these trends can be traced at every stage of the development of cultures and, thus, in the history of humanity.

The crucial question, however, is: having had an understanding of both the positive and negative forces that religions and religious adherents can effect in the life of individuals and societies, why should we still in the 21st century let our deepest emotions of religion being tampered and manipulated by the vested interests, and, thus, to perpetuate their own divisive designs? Instead of effecting unity and communion, they become

the instruments of division and antagonism, antipathy and hostility, setting people against people, especially among those adhering to different creedal forms. This tendency of perpetuating division among the religious adherents, and exploiting the emotional sentiments based on religious affiliation for the sake of the vested interests is a phenomenon that could be seen among different peoples and cultures. What is common to all this is the fact that these vested interests mostly have some political designs as their hidden agendas at the helm of affairs, which otherwise cannot be realized with the natural developments in the corresponding political realms.

Although merely a political move in reality, it has cultural as well as religious repercussions the brunt of which is to be borne by the people at large. For, such a political manoeuvre strictly involves cultural as well as religious dimensions of individuals and societies, and, therefore, can adversely affect the fabric of cultural, political or religious societies. Although we may come across with the indifference or even antipathy of many to the traditional religious forms, in the East or in the West, in most of the present day nations, whether democratic or not, the religious affinities do play a role, at least indirectly. Knowing this well, and tapping it to their good, the politicians are bent on taking advantage of the same to the maximum: thus, we find them attending religious rituals even if those services do not mean anything religious to them, involving in the issues concerning the spiritual or moral life of the religious adherents, mostly assuming the garb of apparently supporting positively the causes of religions, etc. Although this is a worldwide phenomenon, taken for granted in the normal course of events, there lurks the danger of religious sentiments being manipulated by the politicians for their advantage.

A concrete situation of this fact could be observed in the contemporary India, where almost all political parties, whether they claim to be secular or not, are taking advantage of the religious sentiments of the public at large. The age-old religious traditions still have a lasting influence on the mind of the Indian population, and this has paved the way for sustaining a vast arena of religious or devotional practices, and an effective following for various religions. Indian psyche, in general, can be said to be very much religious, and this is particularly true with the adherents of 'Hinduism' – if by this expression we temporarily concede to the technical definition endorsed by the Indian Constitution, or what is

accepted and propagated as Hinduism today by the advocates of the nationalist agenda – which is identified as the traditional religion of the people, still having the adherence of the ‘majority’ of Indians to its tenets. The historical developments in the Indian subcontinent over a long period of time have caused continued political suppression of the Indians either by the Muslim or Western (Christian) vanquishers. Although these conquerors enjoyed temporary political success in suppressing the indigenous governance either through the might of the sword or the strength of political manipulation, they have been equally detrimental in harassing the people and their native cultural and religious sentiments. It might be rightly said that the divergent cultural patterns of the conquerors and the conquered failed in mutually understanding and appreciating each other, causing a lasting wound on the mind of indigenous people, especially on their religious and cultural sensibilities. As any physical wound causes the organism to make its own empowerment by building up antibodies, and, thus, shielding itself from the external threats, the wounded psyche of the Indian society did try – though not always collectively – to protect itself by revitalising and reinvigorating its essential spirit. This, to my mind, is a positive development from the perspective of the sustenance and maintenance of any religiously oriented society.

This wounded psyche, however, having its emotional appeal at large, has turned out to be the most effective instrument of manipulation in the hands of many politicians, who are intent on yielding political power by employing the religious identity and sentiments of the so-called majority community in India. It is a fact that despite temporary setbacks, they keep on building up a promising political climate conducive to their designs, especially because the illiterate masses of the country – who are much more emotionally charged as far as religious issues are concerned – are unaware of their manipulative programmes at large. It is in this context the present number of *Journal of Dharma* addresses the issues related to Hindutva from its cultural as well as religious perspectives.

