

## **HINDUTVA: THE SPIRIT OF HINDUISM**

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By Hindutva, I mean that which constitutes the very spirit, the essence of Hinduism. The fundamental question, however, that we have to address is: “What exactly would constitute this spirit?” For me, it is a million-dollar question that has flabbergasted many, including laymen as intellectuals, and even the leaders themselves. However, there should be nothing mysterious about it, unless one refuses to accept that Hinduism is as vast as the ocean and as limitless as the sky. The paradox seems to stare us in our face in the fact that the essence of Hinduism lies not only in the Hindu religious beliefs and practices but also beyond the narrow framework in which the Hindu religion is manifested in its popular form. It is paradoxical; as yet it is true of Hindutva, the spirit of Hinduism. It points to a typical form of transcendence intrinsic to Hinduism itself which I would designate as transcendental secularism. Secularism of this typical variety, it needs to be noted, is not an accidental feature of Hinduism, but is unavoidably associated with its intrinsic nature. Here lies the perennial attraction of Hindutva as well as its apparent mystery when it comforts us in our face along with its religious dogmas and practices. It needs to be discussed in some detail, which I propose to do in the sequel.

The secular ideas in Hinduism are found and are embedded in the very structure of what is popularly known as Hindu religion. Although it is true that different forms of worship, varieties of colourful temple constructed for the purpose of such worship of different gods and goddess and the well-known Brahmanical priests and preachers with their specific religious dogmas are no less conspicuous in Hinduism, it is at the same time worth-noting that from the very beginning of the Hindu civilization there has been another counter-trend running throughout this culture which cannot be depicted as narrowly religious by any stretch of imagination. This trend has been some times so predominant in its heritage that

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religious dogmas and forms of worship have been relegated in that context to a secondary status in principle as well as in practice. This is mainly due to a uniquely monistic type of thought prevailing in the Hindu culture from the time of its very inception in the Vedic days.<sup>1</sup> It will be difficult not to admit that Hinduism, in this form, is one of the unique manifestations in the human civilization of what I would paradoxically designate as a secular religion, and this aspect cannot be lost sight of when we try to pinpoint what Hindutva is.

A little elaboration of this idea may not be out of place here. In its monistic aspect, Hinduism presents to us a unique picture of a non-dogmatic religion. Is there any specific object of worship, any particular object of “ultimate concern” as distinguished from all others? Is there anything in particular which alone is intensively valued, considered holy or sacred, at the cost of any other value, entity or ideal in Hinduism, considered in its uniquely monistic aspect? Rather, one must admit that here everything is considered holy, every value is considered to be a matter of concern, every bit of life, personal or social, is considered sacred. Here lies its commitment, its “ultimate concern,” because of which I regard it to be the manifestation of a deeply religious attitude, but with a difference, of course. Sankara would put it in the most convincing manner as follows: “The whole world is a heavenly pleasure-garden, all trees are wish-fulfilling trees, all waters are as holy as the waters of Ganga, all activities are sacred, all words, whether religious or secular, constitute the Vedanta, the whole earth a place of pilgrimage like Varanasi, and the entire existence is centred on the ultimate reality, for one who has encountered Brahman, realizing the oneness, or better the non-duality, or existence” (*Samastam jagadeva nandanavanam, sarvepi kalpadrmah*, etc). This is a unique expression of transcendence in the whole world literature. Specific worship of gods and goddess, and definite dogmas or religion are relegated to a secondary position in this ideology. Moreover, it is pointed out that it makes little sense to talk of worshipping the one without a second, the infinite.

