

Handbook of Hinduism

Ancient to Contemporary

M.V. NADKARNI



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M.V. Nadkarni

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Blessings

Hinduism is not a religion in the sense that is normally understood because it does not have a founder, a book or a church or a uniform way of life. At best we can call it a federation of many sects, cults, groups or even religions. However there is a common thread passing through all of them stringing them together into a beautiful multicoloured garland.

Sri M.V. Nadkarni in his latest work 'Handbook of Hinduism', has succeeded to a great extent in expounding such a 'complex' religion in nine informative chapters dealing with all the facets of it. Special mention should be made of his treatment of the moral philosophy of Hinduism and a correct picture of the caste system, clearly showing that it is a social arrangement, having nothing to do with religion.

He has given a useful and informative account of all the modern Hindu movement also.

We hope that his book will prove to be a useful addition to the present literature on Hinduism.

Swami Harshananda

Swami Harshananda

Adhyaksha

Ramakrishna Math

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Preface

This book is a new, more evolved *avatar* of my earlier book, *Hinduism: A Gandhian Perspective*, brought out by the same publishers as first edition in 2006 in hard cover, and as second edition in 2008 in soft cover. This could well have been its third edition, but changes in it have been so many that a new title seemed justified enough. There is a lot that is new, particularly in Part I. This does not mean that I disown any of my views expressed in the earlier book; nothing is lost from the earlier version, but a lot has been added.

In particular, I must emphasise that the Gandhian Perspective which guided and inspired the earlier version retains the same role here as well, though the words, ‘Gandhian Perspective’, are missing in the title now. Gandhi has not been ignored or belittled in this book, but it covers other ideas too which are not inconsistent with Gandhi’s. Particularly, it accommodates Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s views on what Hinduism should be if it has to take a respectable place among world religions, which hardly contradict what Gandhi thought on the matter. Dr. Ambedkar was not only a leader of Dalits but also an incisive scholar on Hinduism. While Gandhi worried over how to reconstruct a reformed Hinduism with its excrescences removed, Dr. Ambedkar’s concern was to destroy its meaningless and inhuman codes. Thus both worked for the common objective of building up a humane and morally meaningful religion in place of orthodox Hinduism. In his famous article on ‘Annihilation of Caste’ (1936), Dr. Ambedkar distinguished between principles and rules, and insisted that a religion should rest on principles and desist from being a religion of rules. It should give scope for reasoning and moral responsibility, which a religion of rules cannot. He regretted, however, that Hinduism had descended to the status of a rigid code of rules on caste, purity and pollution. In the process, loyalty to moral ideals and principles was sacrificed, and reasoning abandoned. He called upon Hindus to give an ethical-doctrinal basis for their religion based on modern values of equality, fraternity and liberty, and bring the practice of religion into conformity with it. He even hinted that Hindus need not borrow from the West in this task, but can draw from their own resources like the Upanishads (see sections 20 and 21 of the article, reprinted in Rodrigues 2004: 263-305). The revised book here, therefore, shows how within the resources of Hinduism, there lies a religion which can meet the expectations of both Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar. The earlier version (2006, 2008) also tried this, but the present book brings out this fact with greater force, support and clarity.

A basic feature which the book emphasises is its dynamism and free flow. The metaphor of a river suits Hinduism very well – it is not static, it flows. Both change and continuity characterize it. Several streams join it and several streams may also flow out of it, but it retains its identity. It has the ability to purify and refresh itself, if only we do not overburden it with pollutants like dogma and rules of purity and pollution. It finds ways of circumventing obstacles and continuing its course. It is life sustaining for all and belongs to all, and is not the property of a chosen few.

Gunnar Myrdal had famously characterized the Indian state as soft. I am not sure if he is correct. But the religion which the bulk of people of the country follow can be characterized as soft – in a good sense of the term, of course. Rigid austerities may be expected of the *sadhaks* (spiritual seekers), but Ajamila, a notorious sinner, is said to have attained the highest state (*parama-pada*) by merely uttering the name of Narayana twice, with a sense of total surrender and heartfelt repentance on his death bed. Strict vegetarianism expected of the *sadhaks*, but tribal goddesses do not mind accepting goats and chicken as offerings by their devotees whose staple diet consists of these and other hunted animals.

