

SOTERIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN HINDU RELIGION AND CULTURE*

Jacob S. Plamthodathil

Introduction

The comment that 'India lives in fifty centuries'¹ seems to summarise the characteristic of infinite variation one comes across in the nature of Hindu Religion and Indian culture. The contribution to religious principles and practices of Hinduism came from a wide variety of sources, peoples and spreads over centuries of human existence on the subcontinent. It has yielded a spectrum of an highly enriched heritage of colorful and complex aspects of religion and culture. Therefore, the task of identifying soteriological perspectives in every sect, school and individual variation will remain incomplete. For the present analysis, the perspectives are identified through the blending of the multiplicity of doctrines, sects and practices. They lead to the well-known characteristic of Hinduism, namely 'Unity in Diversity'

The essence of Hindu religion is known as *Sanatana Dharma*. The impression created by the term in general is that it is a religion relating to conservative and orthodox religious practices including caste rules and customs governing every day life which every orthodox Hindu must observe. The concept *Sanatana* stands for imperishable religious truth and practices which remain eternal, embracing the whole human society rather than being a sectarian religion. It is a broad and comprehensive religious concept covering various shades of religious approaches like *Karma Marga*, *Bhakti Marga* and *Jnana Marga* on the one hand and dealing with practical rules and regulations of daily life in relation to individuals and society, like *varnasarmadharma*, rites, rituals and rules of conduct handed down in *Sruti* and *Smruti*. It acknowledges teachers of various traditions like Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhava, Vallabha, Tulasidas, Chaitanya Jnanesvar, Tukaram, Mirabai and others as authoritative sources. The concept of God and the modes of worship also could have wide variation from the impersonal Brahman to personal gods and incarnations of God through prophets and saints of the contemporary era nurturing numerous creeds, cults and sects spread all over India. It is capable of accommodating any number of diverse systems of religious thought and

*This article was first published by *Journal of Dhrama*, Vol.XII. No. 4.

¹.Krishnaswami, 'Indus Valley to Indira Gandhi' film commentary.

practices and yet upholding the *sanatana*-concept of truth which justifies the idea of eternal religion.

Soteriological context

An all comprehensive, complex, accommodative and truth oriented *sanatana* religion cannot subscribe to just one restrictive soteriological idea involving only one level of religious concept leading to a 'one-man, one religion and one-God' syndrome usually found in historical religions like Christianity, and Islam. The soteriological context found in Hindu religion, Indian sociology and culture encourages a 'multi-man, multi- religion, multi-God' response. Therefore, we are able to find a number of soteriological perspectives meeting the needs of different types of people. The present survey is limited to anthropological, psychological, ethical, theological, liberational, cosmological, eschatological and modern perspectives.

I

PERSPECTIVES

The Sanskrit word, *Dharma*, which comes closer to the meaning of religion is commonly used to refer to religion or morality according to the context of its use. In both senses, experience and actions of individuals in relation to society is emphasized. Man in his search for divinity has to purify himself through his physical, moral and ritualistic actions and experiences. The spiritual emancipation of man in Hindu religion with an inseparable socio-cultural meaning may be understood better by viewing the problem from an understanding of the concept of man, God, world, morality, etc. which is offered to meet diverse needs of human being.

1. Anthropocentric Perspective

One of the most important soteriological perspectives can be gained from the concept and understanding of man provided by Hindu religion, Indian sociology and culture. The concept of man in Indian thought may be summarised as follows²:

²Summarised from S. Radhakrishnan and P.T. Raju (Ed.) ,THE CONCEPT OF MAN "The Concept of man in Indian Thought" by P.T. Raju (Lincoln, Nebraska: John Co. 1972), pp. 309-19.

(a) The idea that man is *margayayin* (traveller, wayfarer) became popular after the spread of the Buddha's message of the doctrine of the Way (*marga*) as one of the four Noble Truths. Later on *Jnana Marga*, *Bhakti Marga* and *Karma Marga* became more acceptable providing a wider choice for man. All schools consider man as pilgrim, the journey being from the world of objective reality to a world of inward reality. It is a process to which man must pay serious attention.