This, however, is not the whole story about Hinduism. In any case, *karmakānda*, the ritual, howsoever obsolete it might have been in its

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<sup>1</sup>Acarya Sri Govinda Chandra Pandey, *Ekam Sad Vipra bahudha vadanti*, Varanasi: Sampurnananda Sanskrit University, 1997.

particular details, is no less influential in the life of an average Hindu than the *jñānakānda*, the philosophical wisdom, and is rather on certain occasions like birth and marriage ceremonies or at the time of death found to have a distinct hold on the Hindu psyche in general. *Bhakti* or devotion, t̄āntric and yogic practices also add their respective colours to the multi-dimensional and multi-coloured character of Hinduism. In any case, it would be far from reality if Hinduism as it is envisaged in the Advaitic ideology of non-dualism is regarded as the one and only truth about Hinduism. The secular base is provided by the Advaita no doubt, but at the same time adherence to peculiar forms of worship of different deities and sticking to particular sectarian ways are also found to be at least as much prevalent as the ideas of what I designate as transcendental secularism, a typically Hindu philosophy of value.<sup>2</sup>

Hinduism is well known for its tolerance and accommodative nature.<sup>3</sup> This is no doubt intrinsic to Hinduism and is evident in the following statement of Lord Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: “Those who worship other gods, they also worship me and serve me, albeit not in accordance with the prescribed rules” (9.23). Here a unique attitude of tolerance and liberal attitude towards other forms of worship and other deities is quite evident. Moreover, one cannot lose sight of the open declaration of understanding and tolerance made by Gaudapādācārya and Śāṅkarācārya, the two great exponents of the Advaita school of thought, in respect of the dualist schools with whom they are supposed to come to a class from time to time.<sup>4</sup> It seems that tolerance is the natural concomitant of transcendental form of monism which provides a philosophical basis for this unique culture of transcendence, i.e., the Hindu culture; a deliberate striving from harmony (*samanvaya*) could also be detected in some other systems of thought in this tradition.<sup>5</sup> Ācārya Pattābhirāma Śāstri clearly

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<sup>2</sup>G. C. Nayak, *Understanding Religious Phenomenon*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997, 66-67.

<sup>3</sup>Balasubramanian, R. ed., *Tolerance in Indian Culture*, New Delhi: ICPR, 1992.

<sup>4</sup>See Nayak, “Tolerance in Advaita,” in Balasubramanian, R. ed., *Tolerance in Indian Culture*, 121-130.

<sup>5</sup>See Ācārya Pattābhirāma Śāstri, ed., *Sbara Bhasyam*, New Delhi, 1984, Introduction (in Sanskrit) on “*Samanvayātmaka panthā*” (the integrating path) of the Mimamsakas.

points out that the Mīmāṃsakas also take resort to the path of harmony and integration; to put it in his own words, “*Ayameva samarvayātmakah pantha mīmāṃsakairasritah.*”

It is significant to note that a culture that could meaningfully boast of the highest enlightenment had in actual practice descended at times to the lower manifestations of consciousness in the form of superstitions, fanaticism, bigotry and intolerance. There have been, however, reformers and spiritual leaders like Swami Vivekananda<sup>6</sup> and even political leaders of the unique stature like Gandhi,<sup>7</sup> who have given fresh impetus in the right direction, and in future we are only to carry this work with unflinching zeal so that this unique culture of transcendence does not lose itself in the mires of intolerance, superstitions, sectarian rigidities and hatred. It would be definitely wrong to identify Hindutva exclusively with any one of such manifestations.

Hinduism of the future generation can reasonably be expected to keep itself away from such superstitions and perversions, as far as possible, even if it need not free itself from rituals, methods of worship, specific meditation procedures and institutions peculiar to itself. Institutions and rituals, however, need not lead to any class amongst different religious denominations, provided the Hindu ideal of tolerance is taken seriously along side its diversification. This should be specially taken care of by Hinduism in the new millennium and I think that present generation youth will have a very important role to play in bringing tolerance and harmony to the forefront while dealing not only with all its own diverse sects and rituals but also with other religions which have become part of its own societal texture. They can be expected to give leadership in this regard with Ramakrishna’s ideology of “*Yata mat, tata path*” (as many religious views, so many paths) in their mind.<sup>8</sup> Even the *Śiva Mahima* also corroborates the view that the same reality is

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<sup>6</sup>Swami Vivekananda, *Rousing Call to Hindu Nation* (compiled by Eknath Ranade), Calcutta: Centenary Publications, 1963.