A religion which has consistently asserted since ancient times the oneness of God as *Ekam*, has no qualms in permitting the worship of His manifold – *bahudha* – forms, left to the devotees' choice. But it would be very misleading to characterize Hinduism as licentious, amoral or unprincipled on this ground. Nevertheless, this softness makes Hinduism a challenging religion to study and understand. This book is a humble attempt in this direction.

The book has two Parts. Part I is about what is Hinduism and what is not. It covers not merely the metaphysics, moral philosophy and *Sadhana* in Hinduism, but also the egalitarian, liberal and socially engaged aspects of Hinduism, very relevant to the present times. A separate chapter shows why Hinduism is not Brahminism and the Caste system. Part II covers the dynamics of Hinduism, describing and interpreting its growth from the ancient to the contemporary times. The Handbook is thus more comprehensive than its previous version. I have dropped the last two chapters from the earlier book (on the 'Hindu Approach to Development' and 'Future of Religion') by incorporating their essential points in other chapters. I have tried to make the text more concise, while retaining the simple language and presentation as before for easy comprehension. There are also anecdotes and songs which the readers can savour. Concepts, especially Sanskrit terms, are explained as needed, not being content with giving merely English equivalents. Reworking on the earlier version helped me to bring in fresh thoughts, more clarity and reasoning on the whole. I must also clarify that the present book is not intended to be encyclopedic. Several concepts used in the practice of Hinduism and its *Sanskaras* are not covered in the book, as also the details of Hindu deities and places of pilgrimage. For more details on Hinduism, readers may refer to the monumental work of Swami Harshananda (2008).

It is not the intention of the book to present Hinduism as the ideal or the greatest of all religions or a wonderland free from any deficiency. No single religion can be said to be perfect, as Gandhi asserted. This requires a constant rediscovery of basic and universal values from time to time in each religion, so that morally repugnant beliefs and practices which have grown as excrescence can be removed. Caste barriers and untouchability, indifference to poverty and suffering of others, and condemning women to a lower status and exploiting them are obvious examples of this excrescence. Rediscovering is not going back; it is not a fundamentalist move to impose some orthodox notion of purity. It is, on the contrary, a process of refreshing oneself and being open to reasoning and dialogue, being sensitive to human rights – especially the rights of the weak and the meek, recognizing the need to ensure freedom to everyone to enrich one's personality and potential, and being serious in environmental concern. Such an attempt is important because the greatest challenge to any religion comes from within, not from outside. Introspection about weaknesses within our own society, particularly to strengthen the moral fibre of all in the society, alone can save us. To do this, it is not necessary to be paranoid about dangers from outside, particularly about the aggressiveness of other religions.

It is a matter of great privilege and honour for me to have 'Blessings' for my book from Swami Harshanandaji, President, Shri Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore. He is highly regarded for his profound scholarship and knowledge of Hinduism. I am deeply indebted to him.

SOME PAGES HAVE BEEN OMITTED FROM THIS PREVIEW

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Introduction

‘...my regard for Hinduism and its beauties did not, however, prejudice me against other religions’.

— M K Gandhi (1927: 133)

1. A RELIGION WITHOUT A NAME AND DEFINITION?

Hinduism is a very unique religion. If you want to catch it with pincer-like definitions made to fit other religions, it just slips away. Religions are generally identified by their founders, normally as single, exclusive personalities; a single scripture; and a historically recorded beginning. Hinduism does not have these features, as is evident from the following. It had no name till about the middle of the second millennium of the Common Era (CE). It did not even have the awareness of a separate distinct religion for quite a few centuries after its evolution. This was due perhaps to the simple reason that other religions with distinct identities had not emerged for many centuries since Hinduism made its beginning around the end of the third or early second millennium before the Common Era (BCE), when the Indus Valley Civilization prevailed and the Vedic civilization began. While other religions were ‘born’ in a historically recorded period, Hinduism has had no such definite historical period of birth, it simply evolved over centuries. No single person could be regarded as its historical founder. It evolved from a blend of divine revelations received by many pious sages, called the Rshis, which were compiled in the form of the Vedas. The Vedas are regarded as Apourusheya (not man-made) because they were not the result of any single man’s (purusha) exclusive inspiration or work, but a result of divine grace bestowed on sages after sages from generation to generation, extending over one or two centuries, which found expression in to hymns.