(b) In the Mimamsa school of thought (the philosophy of the first two parts of the Veda) the concept of *Dharma* is the most important idea. The central thought is *Karma* (action) and is considered as the law and nature of the universe. What binds man and the universe together is karma and in this context Karma is the same as *Dharma*. *Dharma* is the essential nature of man. The realization of *Dharma* which is the highest reality is salvation.

(c) Man goes after the attainment of values of this world and the next. The physical body is shed after death but the values are meant for *Atman* (self) which continues to exist even after death. In this knowing the true nature of self is salvation of man.

(d) The highest rational life (*Buddhi*) is considered by Indian schools of thought as more than reason to assume ethical and aesthetic dimensions. The philosophy of Samkhya and Bhagavad-Gita views the highest rational life as *Sattvik* existence which forms the ideal for man.

(e) It is generally considered by all schools that the highest aim of man should be to disentangle himself from *Prakrti* and journey towards complete realization of *Purusha* as his existence. Advaita thought holds the view that the Brahman is supra-personal and the individual man should endeavour to realize his oneness with it. Ramanuja differs and considers the Brahman as a personal God and is different from individual souls. Thus we may find variations in the details of concepts but the general trend is the same.

(f) The fundamental tendency in Hindu thought is to encourage man to discover the true nature of the 'self' or 'I' which is considered as the inwardness of the physical body. The activity of the inwardness is consciousness and the ultimate aim of man is to purify the consciousness adequately and merge it with pure consciousness which is the ultimate reality.

(g) Another interesting observation one can make is the idea that Matter can be derived from the Infinite Spirit through intermediary steps in

the process, namely, the finite spirit, mind and life. On the other hand, the reverse process is also possible, that is, life, mind and the finite spirit can reach perfect purification for enabling itself to form the Infinite Spirit. In this context, the soteriological aim of man is to hasten the 'reverse process' of uniting with the Infinite Spirit. Spiritual realization became the major aim of the traditional Hindu educational system leaving the search for truth and search for salvation as identical activities.

So, what is man? Man is considered as the most highly privileged form of life which can move up to the Divine Unity considered as the Infinite Spirit, Pure consciousness or any other idea of ultimate reality on the concept of God (Impersonal or Personal). There is no question of a debate as to whether man is *atman* (Spirit), *jiva* (soul), mind, life or physical body. Man may be considered as an integrated form of all these and the soteriological perspective should be to discover its spiritual significance.

In the socio-cultural context, man is placed in terms of the *varnashrama* system. The oft repeated story of creation treats the creation as a sacrifice in which the evolved person is the victim whose body-parts are cut up and offered as oblations in the holy fire. It is mentioned that the mouth of the victim became the Brahman caste, two arms the *Kshatriya*, two thighs the *Vaishyas* and two feet generated the *Sudra* caste. The complexity of the nature and the origin of the caste system does not permit a clear cut answer as to the exact timing and stages of its development. However, no body can dispute the religious endorsement it has received. The hierarchical set up of the caste system has also obtained a soteriological favour, especially for the man who wants to undertake the 'inward journey' of becoming a purified self and ultimately getting merged with the Divine Self itself. The innumerable subdivisions of castes and the outcastes in various order of purity, makes the spiritual journey difficult unless one is equipped with the disposition to follow the *Jnana Marga* or *Bhakti Marga* which could help one to cross the barriers of caste more easily. For the common man the hierarchy of caste system has a hierarchy of spiritual purity connected with it, the lower and being that of the outcaste and the higher end being that of the Brahmin. The law of Karma and the process *punarjanma* (rebirth) are also believed to be operating under such implications. A man has earned his position in the caste hierarchy due to his past deeds (previous birth) and should endeavour to better it for being reborn at a higher level, in the next birth. The divinely instituted *chaturvarna* has to be maintained in its purest form and *varnasankara* (intercaste marriages) has