<sup>7</sup>R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966. See especially last chapter, “Yudhisthira returns.”

<sup>8</sup>See also Thakur Anukul Chandra, *Satyanusaran*, Deoghar: Satsang Publishing House, 1994, pages 20 and 21: “Views may be many even as many as there are people. Still, Dharma cannot be many... In fact, there is no opposition in the views – different views, the same way – feeling one in many forms.”

approachable through different ways according to different tastes (*reīnām vaicitryād*) of the people. The same tolerance should be visible in the approach of Hinduism to other world-religions, too. That this is a special feature of Hindutva cannot be denied even by its worst critic.

Hindutva may take the leadership in the future in the sense that it may show the way how to co-exist with others not only peacefully but also by doing positive good to others in promoting the cause of their respective religions which, if practised in right earnest, can ultimately lead to the highest. If it is really our conviction, as it should be, that there is no real difference in respect of the highest to be attained by different religions and that there is only a difference in the path, not in the destination, then we should be able to demonstrate our conviction in and through our practice. Certainly, any idea of converting others by some sort of forcible conversion to our point of view is out of question so far as Hindutva is concerned, for that is an imposition of one's own ideology on others to which Hindus, at least true Hindus, are allergic to the core.

Is dogma intrinsic to religion? I do not think so. Certainly it is not so always and in all cases; at least it cannot be regarded as a necessary feature of Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> Not a mere glib talk about but a rigorous practice of love and tolerance in the light of the teaching of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā* holds the key for the growth of religion devoid of dogma in future. Hinduism can pave the way for a religious harmony through open dialogues with other world-religions to be carried on without rigid dogmas, but not without faith-commitments, of course.

Here I would like to draw the attention of the learned scholars to the observations of the renowned Ācārya, late Chandrasekharendra Saraswatī of Śrī Kāmakoti Peetham Kanchipuram, who was revered during his lifetime by one and all. While talking of "Religion and Religious Practices," the Ācārya gives us a basic principle to be followed in this regard: "If a thing is good basically, but for some cause evil resulted from it," says the Ācārya, "the sane view is to retain the thing for its good and to eliminate the root cause of the evil result." He further admonishes that

we should first of all stop criticizing and finding fault with other religions and religious sects. We should examine ourselves first and

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<sup>9</sup>See G. C. Nayak, *Understanding Religious Phenomenon*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997.

see if we have lived up to the requirements of our religions, before we proceed to criticize the other man's religion. Religion is intended to elevate human beings spiritually and to bring them nearer and nearer to God. Before we begin to advise others, we should conquer *kāma* (petty desires), *krodha* (anger) and *dvesa* (hatred). We should approach all religions with a spirit of humility and appreciate the good points in all religions.<sup>10</sup>

Though a Hindu Ācārya of eminence, his eulogistic homage to the Buddha is worthy of note.

The life story of the Buddha evokes in us peace, compassion and bliss. The innumerable images of the Buddha found in all parts of the country also produce in us the triple effect of *śānti* (peace), *karunā* (compassion) and *ānanda* (bliss). Somehow, an impression has been gained that Buddhism stood for atheism. We were also told by some historians that this religion was driven out of India. But the numerous Buddhist works in Sanskrit and Pali, and the Ashokan edicts have revealed to us the nobility of the Awakened One (the Buddha) and have filled us with pride that this great soul was born in India.<sup>11</sup>

This is a typically Hindu attitude towards other religions and an appraisal by Hinduism of the masters of other religions. This can be easily extended to the Hindu appraisal of Islam and Christianity, too. As a matter of fact, another genius amongst Hindu religious leaders of the twentieth century, Thākur Anukul Chandra, founder of the Satsang Movement, has given a call, a clarion call for that matter, not to make any distinction between the Buddha and Jesus, on the one hand, and between Kṛṣṇa and Muhammad, on the other. "They are one and the same, don't you know?" He asks: "*Eki tara tui janis re!*" This, once again, is a typical Hindu appraisal of other religions and religious leaders, and this is very much in keeping with genuine Hindutva, the essential spirit of Hinduism.