The teachings of this religion since the Vedas and Upanishads were not meant exclusively for a sectarian group that followed a distinct religion, but for all humanity. These teachings like the Rgvedic sayings – *Ekam Sadviprah bahudha vadanti* (One truth is expressed by the wise in many ways) or *Ano bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu vishvatah* (Let noble thoughts come from all over the world) or the saying from the Mundaka Upanishad – *Satyameva Jayate nanrtam* (Truth alone wins, not falsehood), or the saying from the *Hitopadesha* – *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (The whole world is one family), – can never be the exclusive monopoly of only one religion or civilisation or relevant to a given period only. They contain eternal and universal truths.

Paradoxically, this religion became distinct in due course after other religions such as Buddhism and Jainism emerged with distinct identities. So the residual began to be given a distinct identity too. The Indian word which came closest to describing a religion was not Dharma, as popularly believed, but *Mata* (a view point, opinion) or *Sampradaya* (a tradition). The term Dharma had a different connotation altogether, that of a moral obligation or code of ethics, and the concept of Dharma was

common to all Indian traditions and viewpoints. Thus the residual religion, other than Buddhism and Jainism, began to be called as *Vaidika Mata* or *Vaidika Sampradaya* (Vedic religion or tradition), as it was supposed to be based on the Vedas, while other religions did not claim so.

But there are problems in terming it as Vedic religion, because even in an early phase of its evolution it had transcended, though not rejected, the Vedas. Though the Upanishads are taken as the end part of the Vedas, they are so different in their tone and spirit that they stand apart. We shall dwell at length on the differences between the two later, but the sum and substance of the difference could be said to be this: while the aim of the Vedas was to propitiate the gods through rites and rituals (mainly in the form of *Yajnas*) and singing their praise to get mundane benefits here and in heaven hereafter, the aim of the Upanishads was the single minded pursuit of Truth. Both contained codes of ethics relevant to Dharma, which was common, but their religion was different. The process of transcending the Vedas reached a climax in the *Bhagavadgita* (the Gita henceforth), which gave a different concept of *Yajna* and set out alternative paths to God-Realization or Self-Realization or Liberation, – all of which constituted a distinct march ahead of the Vedas. The process of moving beyond the Vedas has continued right up to the contemporary times, which witnessed several protest movements against the caste system of the Indian society (mistakenly ascribed to the Vedas). The Bhakti movements constituted the most prominent example of moving beyond the Vedas within the framework of the Hindu society and religion. They covered the entire length and breadth of India during the medieval period, – a separate chapter on the Bhakti movements is devoted to them in this book. As a result one can certainly be termed a Hindu even if one does not follow the Vedas.

Even though rites and rituals of the Vedas in their *Karmakanda* (the part of the Vedas dealing with rites and rituals) may not have been acceptable to all, and the Upanishads (the *Jnanakanda* of the Vedas) may have been beyond the comprehension of the common man, there remained the ethics part of both the Vedas and Upanishads which was highly relevant to the common man and to day-to-day living. In emphasising this ethical part, this religion was given another name – *Sanatana Dharma*. I do not know in which text this term was first coined, because there are so many of them. But this was the traditional name given to this religion by the wise who followed it, and the emphasis was not so much on differentiating it from Buddhism and Jainism, as on the moral values which needed to be followed by all. There is a description of what *Sanatana Dharma* is in the *Brahmanda Purana* (II.33. 37-38):

*Adrohashchapy lobhascha tapo bhutadaya damah /
Brahmacharyam tatha satyam anukroshah kshama dhritih /
Sanatanasya Dharmasya mulametad udahrtam //*

It means: The essence of Sanatana Dharma is that one must be free from malice and greed, be austere, and have qualities of self-control, chastity, truth, tenderness, forgiveness, fortitude and compassion for all.¹

Mahatma Gandhi was aware that ‘Hinduism’ was not the original name for this religion, and he accepted ‘*Sanatana Dharma*’, as the appropriate name for it. He did not refrain from using the word ‘Hinduism’ as it had become popular and was accepted by Hindus and non-Hindus alike. But it is

noteworthy that he never used the words 'Vedic' or Brahminical' as a prefix to describe the religion. Gandhi's view of Hinduism was that it is basically ethical, a matter of living a morally upright life than of mere rituals or intellection, and rooted in the principles of truth and non-violence.