to be denounced (Gita-1:41-43). Then again, the three *gunas* (quality) of nature, namely, *satva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are linked with the hierarchy of the caste system. The quality of *satva* dominates a Brahmin, that of *rajas* in a *Kshatriya*, a mixture of *rajas* and *tamas* in a *Vaishya* and *tamas* in a *Sudra* and so on. Each one must perform his duties according to the predominant *guna* of his caste (to a Brahmin discipline, patience and uprightness, a *Kshatriya*-bravery, steadiness and generosity, *Vaishya*-agricultural operations and trade, *Sudra*-service to the higher castes). By doing so one can uplift oneself to higher and purer status during the next birth.

The system of four *ashramas* also defines man and directs his soteriological efforts in terms of the stages in life. The *brahmcharya* covers the student-life *grihasthasrama* indicates the stage of the family man, the *vanaprastha* stage denotes compulsory retirement for purifying oneself to take up renunciation, and finally, the stage of *sanyasa* finds man practising the life of an ascetic freeing himself from all obligatory actions. The hierarchical set up of the *ashramas* are made to help man to follow a path of spiritual progress by reaching a stage of spiritual freedom towards the end of a normal life span. The practice of *varnashramadharma* in its various forms is meant for the good of the individual and society and is integrated with Hindu religion and social order of Indian life, even permeating into the life of all Indians in some way or other irrespective of religious affiliations. The observance of *varnashramadharma* adds momentum of man's inward journey towards self-realization and union with God the Ultimate Reality.

The anthropocentric perspective indicates that though man is a combination of physical and spiritual reality, the discovery of the true nature of his inner self through various means becomes his uncompromising quest for salvation. The true knowledge of self completes his journey back to God.

2. Psychological Perspective

The *Upanishadic* teachings point out that there is one universal self that is within us and undoubtedly exists. However, a distinction between the individual soul and the supreme soul has been made as the concept got more clarified. The individual soul (embodied soul) is in bondage due to ignorance and in the absence of true knowledge of the essential nature of the self. True knowledge is concealed by the experience of *Maya* which may be considered as a mysterious power of the supreme soul. The distinction between the embodied soul and the supreme soul is only in the sense that the individual

soul is endowed with a body, mind and sensorial capabilities which consists of sensual pleasures and the state of ignorance. The endowment of body, mind and sensory facilities keeps the soul in bondage bringing in misery and sorrow. But the moment he realizes that spiritual unity is the only reality, he becomes free and gets liberated.

Viewing the embodied soul in a psychological framework, we find that the body consists of three parts, namely, gross, subtle and causal. The gross body with its sensational facilities, is made of five elements of ether, wind, heat, water and earth. The subtle body (*sukshma sarira*) is the gross body blended with a psychological mechanism of sensation, mental faculties and breath (*prana*). The whole mechanism promotes *karmashraya* which accompanies the soul in its migrations of births known as *samsara*, till he achieves. The store of actions built up during each birth continues to be with the soul till the day of final self realization. The embodied soul, mind and its physical body are all united in the concept of the Absolute or Pure consciousness which alone is truly real.

Ontologically, the individual soul is identical with the supreme soul in terms of the nature of the essential spiritual self. Empirically, the individual soul which is embodied in the form of body, mind and sensory capabilities, is subordinate to the Supreme Soul (*Paramatman*). As already mentioned, the embodied soul consists of three parts, namely- gross body (five elements), subtle body (five sense of knowledge, five sense of action, Intellect, individuation and mind) and casual body (essence of actions, and impressions (*vasanas*) which determines rebirths). The empirical soul keeps on migrating from birth to birth through the mechanism of its psychological make up. In this context, the soteriological question is to find release from *sansara* arising from *karmashraya* produced by the embodied soul and its psychological process.