The crucial point at issue for us, however, is how can any one, any ordinary human being for that matter, emulate the spirit of such Ācāryas and religious leaders like Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswatī and Thākur

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<sup>10</sup>Cited in Balasubramanian, R. ed., *Tolerance in Indian Culture*, New Delhi: ICPR, 1992, 14-15.

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Balasubramanian, R. ed., *Tolerance in Indian Culture*, New Delhi: ICPR, 1992, 16.

Anukul Chandra, in one's religious life and dealings with other religions? The point intimately connected with this is whether such a catholic spirit would not dilute perhaps our faith-commitments when they are expected to be taken most seriously and whether it would not end up in some sort of frivolity in religion, at least in case of those who scarcely know how serious a religious life of commitment and dedication is supposed to be. It is, however, a fact to be noted that the catholicity of spirit does not mar in anyway the seriousness of religious commitments of eminent religious leaders such as Ācārya Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswatī and Thākur Sri Anukul Chandra. The catholicity of spirit has been taken here as something natural to religion in view of the fact that we are supposed to transcend petty desires, anger and hatred if we are to live a truly religious life, according to the Ācārya. The problem, a Herculean one for that matter, lies in initiating the sectarian leaders and their followers in this direction when in most cases they display as a rule, bigotry and fanaticism in propagating the ideology of a particular sect or a particular religious group and stake their whole life and existence for achieving victory at any cost on their opponents. Dogma is the be-all and end-all in many such cases, and the question whether there can be religion without dogma is, therefore, relevant and significant in this context and also in the context of a truly religious life in general.

In religion, as it seems, we encounter a unique phenomenon of a total commitment and deduction to that which is considered to be the highest and the best along with a genuine need to uplift the humanity at large in the direction of that ultimate goal. I am, of course, not referring here to aberrations of religion which might have played havoc at times in the history of humankind. A truly religious person is guided and inspired by what I would call a "unique concern for the weakling," a concern for all those who are weak in some respect or the other. The entire life of a truly religious person is orientated towards the alleviation of the sufferings of the weak and downtrodden. Different sorts of weakness may be found in different persons, groups, or nations needing adequate treatment at the hands of a truly religious man. Such weaklings may belong to the class of rich or poor, learned or illiterate, and even the powerful or the powerless. The concern of the truly religious man is with the common weaknesses and drawbacks which cause suffering to the humanity at large, and this is the sense in which I have designated it as a "concern for the weakling." A

king from this point of view may be considered a weakling in a certain context and may benefit immensely from the contact of a truly religious person. The life history of Ashoka may be cited as a case in point. This “concern for the weakling” could be a whole-time passion with the religious man. Somewhere arrogance of the rich and the powerful perhaps, elsewhere absolute depression of the down-trodden and the desolate, and inveterate hatred of one for the other, egocentricity in severe form, etc., could take any form of weakness, of course, including obvious moral and spiritual failings of men/women. Is there any end to such contingencies in human situation! The only thing which needs to be remembered in this connection is that the term ‘weakling’ here does not refer to any specific class of person, groups, or nations. The reference is to the inherent human weakness, wherever and in whatever form it may be found, even despite appearances to the contrary at times. This may be regarded as a sort of therapeutic conception of religion. It is significant that Chandrakirti in his *Prasannapada* 18.6 refers to the Buddha as a great doctor (*Mahavaidyaraja*) who administers medicine in accordance with the specific nature of the disease of the people. This is the sense in which God has been regarded as “*Dīnabandhu*” (a friend of the poor and the weak) in Hinduism. Apart from this, Guru Nanak has declared that he is a friend of the lowliest (“*Nīca andar nīca jāti nīchihu ati nīcu, Nānaku tin kai sanga sāthi badiā siu kyā ris*”). So also, Buddha’s ‘*mahākaruṇā*’ points in the same direction. In the Bible, Jesus, the Son of God, is well-known to have a definite soft corner for the “weakling” and prophet Mohammed’s concern for the poor and the weak is no less conspicuous. Vivekananda, one of the great leaders of Hinduism and an undisputable exponent of Hindutva, is known to have given a call to treat the poor and the illiterate as the object of veneration (*Daridra devo bhava, mūrkhā devo bhava*).<sup>12</sup> This is a regular feature in the world religions which needs to be highlighted. As a typical exponent of Hinduism, I myself also would assess and appraise religion, in general, and all world-religions in this light. The concern for the weak in the religious person seems to find its inspiration from the realization that one has encountered the highest and the best in one’s life and that this unique experience needs to be shared with others who are less fortunate. It is significant that these features are