The use of the term '*Sanātana Dharma*' is not intended to confine Hinduism only to the Sanskrit tradition but is used only to bring out its enduring character. '*Sanātana*' does not mean conservative or orthodox (which some mistakenly assume it to mean), but it means enduring or everlasting. True to the Gandhian perspective, this book does not see Hinduism as being based exclusively on the Vedas and Upanishads, and takes a more dynamic view of its development through several millennia. The non-Sanskritic *bhakti* sants are as much a part of the dynamics of Hinduism as the Vedas and Vedanta, not to mention its modern interpreters like Gandhi himself. As such I have taken into account, in addition to the religious and philosophical literature in Sanskrit, literature from other Indian languages as well, in original as far as I could, and sometimes in translation.

SOME PAGES HAVE BEEN OMITTED FROM THIS PREVIEW

2. WHY GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE?

This book views Hinduism from a Gandhian perspective, but is not confined to what he said or wrote. It is his *perspective* which is used basically. What characterises Gandhian way of looking at Hinduism is to take it as a dynamic, rational, tolerant, liberal, cosmopolitan, humane, compassionate, egalitarian and democratic faith, given to the pursuit of Truth and Non-violence both in conviction and practice. Such a perspective does not view religion as cast in a static or rigid mould defined by given scriptures and customs, but treats it as a living, vibrant force. Even religions coming from a given founder and based on a given scripture cannot afford to be static in their character. Gandhi refused to see religions, particularly Hinduism, as rigid. This is not to question the relevance of scriptures and the teachings of founders and path makers of religions; nor is it to treat the teachings of scriptures as relative or symbolic, having only heritage value. They certainly have continuing relevance, which Gandhi willingly acknowledged and insisted on reciting portions of scriptures of different religions during prayer meetings, so that we continue to remember their teachings and get inspiration from them to lead a moral life. What he objected to was a fanatical acceptance of literal meaning of all that is said in scriptures, and insisted on applying one's reasoning and taking in to account modern humanist and democratic values in interpreting them. He asserted:

“Every formula of every religion has, in this age of reason, to submit to the acid test of reason and universal justice if it is to ask for a universal assent. Error can claim no exemption even if it can be supported by the scriptures of the world”.

— M.K. Gandhi (*Young India*, 26 February, 1929, p.74)

Gandhi is supported by no less authority than the Gita in this respect. It says, ‘*Vimarshyetad asheshena yathecchasi tathā kuru*’ (XVIII.63), which means: ‘Critically and fully think over this [what all was said] and then do what you want to do’. The *Mahābhārata*, of which the Gita is a part, reflects what Gandhi believed, practised and preached, when it says: “Regard all religious faiths with reverence and ponder over their teachings, but do not surrender your own judgement’ (in *Shantiparva*; as quoted in Madan ed. 1992: vii). Gandhi respected the scriptures of all religions, but did not consider them as infallible or as exclusive repository of truth. He did not contest their divine revelation, but observed that they were after all revealed to the human media – however high and exalted – and therefore handed down to us, and so can give only a partial, fragmented view of the truth, and are, thus, not infallible.

But Gandhi would not rely *only* on reasoning either. He sought a creative and constructive balance between reason and faith, both to solve life's problems and for spiritual guidance. Life would be very difficult if we exclude faith altogether and insist on applying verification and reasoning at every step. Gandhi was a rationalist among believers, and a believer among rationalists. He taught respecting religions in so far as they preached basic moral values, in which we ought to have faith. But we need reasoning in interpreting and applying these moral tenets, which can conflict with each other at times and create ethical dilemmas. In this situation, it helps in distinguishing between what is basic and what is only instrumental and hence relative. If there is a conflict between what is only of instrumental value and what is basic, the basic values would prevail.⁶ Gandhi gave a simple test to

come out of ethical dilemmas: Do I have my own axe to grind in this task? Am I being selfish?