3. Ethical Perspective

The foundation of Hindu Ethical system is formed by a three-fold scheme of spiritual life³. In the system, morality cannot be divorced from spirituality. Morality has a positive role in the promotion of spiritual life. The

³A detailed discussion on the threefold scheme is found in *The Ethics of the Hindus* by S.K. Maitra (University of Calcutta, 1963).

three stages consist of objective morality, subjective morality and transcendental morality.

The social ethics is directed by the system of *varnashramadharmā* which implies the fulfillment of one's obligation to others according to one's *varna* or the inherited social class and as per one's *ashrama* or the specific stage in life. The duties of *varna* and *ashrama* are considered as relative duties since they depend upon one's birth in a social class, station in life and related capacities of the individual. For example, the duties of a *Kshatriya* are obligatory to whoever is a *Kshatriya* and the duties of *brahmacharya* are related to that stage in life in addition to the placement of the individual to a social class by his birth. The relative duties or *varnashramadharmā* covers only one part of moral life. There is another code of universal duties which are obligatory on every individual irrespective of his birth and station in life, known as *sadharanadharmas*. Thus he has duties to his society which has given him advantages according to his social placement based on birth and station in life and also universal duties to fulfill his indebtedness to mankind. The system of *varnashramadharmā* and *sadharanadharmā* as considered as objective morality or morality indicated by a code of external acts leading to conformity of external behaviours. However, objective morality is not adequate itself for spiritual progress. Man has to engage in the acts of purification of mind (*chittasuddhi*) for gaining inner strength and for subordinating in the lower impulses of the natural man. So the Hindu ethics offers a system *chittasuddhi* through external and internal aids.

The search for the highest stage of spiritual life cannot stay satisfied with subjective morality either. The threefold scheme provides a goal that leads to the ultimate end or the stage of transcendental morality. We find this end underlying in Patanjali's Yoga, Sankara's *moksha*, Ramanuja's *bhakti* and Buddha's concept of *nirvana*. The culminating stage of morality is the stage of transcendental life which is a level of spiritual life where the individual is free from the pressures both obligatory duties and the rigors of internal purification. (And yet, both objective morality and subjective morality are necessary for moving on to this stage of moral freedom). It is conceived as the stage of the spirit of morality in which the good is not something which is to be accomplished through obligatory duties of external acts but the good flows naturally through his won life as the function of participation in the life of the Absolute.

The exact nature of the absolute-life is conceived differently by different school of the thought. The *Nyaya* system considers it as the negation of all that is empirical while Sankara points it out as a kind of intuition. Ramanuja and others picture it as intuition culminating in devotion, worship and love which can enrich the empirical life bringing with it a new dimension of absolute significance. It may also be considered as the intuition of the Self or that of *Prakrti* and *Purusha* or a step of knowledge which doesn't require the distinction of *Jnata* (Knower) or object (*jneya*) naming it as a kind of pure experience itself. At this stage, morality gains freedom from the bondage of duty and a state of absolute freedom is reached. The new state of freedom transcends all bindings of rules and regulations and abides in the external reality of the Absolute without caring for the successes or failures of actions by giving it a dimension of timeless reality. Whatever may be the differences among various schools of thought about the exact nature of the transcendental freedom of morality, it is important to note its soteriological significance. The journey of morality beings with objective morality, passes through subjective morality and finally reaches the state for transcendental morality if the traveller persistently follows the path. The achievement of freedom, the bondage of duty and reaching the transcendental level of morality is the soteriological consequences of the goal of Hindu Ethics.

