

# **Handbook of Hinduism**

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# **Handbook of Hinduism**

## **Ancient to Contemporary**

M.V. NADKARNI



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**Handbook of Hinduism: Ancient to Contemporary**  
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

Bangalore - 560019



## 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. The book, therefore, has a cover design showing a river flowing from the mountains, based on a beautiful water colour by Savkur Shyamsundar.

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.

Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of original verses and poems in to English have been made by me. However, Prof R.S. Deshpande, Mrs. Sharada Rao and Mr. V.K. Jain helped me in understanding clearly the meaning of several Marathi and Hindi poems. The encouragement that I received from my friends and family on the earlier versions helped me bring out this one too. I have acknowledged their help in the earlier editions, but I mention a few of them here – Professors V.R. Panchamukhi, V.M. Rao, K.T. Pandurangi, and C.T. Kurien; my daughter Saraswati and sons - Anirudh and Makarand, and their families; my brother Kishore and his family; and my sisters-in-law Girija and Shanta and their families. Chinmay, my son-in-law, presented me with several valuable books published abroad, which were of great help. T. Amarnath diligently typed a few of the chapters. Rajesh Vorkady took a lot of active interest in the book.

Pradeep Chakraborty and my brother, Kishore, kindly went through the whole MS and added grace to my book by correcting many typos and careless mistakes. Sunita Nadkarni not only gifted several precious books from the collection of her late husband, Vivekanand, but also graciously did an expert and meticulous editing of the manuscript, as a result of which my presentation has gained in elegance. They also gave good suggestions. S. Subramanian helped by promptly providing the needed reference material from websites. Subhashree Bannerjee – my 'grand student' and deemed daughter, helped in several ways on the computer. My hearty thanks are due to all of them, including of course to my cousin, S. Shyamsundar who permitted me to use his water colour picture for the cover design.

Memory of my dear wife Ganga has been a sustaining source of inspiration in this work too. Paradoxically, I continue to miss her terribly, but still feel she is with me all the while.

I am especially grateful to the readers and reviewers of the earlier editions whose views, reactions and suggestions helped me significantly in reworking on this book.

I also thank my publishers – Ane Books Pvt. Ltd, especially its CEO, J.R. Kapoor, who prodded me into preparing this version with a new title and cover design and did a good job of publishing it.

My readers may kindly note the Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation (that follows this Preface) before going through the text. I have devised my own key, relying only on underlining, which is much simpler and does not need any special software. It thus avoids distortion of the text that results from transferring the text from one computer to another which does not have the special software.

I shall be happy and grateful to receive comments and suggestions from readers, which may be sent by e-mail to [mvnadkarni1968@gmail.com](mailto:mvnadkarni1968@gmail.com).

**M.V. Nadkarni**

April, 2013

# Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation for Words in Indian Languages (in alphabetical order of Indian Languages)

## Vowels

a	–	a	a – as in abode; or u as in <b>run</b>	<u>a</u>	–	a	as in <b>palm</b>
i	–	i	as in <b>if</b>	<u>i</u>	–	ee	as in <b>deep</b>
u	–	u	as in <b>full</b>	<u>u</u>	–	oo	as in <b>pool</b>
<u>r</u>	–	r	as in <b>Kṛshna</b> ( <b>Krishna</b> )	<u>e</u>	–	ay	as in <b>May</b>
e	–	e	as in <b>pet</b>	<u>o</u>	–	o	as in open, <b>goat</b>
o	–	o	as in <b>got</b>				
ou	–	ow	as in <b>cow</b>				

## Consonants

k	–	k	as in <b>King</b>	kh	–	ckh	as in <b>blockhead</b>
g	–	g	as in <b>go</b>	gh	–	gh	as in <b>yoghurt</b>
ch	–	ch	as in <b>chain</b>	chh	–	tchh	as in <b>catchhim</b>
j	–	j	as in <b>judge</b>	jh	–	dgeh	as in <b>hedgehog</b>
<u>t</u>	–	t	as in <b>ten</b>	<u>th</u>	–	th	as in <b>anthill</b>
<u>d</u>	–	d	as in <b>god</b>	<u>dh</u>	–	dh	as in <b>godhood</b>
<u>n</u>	–	n	as in <b>under</b> ; n pronounced with tongue from back upwards.	th	–	th	as in <b>thin</b>
t	–	t	as in <b>Gita</b>	dh	–	th	in <b>this</b>
d	–	th	as in <b>then</b>	ph	–	ph	as in <b>fit</b> or in <b>loophole</b>
n	–	n	as in <b>no</b> , <b>singer</b> , <b>bench</b>	bh	–	bh	as in <b>abhor</b>
p	–	p	as in <b>pup</b>	r	–	r	as in <b>run</b>
b	–	b	as in <b>ball</b>	v, w	–	v	as in <b>avert</b>
y	–	as in	<b>young</b> or in <b>yard</b>	h	–	h	as in <b>hum</b>
l	–	l	as in <b>luck</b>				
sh	–	sh	as in <b>cherish</b> , <b>show</b>				
s	–	s	as in <b>sun</b>				
<u>l</u>	–	(not in English; l pronounced with tongue far back upwards in the mouth and down)					