In spite of his love and admiration for Hinduism, Gandhi was unsparing in his criticism and condemnation of the system of untouchability in the Hindu society. When some orthodox scholars pointed out to textual support for this practice, he was clear in denouncing such parts of the scriptures that supported it. He even said that he would renounce the Hindu faith itself, if he found that it supported this practice, but clarified that he believed that there is no support for untouchability in the Hindu religion. His opposition to untouchability was not so much based on sympathy or compassion, as on justice and the right to dignity of the oppressed. There was no basic conflict between Gandhi and Dr B R Ambedkar as far as the issue of untouchability was concerned. In a Gandhian perspective, it is possible to identify and determine those tenets of a religion which, even if not followed, even if consciously flouted, there would be no harm to its basic character. There could be such parts in the scriptures of other religions too which flout basic values of respect for human dignity, democracy and equity, which, therefore, could be consciously disregarded, without harm to the basic essence of these religions. It is possible that at certain times and in certain circumstances, certain practices were adopted as instrumentally useful, such as confining women to the safety of homes in periods of violence and insecurity. Such practices cannot, however, be held to be sacrosanct and universally valid, as they conflict with other basic values. As for the practice of untouchability, there was no moral justification for it at any time and could not have had the support of any genuine religious scripture. The customs that supported it were and are absolutely immoral and needed to be rectified before further harm was done. Gandhi was clear also in condemning the hierarchical and inegalitarian

features of the caste system in the Hindu Society and strove hard to give dignity to the lowly, exploited and the meek all his life.

Gandhi thought over a lot about how to resolve conflicts between the teachings of scriptures and the contemporary notions of democracy, justice, fairness, equality and dignity of all human beings. In any moral dilemma, he relied on unbiased and unselfish reasoning and his "Inner Voice". By this he did not mean that the rules of ethical conduct could be left to individual convenience and caprice. He believed that anyone can tune in to the inner voice by shedding egoism and selfishness. Gandhi was really more concerned with ethics and pure spirituality than with religion in a narrow sense of the term. His perspective, because of its undogmatic and liberating potential even in the mundane world, transcended religion. But he did not decry religion in general, or any specific religion for that matter, because he was convinced of the powerful potential of religion to inspire and sustain moral conduct.

SOME PAGES HAVE BEEN OMITTED FROM THIS PREVIEW

Theology and Metaphysics of Hinduism

*Purnamadah Purnamidam,
Purnat Purnamudachyate /
Purnasya Purnamadaya
Purnam evavashishyate //*

(Invocation in the *Isha Upanishad*)

That [the Transcendental] is full; this [the world] is full.

The full comes out of the full.

Taking the full from the full, the full itself remains.

(The translation is by S Radhakrishnan, 1994, p.566; parentheses added.)

1. THE DIVINE AND THE WORLD

Theology and metaphysics are intimidating words, but I assure my readers that this is not the purpose of using them here. They are expressive and useful words in conveying broadly the scope of this Chapter. Theology means the study of the concept or concepts of the Divine in a given religion, and related religious beliefs and theories. It may not be a matter of *belief* or *faith* alone, but also of experience of the Divine. Hinduism stresses the experiential and intuitive aspects of religion, without, however, sparing the discursive aspects of advancing particular concepts. The great Acharyas of Hinduism were formidable debaters as well. Even while stressing experiential side of the concepts, they did not shy away from the spoken and the written word. Theology is deeply interrelated with metaphysics as in Hinduism, which is reflected in the present Chapter too. According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, metaphysics is ‘the branch of philosophy concerned with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being and knowing’. When we go deeper into the nature of being, we cannot help exploring its relation with the Divine. The term *Adhyatma* philosophy, in Hinduism, includes in itself both theology and metaphysics, and hence could have served as the title of this chapter. But *Adhyatma* also includes *Sadhana*, ways of spiritual practice or pursuit, dealt with in the fourth chapter below. *Sadhana* follows from our understanding of *Adhyatma*, and therefore, the two are closely related. *Sadhana* also cannot be separated from dharma (fulfilling our moral responsibilities). But moral philosophy is so important, that the next chapter is devoted exclusively to it. The three are treated separately in respective chapters only for the convenience of presentation, and wherever necessary, their inter-relations will also be presented.

A problem in presenting the theology and metaphysics of Hinduism is that there are many schools of thought or philosophy within Hinduism, and we cannot say that a particular school represents the whole of Hinduism. The doctrinal differences between them have been bitterly debated, and it is difficult to strike a common ground which does justice to all schools. A full treatment of all philosophies requires not a book, but several volumes. A complete work on Indian philosophy, for example by S Radhakrishnan runs in to two bulky volumes (1996; first published 1923), and by Surendranath Dasgupta (1975; first published 1922) runs into five volumes. It may, therefore, appear as foolhardy to attempt to devote only a chapter here on this. What is attempted here is a simple introduction, without claiming either comprehensiveness or representativeness. The attempt may appear somewhat subjective, but I shall try to be fair to at least the main schools of philosophy by not ignoring them. Fortunately, the differences arise mainly in the theology and metaphysics parts of *Adhyatma* philosophy, and not in either *Sadhana* or discussions on dharma (moral philosophy). The common ground between different philosophies of Hinduism is thus fairly significant, which is what makes this book possible.