4. Theological Perspective

The concept of God in Hindu Thought and Culture can yield another area of soteriological perspective. One finds numerous concepts of God in the beliefs and practices of Hindu religion, ranging from a philosophical understanding of monism to the multiplicity of personal gods supported by the idolatry of the popular devotions of the masses. It is not within the scope of this paper to deal with numerous ideas of God contributed by Hindu religious culture. However, it is necessary to have brief analysis of the concept as a reference point for the discussion. For convenience and brevity, let us summarise the various ideas into the concept of Brahman (the Absolute), *Paramatman* (the Supreme Self) and *Bhagwan* (the Personal Lord).⁴ The concept of God as Brahman the Absolute, reveals God as the ultimate reality

⁴A clear analysis of the concept may be found in 'God in Hinduism: Brahman, Paramatman and Bhagwan' by P. Fallon, *Religious Hinduism* by Jesuit Scholars, (Allahabad. St. Paul's, 1964), Chapter 6, pp. 73-81

which is beyond all multiplicity and divisions. It is the 'Ground and Principle' of all forms of existence. It is an impersonal concept which at its best can serve as an object of meditation rather than a powerful personhood for solving individual problems. Even so, it is from this 'Ground and Principle' that man comes from and to which he hopes to return to. The origin and existence of man comes from Brahman and man ought to strive to discover the understanding of the '*advaita*' nature of existence. When he gains this knowledge and experience, the return journey gets completed and the soteriological goal becomes a reality.

In the idea of God as *Paramatman* (Supreme Self), is conceived as the subjective Principle which is the root of all selves. Here again the theologians and philosophers may differ in their idea of the exact nature of *Paramatman* but it is the infinite base of our finite self which is considered in Hindu thought and culture as a spark of the infinite. In this context the spiritual goal of man should be to realize the Supreme Self by using various techniques of spiritual discipline. Ultimately, the *Atman* has to be perceived as the changeless *Paramatman*, the very principle of selfhood itself. In soteriological terms, man looks within, into his selfhood in a disciplined manner in order to realize its true nature as found in *Paramatman*.

In practical term and practice, the vast majority of Hindus conceive God as the Supreme object of man's worship and devotion, perhaps, best referred to as *Bhagwan*, the Personal Lord. God is to be reached in a personal way by establishing the relationship and devotion in whatever form one can find him in a personal way. *Bhagwan* descends to man in various forms. *Bhagwan* is man's personal lord to whom he must surrender all he has. He may be experienced as a friend and lover of the devotee. He is gracious to all who worship him truly and reveals his love and compassion unreservedly in times of need. He is the Personal Lord and Saviour of man and assumes any form he wants to for the salvation of mankind. The Lord comes down to man and brings the idea of Brahman and *Paramatman* in personal terms, close to human nature. Ardent worship, unqualified devotion and complete self surrender to a Personal Lord can lead to a union with him which eventually will mean the realization of the absolute.

A positive response of man to God has a soteriological consequences whether it is conceived as a return journey of realization of the absolute (*Brahman*) as the 'Ground and Principle' of existence, or seen as the process of reaching *Paramatman* through self realization or knowing God as *Bhagwan*

at a personal level through devotion, self surrender and worship. In all these concepts, man's goal is to reach God which implies his salvific behaviour and in Hindu thought and culture, salvific behaviour heavily rests on man's attempt to reach God at a personal or impersonal level, though it must be admitted that God descends to man as a saviour at the personal level