**Note:** Harshananda (1999: 11-2) was helpful in illustrating pronunciations, but the key used here is simplified relying on underlining, using no other symbols. The short e and o are not used in Sanskrit but are used in some regional languages like Kannada.



# Contents

<i>Blessings by Swami Harshananda</i>	v
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation</i>	xi

## PART-I

### WHAT IS HINDUISM AND WHAT IS NOT

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1–18</b>
1. A Religion without a Name and Definition?	3
2. Why Gandhian Perspective?	9
3. Is Religion Necessary?	12
• Notes to Chapter 1	17
<b>Chapter 2: Theology and Metaphysics of Hinduism</b>	<b>19–44</b>
1. The Divine and The World	19
2. The Self and The Divine	33
3. The Self and The World	36
4. Law of Karma – Not Fatalism	39
• Notes to Chapter 2	43
<b>Chapter 3: Moral Philosophy of Hinduism</b>	<b>45–78</b>
1. Meeting Some Criticisms	45
2. Truth and Non-Violence	48
3. Dharma and its Dilemmas	52
4. Ethical Grading – Theory of Guṇas	58
5. Human Goals in Hinduism – <i>Purushārthas</i>	61

6. Social Concern in Hinduism	64
7. Environmental Ethics in Hinduism	67
8. Ethics in Practice	70
• Notes to Chapter 3	77
<b>Chapter 4: <u>Sādhana</u> in Hinduism</b>	<b>79–112</b>
1. <u>Sādhana</u> and its Purpose	79
2. Self-Realisation through Jñānamārga and Rājayoga	83
3. Karma-Mārga: The Path of Selfless Work	89
4. Bhakti-Mārga: The Path of Love and Devotion	94
• Notes to Chapter 4	101
• Appendix I to Chapter 4: Selected Prayers	102
• Appendix II to Chapter 4: Hindu Festivals	104
<b>Chapter 5: Caste System is not Hinduism</b>	<b>113–148</b>
1. Hinduism is not Brahminism	113
2. The Caste System – <i>Jāti</i> vis-à-vis <i>Varna</i>	114
3. There was Hinduism before the Caste System	116
4. Social and Occupational Mobility not Insignificant	117
5. Canon and Caste	119
6. Legends as A Weapon against the Caste System	127
7. Movements Against Caste within Hinduism	129
8. How then did Caste System Emerge and Survive?	131
9. Justification Lost, but Castes Continue – A Paradox	136
10. Gandhiji's Views	140
11. Did the Caste System help Establish the Muslim Rule?	142
12. Aggravation of Caste Inequality during British Rule	143
• Notes to Chapter 5	148

## PART-II

### DYNAMICS OF HINDUISM

<b>Chapter 6: Dynamics of Hinduism—Continuity and Change</b>	<b>149–172</b>
--	----------------

Contents	xv
1. Canon vis-à-vis Charisma	151
2. Driving Forces Behind Dynamics	164
• Notes to Chapter 6	171
<b>Chapter 7: The Ancient and Classical Phase</b>	<b>173–202</b>
1. Vedic Phase	173
2. Upanishadic Phase	178
3. Six Schools of Philosophy: <i>Shad-Darshanas</i>	180
4. Heterodox Schools	188
5. Hinduism on the Eve of Muslim Invasions	197
• Notes to Chapter 7	201
<b>Chapter 8: Bhakti Movements</b>	<b>203–250</b>
1. General Features	203
2. Tamil Nadu	209
3. Karnataka	211
4. Maharashtra	220
5. The Rest of India	229
6. Conclusions	243
• Notes to Chapter 8	247
<b>Chapter 9: Modern and Contemporary Phase</b>	<b>251–314</b>
1. Many Moods of Modern Phase	251
2. Continuity and Change: A Few General Features	302
• Notes to Chapter 9	313
<i>References</i>	315–328
<i>Glossary</i>	329–332
<i>Name Index</i>	000-000
<i>Subject Index</i>	000-000
<i>Index to Shlokas and Songs</i>	000-000