Hindutva, literally meaning the spirit or essence of Hinduism, has turned out to be an expression so often referred to and used not so much by the ardent practising Hindus, but by the politicians, in whose hands anything can be a manipulative strategy for yielding undeserving political power, especially when it can be of emotional appeal to the majority of the

vote bank. Hindutva as a nationalist movement, adversely affecting the pluralistic fabric of India, asserts against all historical backgrounds and the present-day social structures that India is one nation based on a *single* Hindu culture. Their ultimate aim is to establish a Hindu theocratic state in India, as if it is the natural and essential (or integral) fulfilment of the foundational world view of the 'majority' community, although they comfortably bypass the fact that this psyche is constituted by so many mutually supporting, but at times, mostly divergent streams of culture, thought, language and religion. It must also be said that it is an evident rejection and violation of the essential secular fabric of the Indian Constitution.

Those who are actively advocating a religious nationalism in the name of Hindutva are making an attempt to give shape to a *homogeneous* national unity purportedly based on the fundamental religious identity of the majority religious community. This, however, shall not be the final destiny of a state, as identifying the national identity and religious identity would have devastating consequences on the life of its citizens. For, the national and religious identities need not, may not, and (historically) did not always spontaneously converge on the same goal. Many a time, religious nationalism, being more sectarian than universal in appeal, tends to antagonise some segments of the nation – sometimes even those who subscribe to the same religious affinities and creedal forms – and fragment the nation and the society at large than truly becoming a leaven or catalyst of national unity and integrity as most of its political proponents purport it to be the case. A concerted effort is being made to force a sectarian identity as everybody's national identity; such a move involves the curtailment of the freedom of the people belonging to the minority religious or cultural groups, as the forced identity is only a 'foreign' identity as far as the latter groups are concerned. True nationalism shall never be an attempt to imprison anyone in any type of identity, but should be an instrument of freeing the citizens in order to become themselves, on their own. What is advocated is the need of a dynamic national unity and integrity that accommodate, accept and awaken the individual as well as community identities of various segments of the state through which the national identity can be promoted and achieved.

Only instilling a quest for transcendence among all constituent units can bring about the emergence of a true national identity in a pluralistic

society. The secularism that is advocated by the architects of the post-Independent India involves such a positive transcendence, and not a state that appeals in any way for an a-religious or agnostic existence. Secularism is not a denial of religion and religious sensibilities of people, but an affirmation of the most central and deep dynamics of human nature, with the possibility of opening up to others and accepting differences in the realization of one's humanity.

A new and artificial national consciousness is being forced upon a large section of Indian people by the so-called majority group at the expense of the unique consciousness of the minorities. This dynamics is being played and replayed in relegating the unique identities of the aboriginals of the country (technically, now identified as SC/ST/OBC) by classifying them as Hindus. Indeed, this has received a legal sanction from the architects of the Indian Constitution when they tried to offer the most wide, but 'negative' definition for the word 'Hindu'. The nationalist consciousness that is being publicised as the only valid and viable alternative for the unity and integrity of India, then, is turning out to be a denial of individual identities. I am not trying to advocate sectarianism, but only pointing to the need to identify, respect, and promote the unique consciousnesses and identities of certain linguistic, cultural or religious groups in such a way that they would become constructive elements in naturally evolving a healthy national consciousness. Thus, the attempt is not to advocate any type of antagonism against the nation as a whole, or any component unit of the nation. What is envisaged here expects that the national consciousness would nurture mutuality and respect among all major or minor component units or groups, and that these units would, in turn, enhance and promote the wider horizons and integral growth of a healthy national consciousness without in any way endangering either.

A secular society that calls for transcendence will not come about automatically. It is due to the natural and emotional bend or preference for oneself, for one's family, community or religion to which normally one belongs. However, in the light of a broader and healthier perspective, especially in the context of a pluralistic religio-cultural ethos, individuals and small or big group identities that these individuals form, must consciously strive to build up a secular society that can go beyond the narrow bounds of the other 'lower' affinities and commitments. Such a culture can emerge only if the members begin to respect each other, not

basing on the particular sectarian identities, but on the ‘humanity’ in which everyone partakes, and the inherent and unique relationship that emerges from it. The healthy constituents and contributors in this endeavour are, certainly, those cultural or religious identities that assist and promote individuals and groups at large to transcend their limiting boundaries – not by disrespecting or annihilating them – and, thus, to establish some sort of a trans-boundary existence among the citizens of a nation. They have to constantly remind themselves and reinforce the promising unity-building thought that “the bonds that unite us are stronger than the barriers that separate us,” and try hard in all earnestness to establish a promising and life-enhancing communion of humanity, through which, I hope, there shall emerge the true national identity and integrity of India. In the words of S. Radhakrishnan, “it is a condition of consciousness in which feelings are fused, ideas melt into one another, boundaries are broken and ordinary distinctions transcended.”¹