The invocation in the *Isha-Upanishad* quoted at the beginning of this chapter gives a deep insight into one of the important (but not popular) conceptualisations of the Divine in Hinduism and its relation with the physical universe. This is the *Advaita* (non-dual view). The Divine is viewed as *Purnam* – the Full, the Complete, the All, without a second (*Ekamevadvityam*, as said in *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.2.1). There is nothing else besides this. This is *Ekam*, the One Absolute. It includes the cosmos, and because it is from the Full, the Cosmos also is full. *Purnam* is the Fundamental Reality, Absolute Reality and other realities that are tried to be distinguished from It, are conditional, relative or secondary. Viewing the world as a separate reality would have diminished the absoluteness and fullness of the Brahman. The Brahman is the only ultimate and essential reality. That is how Shankaracharya (Shankara henceforth) called the world (*jagat*) as *mithya*, which is neither real nor unreal. Why it is neither real nor unreal becomes clear when we try to understand how the One became manifold or appears so. There can be different expressions and manifestations of the Brahman. The expressions are *bahudha* (manifold) but the basic, the fundamental substance is *Ekam*, the One. The phenomenal world is one of name and form – *nama* and *rupa*. The *Chandogya Upanishad* (3.14.1) asserts clearly – *Sarvam khalvidam Brahma* (‘verily, all this world is the Brahman’).

The Upanishad makes it further clear in the words of Uddalaka to his son, where he takes the examples of clay, gold and iron and their respective different forms (.6.1.4-6). The forms are also real, but the basic realities behind these forms in these examples are clay, gold and iron. (Radhakrishnan 1994: 391, 446-7). The examples are used in the Upanishad only to convey that similarly the world is a gross form of Brahman. Rambachan clarifies this further: ‘What Shankara emphatically denies is that the world has a reality and existence independent of Brahman. The world derives its reality from Brahman, whereas the reality of Brahman is independent and original’ (Rambachan 2006: 77). The names and forms are neither false nor an illusion, but they do not constitute the essence. Swami Dayananda (2007) also gives other examples of the ocean, its waves and water to explain the Advaita view. Water, though one entity, takes three distinct forms – ice, liquid water and vapour. All the three are real, but they are only forms of water.

SOME PAGES HAVE BEEN OMITTED FROM THIS PREVIEW

Moral Philosophy of Hinduism

‘A person who follows the path of dharma does not feel helpless.’

— M. K. Gandhi (*Harijan-bandhu* 5 Nov 1933; CWMG 56:183)

1. MEETING SOME CRITICISMS

Before presenting the main theme of this chapter, let us meet some criticisms made against Hinduism, particularly about its capacity for evolving ethics or a moral philosophy. Though these criticisms may be based on a wrong understanding which ought to be cleared, we also have to remember that criticisms have a constructive role. They have helped in removing some of the morally repugnant excrescences like the practices of Sati and untouchability, and in rediscovering our root values which have universal acceptance. Criticism of the law of karma, for example, has helped us to rediscover that karma is not fate or fatalism, and is actually based on recognition of free will, and individual moral responsibility, as seen in the preceding chapter.

The charge that Indian religions, inclusive of Hinduism, are other-worldly, world-and-life negating, and hence cannot provide any basis for ethics, let alone economic development, has been dealt with in the preceding chapter. It was pointed out that even the Advaita school, which is just one of the many in India and which has been the main source for creating this misunderstanding, has duly emphasized our responsibilities to the world, and there was no question of any school of philosophy in any Indian religion, including Hinduism, ignoring the importance of ethical living, as will be seen from the remaining sections this chapter.