## **Part-I**

### **WHAT IS HINDUISM AND WHAT IS NOT**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Theology and Metaphysics of Hinduism**
- 3. Moral Philosophy of Hinduism**
- 4. Sādhana of Hinduism**
- 5. Caste System is not Hinduism**



# 1

## 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 Apourush<sub>e</sub>ya (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 bahudh<sub>a</sub> vadanti* (One truth is expressed by the wise in many ways) or *Ano bhadrah 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):

*Adrohashchapyā lobhascha tapo bhūṭadayaḥ damah /  
 Brahmacharyam tathā satyam anukrośah kshamaḥ dhṛtiḥ /  
 Sanātanasya Dharmasya mūlameṭad udāhṛtam //*

It means: The essence of Sanātana 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.<sup>1</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi was aware that ‘Hinduism’ was not the original name for this religion, and he accepted ‘*Sanātana 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 Vedānta, 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.

As is well known, the word ‘Hindus’, was used by the Muslim invaders in India, for the first time in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE<sup>2</sup> referring to non-Muslims living near and beyond the ‘Indus’ river (the Sindhu). The term ‘Hinduism’ as the religion of the Hindus was coined much later by the British. This certainly does not mean that this religion was invented by the British, nor that it did not exist before the British came to India. Interestingly, the term ‘Hinduism’ gained acceptance of its followers too.<sup>3</sup> It would have been odd to call them as the Sanātanis, or worse still as ‘Sanātana Dharmians’! The term, Hindu, was short, easily to pronounced, and it continued as such. Even then, ‘Hindu’ did not become a term of self-identification for a long time for many Hindus, till about the middle of the second millennium of CE. The self-identification was more in terms of caste or sub-sect. However, self-identification as Hindus became more and more pronounced as the Muslim rule extended through the length and breadth of India, which received a further impetus in the wake of social reforms in the Hindu society initiated and advocated by modern savants of Hinduism such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda. Paradoxically, the consciousness for the need for reforms in the Hindu Society accentuated self-awareness as Hindus, more than the consciousness of distinction between Hindus and non-Hindus.

Nevertheless, Hinduism is a religion which defies definition. It is difficult to constrain Hinduism in terms of a common scripture and philosophy, common God, or common tradition, or clear-cut

boundaries. Yet, the different colours in the wide spectrum of Hinduism are not unrelated to each other. They span from the one end of the most subtle and sublime to the other end of the most crude and even vulgar. Hinduism accommodates the 'Great Tradition' represented by what can be called as 'Classical Hinduism', based on the Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Smṛtis*, the *Purāṇas*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Brahmasūtras*, the Gita, Yoga-Sūtras and the philosophical contributions of several *Āchāryas*, the Bhakti Movements, and modern interpretations of Hinduism by Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi and several others. At the same time, Hinduism accommodates the 'Little Tradition' of popular, folk and tribal religious practices and beliefs, *tantra* and several obscure cults. The 'Little Tradition' is also sometimes called as 'Village Hinduism'. The two traditions have not been water-tight compartments. They have influenced and interacted with each other. Over a period, several components of the Little Traditions were refined and brought into the Great Tradition. A prominent example of this is the *Atharva Veda*. In the process of popularizing the Great Tradition, several beliefs and rituals were modified for adoption by the masses. There are of course conflicts between the two Traditions. For example, Gandhi deplored animal sacrifice as inconsistent with Hinduism as it violated the basic principle of non-violence. Similarly, witchcraft and black magic in Village Hinduism conflicted with the principle of Truth which is basic to Hinduism. There has been a historically long process of elevating Village Hinduism to higher and more sophisticated planes of the Great Tradition, but this has been a slow process. It is, however, incorrect to take for granted that everything in Village Hinduism is bad or superstitious. There is also a lot that overlaps between the two traditions, in terms of moral values, including respect for truth and non-violence and selfless service to others. The Little Tradition or Village Hinduism may even have its own deities, but this has not separated this Tradition from Hinduism, thanks to the pluralism and liberalism of the latter. It is not that only the elite believe in the Great Tradition with illiterate masses believing in the Little Tradition. The followers of the two Traditions interchange so much (sometimes overtly and sometimes secretly) that it may be difficult to distinguish between the two.