It is with this hope scholars from a cross section of the Indian society address issues related to Hindutva, especially from a cultural and religious perspective. The first article by Albert Nambiaparambil, a pioneer in inter-religious dialogue in India, with about thirty years of experience in the field of actively promoting inter-religious relationships, is an attempt to articulate the causes, the repercussions and the positive directions that are to be put in perspective in order to understand the reality of a religion in relation to other religions. His foundation in the lived experience of a dialogic life makes his point truly a valid one. While making an earnest appeal to believers in different religions “to discover again and again, always anew, their own self-identity,” he cautions us that “fanaticism of any kind, even in the cover of mistaken nationalist identity, is a danger to be confronted by the fellow-pilgrims.”

Articulating the positive spirit of Hinduism and identifying it as true Hindutva, G. C. Nayak unravels the highest ideal of human and spiritual realization as conceived by the enlightened seers of the age-old Indian traditions. Trying to draw a balance between the ideal and reality, Nayak asserts that while “fanaticism and bigotry cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be regarded as virtuous,” “tolerance is a necessary feature of

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1988, 91.

Hindutva, understood in its proper perspective.” He suggests that we should be aware of the need of “right directions” to keep the essence of Hinduism alive so that “this unique culture of transcendence does not lose itself in the mires of intolerance, superstitions, sectarian rigidities and hatred.”

In “The Human as Religious and Secular: A Search into the Religious and Secular Ideologies of Our Time,” V. F. Vineeth presents the tension between religious and secular dimensions in the societal life, and sheds light into the fact that Hindutva, as a social or political reality, is an attempt to manipulate and take undue advantage of this dichotomous situation in a highly religious oriented India. Although he calls for an understanding of the historical situation within which the Hindutva ideology has gained currency in India, basing on his analysis of the multi-faceted Indian society, he is categorical in saying that “*Hindutva* can never embrace the heart of India. It will be only a wishful desire of a few upper-caste Hindus cherishing the Brahmin superiority over all other people of India.”

Identifying one of the reasons for the rise of Hindutva as a reaction, in his article “Academics Compounding Hindutva,” M. Sivaramakrishna highlights the failure of the western and western influenced Indian scholars, mostly the academicians, to understand and appreciate the Hindu ethos in its true spirit. According to him, “they seem insensitive to the nuances of faith.” Identifying some of such causes for the hardening stand of Hindutva at the national level, he calls for understanding among scholars when dealing with faith traditions, openness to differing cultural patterns, appreciation and positive approach to the religious experience of other peoples, etc. In the following article, Sanjyot D. Pai Vernekar examines the current concept of religion in the context of India, and holds that “religion has become responsible for all manner of undesirable developments taking place in the Indian subcontinent today.” Drawing from the great lore of Modern Indian religious reformers and scholars, especially anchoring on the life vision of Sri Aurobindo, Vernekar concludes that “the openness and universal outlook that are its [i.e., Hinduism’s] hallmarks shall be retained and positively cherished and cultivated for posterity.”

V. T. Rajshekar, in his reflection “Hindutva: Whipping up Sleeping Slaves,” argues for the cause of those segments of the society that are

adversely affected by the secular as well as religious manipulations of the apparently 'religious' forces. He confronts both the "Sacred Brahmins" and "Socialist Brahmins" in India who, according to him, are equally intent on manipulating the Dalit community for their political benefits. He contends that while the first adopts an explicit manipulative strategy in using religious affinity, the latter does the same in a tacit or implicit manner, and, thus, both amounting to be of the same category in perpetuating evil political strategies. Relying on the studies of B. R. Ambedkar, the author hopes that there will come a time "when Dalits will be whipped up from their current deep slumber, made to get angry and then fight to success."