As a rejoinder to this, critics reply that Hinduism believes in moral relativism, following from its concept of the world being only relatively real, and that its ethics is for convenience, which therefore is not taken seriously. Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, in his Convocation Address at the University of Calcutta in 1905, called Hindus compulsive liars, having no sense of truth (Chatterjee 2005: 75). He was no scholar, but as Viceroy should have known better. Other Western scholars like Weber (1976; 1967), Schweitzer (1960) and Kapp (1963) were not as damaging, but shared the view that Hindu ethics is relative. This criticism about relativity of ethics is more serious, and reply to it will take us beyond this section. We will have more to say on this in the rest of the chapter. At this point, we may note that all the religious thinkers and philosophers in India, including Shankara, accepted ethics as absolutely essential, not only in day-to-day activities of life, but also for *Sadhana*. There was no concession either in the former or latter. The following-verse from Niti-Shataka (Verse 81) Bhartrhari, devoted to spelling out a code of conduct for people, would hardly indicate moral relativism.

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2. TRUTH AND NON-VIOLENCE

Gandhi considered truth and non-violence as the fundamental values of Hinduism. In saying this, he was extremely insightful. The foundation of Indian ethics, not Hindu ethics alone, can be said to be in the Vedas, and the Vedas were the first in the world to probe into what the *Rgveda* called *rtam*. Initially, *rtam* was seen in the cosmic order, by which both the physical and the social worlds were sustained. When a sceptic asked who has seen the god Indra, he was asked to see him in the working of the world itself, and in the beauty and order resulting from the working of the moral law – *rtam*. *Rtam* was also understood as righteousness and quickly developed into the concept of *satyam* or truth, with strong ethical implications. Sometimes, both the words were used simultaneously, as in the following *rk* from the *Rgveda* (X.190.1) and often interchangeably.

Rtam cha satyam cha abhiddhat / Tapasah adhi ajayata//

(Righteousness and Truth upsurged, kindled from Self-discipline.)

(Tr. By Hattangdi 2002 : 127)

The *Rgveda* uses the word *Satyam* many times. For example:

Satya-savam Savitaram (V. 82.7) (God is the source of Truth. *Ibid*: 133).

Satyam vadan satya-karman (X.113.4) (Speak truthfully, and act truthfully. *Ibid*: 134)

Satyena uttabhita bhumi (X. 85.1) (The Earth is upheld by Truth. *Ibid*: 135).

Satyah Satyasya dadrshe purastat (VIII. 57.2) (On facing the truth, one's true nature reveals itself. *Ibid* 136).

Satyam it tat na tvayan anyah asti (VI.30.4)(That is verily the Truth; there is nothing else like that. *Ibid*: 134)

The last aphorism above could be said to provide the *Rgvedic* support to Gandhi's assertion that Truth is God, and that Truth alone exists, nothing else; falsehood cannot survive. He explained that *Satyam* is derived from the word *sat* (which exists), which means *asat* (unreal) cannot exist. This is exactly what the Gita (II.16) says, '*Nasato vidyate bhavo nabhavo vidyate satah*' ('The unreal never is. The Real never is not'. Tr.by Swami Swarupananda 1982: 37).

The importance of *satyam* in Hinduism made Gandhi to define Hinduism as relentless pursuit of truth. Pursuit of truth requires freedom of thought which Hinduism granted to its followers abundantly in a way which few other religions could match. The variety of concepts of God and His relationship with the world and the Self, and the different schools of philosophy discussed in the preceding chapter must have made this clear. Max Weber, an otherwise trenchant critic of Hinduism, observed: "The freedom of thought in ancient India was so considerable as to find no parallel in the West before the most recent age" (quoted by Srinivas and Shah, 1968: 364).

Based on his deep understanding, Gandhi also thought that Truth was neither a mere metaphorical nor a mere epistemological concept, but was the very foundation of ethics. 'Truth is a sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles' (Gandhi 1927: xi). Making statements corresponding to thoughts as they exist or to events as they actually take place are surely a fundamental aspect of Truth,

but the meaning of truth went beyond this for Gandhi and included moral truth as well. Its moral aspects cover non-violence, honesty, simplicity and straightforwardness, self-control, righteousness, equity and justice. Gandhi explained, therefore, that it is by following these values, not only individuals but also the society and even the world at large gain happiness. He said: 'The key to happiness lies in the worship of Truth, which is the giver of all things' (CWMG 79:426). Without truth, life would not be worth living. Life depends on mutual trust in a society, and in the absence of truthfulness, trust is lost, and life would be a continuously meaningless and even violent struggle.

END OF PREVIEW