5. Cosmological Perspective

The relation, which is conceived as existing between nature and God, and theories which treat the problems of creation also will provide a soteriological perspective. The philosophical speculations dealing with the problem of creation began as early as the Vedic period. The Rig Vedic reference to creation as an act of sacrifice by Gods which evolved a person who was born from the primeval person. The evolved being was offered as oblation to the primeval person and from those limbs, all natural objects, gods, men and animals were formed. In the *Nasadiya* hymn of *Rigveda* (X 129) creation is described as coming from unmanifest waters by the germ of desire arising in the mind of the Supreme Being, called 'that one'. Whatever is the mechanism of creation the motive of creation brought out the recognition of the First Principle which was conceived at a personal level as *Prajapati* in the earlier stages of religious thought and later *Atman*. Then the idea of Primeval Being creating the universe and entering into it as the first born was developed. The *Upanishadic* idea that Brahman is wholly present in every living thing clearly brought in pantheistic idea of creation. Other ideas like *Hiranyagarbha*, Brahma as the creator who is born from Brahman, the Absolute also became prevalent in the story of creation. Then, again, the idea of a kind of evolution taking place from the interaction of *Purusha* and *Prakrti* and such other theories are presented. But one thing is acknowledged as certain, that is, Brahman is the only reality and the empirical reality is the clock around it. The embodied soul did not exist before creation. Creation explains the identity of *Atman* (Brahman) and the Universe by applying the principle of causation by providing a significant status to empirical reality. In another sense, the evolution of the universe was a self-evolution of *Atman* which entered into it on creation. The idea of periodic dissolution and creation also became popular later. The cycle of births and deaths (creation and dissolution) is without beginning and end. Irrespective of the variations in the theory of creation (particularly, the process of creation) the Hindu thought has the dominant idea that the ultimate reality from which creation takes place is present in all forms of existence in the universe and these forms gets dissolved

either individually or collectively in the course of time so that it can go back to its original form for being created again (the cycle goes on and on). The soteriological significance is that all forms of creation or empirical reality goes back to ultimate reality, and this can be hastened by individual effort of dissolution.

6. Eschatological Perspective

Right from the Vedic period, the idea of immortality of the soul and its identification with the supreme soul has been a fairly dominant eschatological thought in Hindu religion. It is the gross body that is destroyed at the time of death, but the soul remains indestructible and it is identical with the universal spirit. However, the embodied soul which doesn't have any spiritual enlightenment has to go through *Sansara*, consisting of a number of births in order to achieve the final emancipation. This doctrine of *Punarjanma* (transmigration of soul-rebirth) is very dominant in Hindu Thought and Indian Culture and crosses over to other religions as well. In *Brihadarnyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads*, we find an eschatological programme known as the doctrine of the five fires (*panchagni vidya*). The theory tells that on death of man the soul goes to heaven in a very fine form protected by waters and faith which is interpreted as subtle body and *karma*. The soul returns after a short period, having been sacrificed by the gods in the fires or heaven, the atmosphere, earth, man and woman, the soul returns to its earthly birth. There are other theories like *Devayana* or path of the gods which leads to *Brahmaloka*. Another path is known as *Pitrayana* (path of the fathers) prescribed for souls who have accumulated good *karma* but have not received full enlightenment. On death they go to the moon where they get reward for their good work spending times in the company of God, then they get reborn on earth. The third path is meant for sinners who have to be reborn without getting a chance to spend time in the company of gods. They may be reborn in the form of animals or in a caste of men who are equally degraded. Among these who have done some good works will be reborn in higher castes. The law of *karma* rules the eschatological scheme of events, though there are variations in the theories of explaining as to how it operates and what is the path the souls follow after death.

Bhagavad-Gita adds more theories of eschatological system. There are some people who do not depart on death to *pitrayana* or *devayana* and their souls enter the atmospheric world *bhuvan loka* and they remain there as disembodied ghosts (*preta*), because of the lack of proper *shraddha* rites

performed by their children. The deceased fathers who do not get proper offerings of *pinda-odoka* (food and water) may also fall to lower levels of rebirth. The wicked sinners are destined for *naraka* (hell) and get tormented for a long time before they are reborn. Another place where the wicked are thrown to by Krishna is *patala*, below the earth and devilish men are hurled down forever into 'devilish' womb (*asuri yoni*). Then again those who worship *devas* will go to them, and those who worship ghosts will find a place among them and those who worship Krishna as the universal spirit will enter into his being. Those who are dominant with *satva guna* will go upwards and become gods, others with *rajas* will be born as men and those who are with *tamas* will be born as animals or in lower forms. According to the Gita, if one remembers Krishna at the time of death, he is absorbed in Him (8:5.6).