With all the diversity, not only across communities but also within communities, all are subject to a moral order based on eternal and universal values. There is some undefinable unity amidst all this seemingly incoherent mix. Nirad Chaudhuri has no hesitation in declaring that "Despite its all-too-obvious inconsistencies, Hinduism is one whole" (Chaudhuri 2003:1). As Ferro-Luzzi (2001:294) says: "it is not necessary to abandon the term Hinduism or deny it the status of a religion [because of the problem of defining it]. What should be abandoned instead is the conviction that all concepts can be defined because they must possess common attributes and clear-cut boundaries". She draws support from Wittgenstein according to whom concepts used need not have common attributes and clear-cut boundaries but may be held together by "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing."<sup>4</sup> Hinduism is such a network. Ferro-Luzzi observes that concepts formed in such a way may be called 'polythetic', which cannot be defined but only exemplified.<sup>5</sup> As Balagangadhara remarks: "what makes Christianity into religion is not what makes Hinduism into a religion" (1994:22). He clarifies further that "Though the existence question of religion is cognitively interesting, it is not a definitional question" (*ibid*: 516).

Freedom to have diversity is itself an important feature of Hinduism, which can even be taken as one of its defining characteristics. This became an important feature of India itself as a country and of its culture, thanks to the influence of Hinduism. No other religion has permitted such pluralism and manifold diversity in scriptures, philosophical view points and practices as Hinduism. B P Singh (2011) calls this as *Bahudhā* approach, which means respect (not merely tolerance) for pluralism and diversity amidst an environment of peaceful co-existence, harmony and mutual understanding. The *Bahudhā* approach follows logically from belief in the two *R̥gvedic* sayings quoted in the second para of this section. It has permitted diversity not only within Hinduism, but also in relation to other faiths. Not merely tolerance but also respect for other view points, other faiths and other peoples, and openness, have characterised Hinduism almost as its most distinguishing characteristic since its very beginning. There is evidence of it not only in Sanskrit texts but in regional language literature as well. The earliest discovered (10<sup>th</sup> Century CE) Kannada text, *Kavirāja-mārga* by Nṛpatunga, says (in 3.177):

*Kasavaravembudu nere sairisalarpede para-vicharamam para-dharmamam.*

(Tolerance of ideas and faiths of others is gold itself.)

It is noteworthy that there is advocacy of this not only in texts or literature, but it was observed also in the day-to-day conduct of people, as B P Singh has shown (2011: 192-221).

The *Bahudhā* tradition, however, made Hinduism rather amorphous, which meant that it became difficult to define it in terms of its distinctive features, other than respect for diversity. There have, however, been some foolhardy attempts to define Hinduism in terms of its belief in (a) the infallibility of the *Vēdas*, (b) *Varnashrama* system confused with the caste system, (c) polytheism and (d) Nature worship including cow worship.

However, one can be a Hindu without following any of the above four features. One can be a Hindu without believing in the infallibility of the *Vēdas*. Gandhi did not believe in their infallibility and explicitly said so, and yet declared himself to be a Hindu, even a *Sanātani* Hindu. I have already explained above why Hinduism cannot be called as just a Vedic religion. I may add here that even in the early phase of Hinduism, there were many who followed the non-Vedic tradition of the *Tantras*. During the Bhakti Movements in the medieval period, there were many sant-poets who did not swear by the *Vēdas* or their infallibility, and yet contributed immensely to the dynamics and development of Hinduism.

As for the caste system being an intrinsic feature of Hinduism, as well as the attempt to describe Hinduism as Brahminism, I have refuted these contentions in a separate chapter in the book. I may only observe here that it is wrong to think that the *Vēdas*, the *Upanishads*, or the *Gita* vindicated the caste system; on the contrary, the Hindu sacred scriptures have denounced the birth-based caste system. The caste system emerged for reasons that had nothing to do with the principles and teachings of Hinduism.

Hinduism is more than polytheism and it is misleading to call it polytheistic. The *R̥gvedic* saying quoted on page 1, which in translation means that one Truth has been expressed variously by the

wise, is a powerful refutation of the commonly held view of polytheism. 'Polytheism' of Hinduism, if it can be so called at all, was only a way of permitting people to worship God in any manner or form they chose. Similarly, Hinduism is not the same as Nature Worship or animal worship, though of course Hinduism traditionally has a tremendous reverence for Nature since Vedic times. Cow worship and protection reflect respect and compassion to the animal world and at the same time our gratitude to the generosity and gentleness of the cow. Yet, there were, at any time in the long history of Hinduism, sections of people who ate beef within the Hindu society. Textual evidence suggests that beef eating was permitted even among Brahmins during the Vedic period.