In this issue we also have two special thematic literature surveys. The first is a critical analysis of Sita Ram Goel's book *Jesus Christ: An Artifice for Aggression* (1994). In this article Sebastian Athappilly argues in an uncompromising language that the attempt of Goel is one of manipulative scholarship, and holds that the attempted disproving the historicity of Jesus and painting Jesus as an instrument of aggression are resulting from certain hidden or unarticulated agendas such as "animosity against Christianity motivated by the manipulative designs of Hindutva *vadis*, disapproval of the Hindus' love for Jesus, and misplaced feelings of insecurity." The second special literature survey is by Douglas L. Berger and Irfan A. Omar on Gerald James Larson's book *India's Agony over Religion* (1995). After delineating the theories that Larson puts forth in analysing the historical as well as the contemporary religio-political situation of India, especially in terms of the "Old" and "New Indic Formations," the authors seem to favour the stand that the "Old," just because it is old, "cannot by any means be construed as the 'foundation' or 'essence' of India to satisfy some conservative representations of national identity," and contend that the "New Indic Formations" "should be full partners in the living multi-logue of the [Indian] culture." Although the methodological tools that Larson adopts in analysing the history of Indian thought are challenged as involving illogical leaps, the review authors hope that the "conversation Larson has initiated continues at various levels, as the future of India heavily depends on the 'on-going debate not unlike the one that has always been unfolding through the centuries.'"

Any attempt to understand and propagate the ideal of Hindutva (equated with "Indianness," as the present-day Hindu nationalists try to

impress upon the people of the country as a whole) could have been considered a praiseworthy one, if it were understood as a soul-search by all Indians to identify and commit themselves to the essential and unifying spirit of their cultures and religious life of the people of the Indian subcontinent. The question we are addressing here, however, is not only what Hindutva is in itself, but also what it is made to be. In a blatant disregard to its cultural and religious importance and validity, in the hands of vested interests the same has turned out to be a tool of fanaticism. Religious fanaticism is not only a misguided and exaggerated reaction to certain historical wrongs, but also a conscious but 'blind' adherence to the tenets of a religion or belief system that is made to be the axis of manipulating other adherents for certain vested interests which are diametrically opposed to the generally accepted and articulated central principles of relationship and communion among humans and with the transcendent cosmic reality.

This situation has to be squarely faced by all. Instead of blaming the darkness, the need of the hour is to light at least a tiny candle, the light of which will, in the course of time, enkindle the hope for the nation, and for the world at large. It is true that the contemporary India has plenty of politicians, but the tragedy is that India has very seldom witnessed the presence and activities of true statesmen. Indeed, it is the success of the vested interests in the political scene; but India as a nation should respond to this situation by empowering its collective consciousness. Let it lead the Indian citizens to pledge themselves to a committed transformation of the electoral consciousness of grass-root political communities, along with the educational system that sets the pace for the future. We need the rising of individual stalwarts who would be able to involve in selfless service for the welfare of the nation and the people of India. It demands a commitment to the positive cultural and religious ethos of Indian people, without subscribing to the sectarian and partisan manipulative politics. In order to make it a reality, especially in the context of widespread manipulative politics smeared with caste-creed-sectarianism, the media and the whole educational system have to involve in a longstanding concerted effort. This imposes the imperative that both the media and the educational system should remain outside the power-spectrum of the corrupt and corrupting political parties.

So also, India badly needs truly enlightened religious leaders. Only an enlightened religious leader will be able to lead others into enlightenment. In the context of plurality of religions in India, we need an enlightenment that would initiate the members of a particular religion to transcend its own physical boundaries, and reach out to others, in generosity and understanding. Such a reaching out to the co-pilgrims of other belief systems (and cultural patterns) would enkindle mutual trust and respect, leading to a sensitivity and appreciation of the values, virtues and practices of each other, even if any of them fails to understand the other completely.

Ultimately, the unbecoming strategies adopted by some political parties to enthrone a Hindu theocracy in India should initiate a positive response on the part of every Indian citizen. It demands a concerted, continued and committed action on the part of the people not to be guided by any partisan or sectarian policies, but to remain firm in the pluralistic cultural and religious ethos of the country. There shall be no sacrifice of the pluralistic cultural and religious matrix of India: it constitutes the uniqueness and strength of India as a people and as a nation. This calls on every Indian citizen to willingly recognize, respect and promote the values that each one considers to be central to his or her life without in any way disregarding and disrespecting the other. It is mutual openness, understanding, appreciation and promotion that are to be recognized as central to the life of Indian people, or of any people for that matter, who have the plurality of culture, thought, language and religion as their existential reality and national patrimony.

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