The eschatological determination according to Hindu Thought and prevailing Indian culture, is fundamentally based on the *samskara* (accumulation of the essence of deeds in previous births), the karma of the current-life and the type of spiritual discipline one follows including the object of worship. The salvific significance is that the quality of previous lives, the behavioral content of present life and the choice and practice one makes on the spiritual path will determine the future of the individual after death.

7. Liberational Perspective

It is generally accepted that the existence of human form carries along with it a kind of bondage. The main bondage recognized in Hindu religion is that of endless succession of rebirth in this world of misery and sorrow. It must also be remembered that a Hindu life is governed by minute rules and regulations relating to religious life and good conduct which were laid down in *Dharma Shastra* to preserve the socio-religious system. Disobedience to these rules and regulations may be counted as religious offences or sins. At the level of day to day life, man should uphold both *varnashramadharma* and *sadharanadharma*, which will lead him to the path of liberation.

The main object of Upanishadic sages and their spiritual and intellectual pursuits was to find a life of eternal peace and happiness by liberating themselves from the fetters of rebirth. That spiritual freedom and happiness cannot be gained simply by finding a place in heaven (which is not eternal), but by realization of the true nature of *Atman* which will bring in liberation of souls from the bondage of the cycles of birth and the worldly miseries. On the

positive side, the idea of liberation in reaching deathlessness (*amritatva*). There are sectarian concepts of reaching this state by entering *Vaikunta*, the abode of Vishnu, *Kailasa*, the abode of Siva, *Goloka*, the abode of Krishna, etc. But these are considered to be of limited views of liberation, perhaps meant for people who are unable to grasp the philosophical knowledge of the realization of the oneness with the Brahman and all reality. The direct knowledge of *Atman* and its oneness with Brahman brings true liberation. The goal of man's search for knowledge is to know Brahman and to realize that he is Brahman itself in whose Supreme Self everything is included. Once such knowledge is gained one is truly liberated from not only rebirth but also from the bondage of joy and sorrow as well. It is not negating simply the individual self but it is the affirmation of the true nature of self. There are divergent views as to the time of liberation, that is whether it is possible while one is alive-*jivanmukta* (Sankara's view) or whether it is possible to obtain the deliverance only after death *videhamukti* (Ramanuja's theory). A compromise theory is also available propounding the opinion that *kramamukti* (release by stages) is also possible.

The Gita emphasizes the positive side of liberation implying *parama santi* or perfect peace (6:15), indicated by a release from evil and rebirth. The embodied one is freed from birth, death, decay and pain and attains immortality (14:20). In Hindu religion, the most commonly known and accepted ways of liberation are *karmamarga*, *bhaktimarga* and *jnanamarga*. A balanced practice of all three is also possible (7:17, 6:46,47).

In the soteriological context, the redemption of man consists of liberation which has negative and positive sides. On the one hand liberation means liberation from endless cycles of births and deaths, and consequently, freedom from suffering and sorrow; and on the other hand the affirmation of the true knowledge of self, eternal comradeship with the highest form of Divinity and perfect peace which passeth both joy and sorrow. The attainment of liberation could be realized through any one of the recommended ways or through a combination of those according to one's temperament, disciplinary outlook and emotional and intellectual needs.

II

AN OVERVIEW

Considering the complex and subtle nature of the Indian Socio-religious and cultural formation, it is admitted that soteriological perspectives need not be limited to the above view points, rather these are intended to serve as points of stimulation to bring out other perspectives as well. The attempt has been made to discover especially the unifying elements of perspectives which essentially govern Hindu religious thought and culture. Possible variations of outlook will leave enough scope for further discussions.

Anthropocentric perspective emphasizes the need for seeking the knowledge of the true nature of Self abiding in man who is a combination of physical and spiritual realities. In this context, the salvific quest assumes that man is potentially capable of moving up to and merging into the Divine Self/Divine Unity itself.