What then are the distinguishing features of Hinduism that make it a religion? This elicits the question – What is religion? William James (1997: 48-74) in his celebrated lectures on '*The Varieties of Religious Experience*' warns against simple definitions of religion. Defining religion in terms of a belief in one super-human transcendental person called God, an organised institution which controls beliefs and practices of worship and conduct of followers, a single scripture, a single founder etc. are examples of simplistic ways of defining religion, based on the experience of a few selected religions like Christianity. These definitions do not fit other religions which are no less genuine. Some of the 'secular' and leftist intellectuals in India question the status of Hinduism as a religion on these grounds. Their attack on recent trends of intolerance among some followers of Hinduism is quite understandable, but not their questioning the very status of Hinduism itself as a religion. A better strategy is to remind these errant followers of Hinduism how they are defying the very characteristic of Hinduism which distinguished it from other religions. Toynbee observed: "*One of the most prominent characteristics of Hindu religion was the spirit of live and let live* and, in this respect, of all six higher religions, Hinduism is the one that has been the most frank in acknowledging its continuity with the past and the most pious in cultivating it" (Toynbee 1961: X: 220; emphasis added).

However noble and laudable the philosophy of 'Live and Let Live' may be, it cannot be the only or exclusive criterion for a religion. Belief in an all-powerful, all-controlling intervening personal God cannot be a criterion since there are religions like Jainism and Buddhism, which are religions in their own right, but are agnostic. The concept of God can vary from religion to religion, and each concept can give a sublime religious experience and fulfillment. There is no verifiable way to assert that only one concept is true and others are false.

William James took religion to mean "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [and women] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (1997:53). However, as a definition, this is unduly restrictive, as it requires faith in the Divine, and rules out community or collective scope for religious behaviour. A religion can be termed as a particular system of faith and worship, but this would not do justice to a religion like Hinduism which is pluralist in character and incorporates several systems of faith and worship.

Swami Vivekananda treated religion both as a science and an art. He said, "Religion is the science which discovers the transcendental in nature through the transcendental in man" (CWSV Vol.8: 20). "Religion is [also] the art whereby the brute is raised unto a man" (CWSV Vol.5: 409). Though both

these statements are very insightful, describing important roles of a religion, they may not serve as *definitions* of religion. I think it is enough for a religion to be treated as a religion, if it meets the following requirements in a mutually complementary way: (1) It should have a philosophy (– not necessarily a singular one) or, more accurately, metaphysics, which deals with pursuit of Truth, – Truth as found or experienced by the savants of the religion, its different expressions, including day-to-day life. This metaphysics would also go into basic but abstract questions like what is Being, what is Knowing, the relations between the Truth, the phenomenal Universe and human beings. Gandhi asserted that Truth is God, and there is no God other than Truth. Metaphysics is intermeshed with Theology. Theistic religions have a belief in God, personal or impersonal, or both, and also in related beliefs. (2) It should have moral philosophy to guide its followers in day-to-day conduct, not only towards other persons, but also towards one's own self. (3) It should show a way of Realisation of Truth, of transcending the day-to-day struggle of life and thus achieving liberation, or salvation – either in this world itself or the other world after death, or both. In other words, it should explain how to do 'Sādhana' as we call it in Hinduism. All major religions including Hinduism meet these requirements. The subsequent Chapters in the first part of this book explain how Hinduism meets these requirements. In the process, the question of 'What is Hinduism' is answered. The first Part also has a chapter on *what is not Hinduism*, and takes up the issue of why Hinduism is not Brahminism, and why it is not Caste system either.

## 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, ‘*Vimarshyetaḍ aśheṣheṇa 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 *Mahabharata*, 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 inequalitarian

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.