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<sup>12</sup>See Vivekananda, *Rousing call to Hindu Nation*, 93.



found both in Godless religions and religions having faith in different types of divinity or Godhead in the context of world religions.

William James has made some interesting observations in the context of aberrations found in religion which need to be discussed at some length. He points out that

religious after a fashion, they (Men's minds) yet have many other things in them besides their religions, and unholy entanglements and associations inevitably obtain. The baseness so commonly charged to religion's account is, thus, almost all of them, not chargeable at all to religion proper, but rather to religion's wicked practical partner, the spirit of corporate dominion. And the bigotries are most of them in their turn chargeable to religion's wicked intellectual partner, the spirit of dogmatic dominion, the passion for laying down the law in the form of an absolutely closed theocratic system. The ecclesiastical spirit in general is the sum of these two spirits of dominion.<sup>13</sup>

Though there is no doubt some truth here in what James has said, it is, however, only a partial truth. Instead of putting the entire blame at the door of the ecclesiastical spirit, one should take note of certain intrinsic features of religion proper and a possible infiltration of bigotry in and through those very features. It seems to be a significant feature about religion that there cannot be a religion without a total commitment or devotion to that which it considers to be the highest and the best. It is, therefore, nothing strange or extraordinary that a religious person or a religious institution should have one's or its own total commitments. One such commitment or devotion may have its origin in some such Gospel as that of Mark, "Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength," and another may get one's inspiration from the invocation of Sri Krsna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* to take resort to Him, forsaking all considerations of dharma (*sarva dharmān partityajya māmekam śaranam braja*). Even one may be said to be committed to tolerance, to the point of view that all the diverse paths of different religions lead to the same goal, as is the case in Hinduism in one of its typical manifestations, or, on the other hand, one may be committed exclusively to one particular path. In this sense, the life

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<sup>13</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: The Modern Library, 1929, 330-31.

of a truly religious man is a typically dedicated life; there is not only a plain concern here, but also an ultimate concern and commitment without which it cannot be regarded as religious. This ultimate concern, leading to a total commitment or a typical dedication to its cause can easily make room for bigotry and fanaticism, when extended too far beyond the reasonable limits.

Fanaticism is a sort of misguided and exaggerated reaction. There may be difference of opinion regarding someone being misguided or having an excessive reaction, of course, but when it turns out to be resulting in a meaningless destruction of life, for example, can the reaction be regarded as any thing but exaggerated and excessive? Is it not a fact that human life at least is intrinsically valuable irrespective of any other consideration and that if innocent people are destroyed unnecessarily should there be something intrinsically wrong or defective in our approach itself?

While it is a definite virtue to be committed to one's faith, fanaticism and bigotry cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be regarded as virtuous. It should be borne in mind that an appreciation of the opponent's point of view and of other persons' commitment to their own faith is a virtue which needs to be cultivated deliberately. Tolerance is not merely a virtue of the weak; it can only be a virtue of the strong. This tolerance is a necessary feature of Hindutva, understood in its proper perspective.

Institution, for all we know, is usually a vital part of religion, and religious institutions, it is true, have been responsible for perpetuating much of the malevolent and wicked practices. But wickedness does not lie so much in the institutionalisation of religion as in the bigotry and pigheadedness of the maniacs. A devotee is not a maniac and religious attitude is not properly represented by the attitude of a maniac; advocacy of Hindutva, it needs to be reiterated, is not and cannot meaningfully fit into, the manifesto of a maniac.