The psychological perspective acknowledges man's endowment of body, mind and sensory facilities which keeps the soul in the bondage of misery and sorrow. The spark of Divine Self placed within man should be discovered by looking 'within' by following properly disciplined activities and consequently progressing towards identification with Pure Divine Consciousness.

In the ethical perspective, we find three stages of spiritual progress linked with morality, namely, objective morality, subjective morality and transcendental morality. The spiritual progress is achieved according to the stage of morality one has reached (objective/social, subjective/psychological or transcendental/absolute). A persistent traveller on his spiritual journey, will reach the transcendental or absolute stage of freedom from all bondage of both good and evil.

The idea contained in the theological perspectives provides three different levels of the concept-God as Brahman-the Cosmic absolute God as *Paramatman*- the Supreme Self and God as *Bhagwan*- the Personal Lord. The salvific behaviour of man will depend upon the level of the concept of God he is able to perceive and accompanying the spiritual disciplines he is able to follow.

In the cosmological perspective, we find that the Hindu thought has the central idea of the Ultimate Reality as the base of every creation. It not only generates creation but also resides in it. Man must ultimately find dissolution of the creation of his individual reality and journey back from empirical reality of creation to ultimate reality of undisturbed existence.

The eschatological outcome is directed on the basis of the *samskara* accumulated by individual soul according to their karma in previous births, the karma of their current form of life and the spiritual path they are able to select and follow. The ultimate aim of man should be to merge with Divine Consciousness.

According to the liberational perspective, man strives to save himself from the bondage of endless birth-death cycles and has to try to attain true knowledge of self. The liberation from such a bondage will ensure the attainment of perfect peace which passeth both joy and sorrow.

FOCUS LINE

Perspective	Journey Type	Ultimate Goal
Anthropocentric	Inward Journey	Divine/Self/Divine Unity
Psychological	Journey 'within'	Supreme Self
Ethical	Journey of Morality	Transcendental/Absolute
Theological	Journey to God Choice of Path and Concepts	Brahman, the Absolute Paramatman, the Supreme Self, Bhagwan, the Personal Lord
Cosmological	Onward Journey of Creation and Return Journey of Dissolution	Absolute Existence Empirical Existence
Eschatological	Journey of Merger/Union	Divine Consciousness
Liberational	Journey to Freedom (ex. Endless cycles of birth- death)	True knowledge of self

In general, Hindu religious thought and Indian socio-cultural context visualize the salvific efforts of man as a kind of journey (if undertaken

properly) which assures restoration of man to his original Divinity. The speed of restoration will depend upon the type of journey, the spiritual discipline and the goal set before him. Man is free to select the type of journey (though the character of the accumulation of his *karma* from previous births might determine the selection of these), the spiritual discipline and the ultimate goal which goes with it. The anthropocentric perspective of the inward journey of man to find Divine self and Divine Unity, the psychological perspective of looking 'within' to understand the Divine Self, the Ethical perspectives of progressive morality towards transcendental morality which obtains freedom from good and evil, the theological perspective of the different concept of God and appropriate spiritual discipline to suit the temperament, spiritual pursuit and level of spiritual aspiration, the cosmological the perspective of the onward (out-ward) journey of creation into empirical existence and return journey of dissolution to absolute existence, the eschatological goal of the final merger with Divine Consciousness and the liberational perspective of finding freedom from the endless birth-death cycles and obtaining the affirmation of the true knowledge of the nature of Self and Perfect Peace, do provide a multi dimensional understanding of the salvific approach which uplifts man at his own speed of operation, degree of knowledge, perseverance and level of consciousness. Though it results in varied behavioural content, the goal of the spiritual journey remains the same in essence inspite of the difference in the path people follow according to their level of understanding, aspiration and spiritual motivation. Other religions (especially with unidimensional approach) could greatly benefit from these soteriological perspectives not only for communication and dialogue but also for reinterpretation of their own salvific concept in the context of Hindu religious thought and socio-cultural heritage which entwines the Indian seeker's psychological make-up.