Non-violence (*ahimsa*) of Hinduism in Gandhian perspective was not just a passive concept of avoiding violence; in fact, it required its practitioner to be socially engaged, proactively kind and caring. An important aspect of the Gandhian perspective thus is its emphasis on selfless social service. For Gandhiji, Truth or God was not something to be sought on some desolate and distant mountain peak, but to be sought only through removing the sorrow of others, empowering them in the process. Many others in the modern phase of Hinduism shared his views; nevertheless Gandhi was the most distinguished. He did even more. Even as he believed in non-violence as a basic value to be followed for its own sake, he also saw its potential to be used as the means of fighting injustice and oppression. J B Kripalani, a close follower and co-worker of Gandhi, tells Fred Blum when interviewed: “There are two kinds of non-violence. One is the non-violence of Christ. It has no social implication, it is for the salvation of the soul. ... What distinguishes Gandhiji is that he made non-violence as an instrument for correcting political, social and economic wrongs.” (see Thakkar and Mehta 2011:75). Gandhi’s distinctive contribution was to initiate and sustain constructive social and political change on a large scale, to revolutionize thinking among millions not only in India but also outside, and empowering them. His pro-active non-violence had a liberating potential, and enabled not only himself to find truth but also many others. When he was in South Africa, he recognised his life’s mission – to work for the oppressed and the deprived and end their oppression through a non-violent struggle (*satyagraha*), with no ill will against the oppressors. He could easily see the similarity in apartheid in South Africa and untouchability in India and strove to end both. He derived inspiration for selfless service as much from Christianity and Islam, as from Hinduism and Jainism. He saw in this the very core of religion and true spirituality. Indian religions, including Hinduism, have a long tradition of, and scriptural backing to selfless service which Gandhi rediscovered.

This makes the Gandhian perspective socially engaged and explicitly so. He did not look upon Hinduism, or any religion, as a bundle of rituals and metaphysical texts. A religion has to be lived in a way that brings out our love, compassion, and altruistic nature to the fore. It has to make us socially engaged to eradicate poverty, hunger, ill health, illiteracy and ignorance in the society at large. It is not enough to meditate in isolation and attain individual liberation. It is more important to selflessly strive for the uplift of our society and help the needy.

The relevance of the Gandhian perspective becomes conspicuous in interrelations between different faiths or religions. He insisted upon mutual respect and understanding and not mere tolerance. He admitted that each religion had a key to the understanding of Truth, and it is erroneous and even harmful to make comparisons and claim superiority of particular religions. No religion has a monopoly over God or salvation. He therefore was a bitter critic of proselytisation and conversions, which only spoil mutual trust and respect and create bitterness. While he deplored conversions, he welcomed convergence, though he ruled out any idea of a universal religion common to all as the end product of such a convergence process. Separate religious identities would remain and even be cherished, but as Amartya Sen (2006) said, religious identity is only one of the many identities of a person, and we should not allow this one identity to obliterate all other identities and even the idea of a common human identity. Sen's advice is entirely consistent with the Gandhian perspective on religion.

The Gandhian perspective on Hinduism is not his innovation or invention. This is so in all its aspects – its emphasis on reasoning combined creatively and constructively with faith, on openness to fresh thoughts and view points, on ethics of Truth and Non-violence as the core of Hinduism, on mutual respect between religions, on being socially engaged, and on the dignity of each individual human being. It is Hinduism which imparted these values to his perspective, and it is through this perspective that he viewed Hinduism. It was an utterly mutual relation. As Fischer observes, 'Gandhi's intellectual receptivity and flexibility are characteristics of the Hindu mind' (1998: 427). Gandhi was a chip of the old block of Hinduism. It is not possible to understand Gandhi without his Hinduism; nor is it possible to really understand Hinduism without a Gandhian perspective.

### 3. IS RELIGION NECESSARY?

Religion had a sway over man almost since the beginning of civilisation everywhere. It pervaded almost all the spheres of man's life – food, marriage, social relations, dress code, education, entertainment and polity. In the process, it also became too powerful and even tyrannical. Though, as Swami Vivekananda observed, religion raised the brute to the status of a human being, the reverse also took place. Heinous brutalities took place in the name of religion consciously and deliberately. – flaying human beings alive, burning people alive, unjustified incarceration, blinding and maiming. Europe during its 'Dark Ages' before the Enlightenment Era, had so many of these cruelties routinely perpetrated in blind belief that questioning religious dogmas became an important task of the thinkers who led the Enlightenment Era. These cruelties were perpetrated on all who dared to differ, particularly the scientists who came up with new findings and perspectives. Hatred of people following other religions provided another alibi for cruelties against the so-called heathens or infidels. Though oppression of other faiths and violent resistance to new ways of thinking was not a conspicuous feature of ancient India, Hindu society (if not Hinduism) cannot escape from blame in regard to at least discrimination against *Shudras* and untouchables. Thus, ultimately, the question of whether religion is necessary, or an evil best avoided, depends much on what we mean and imply by religion.

It was against this background of the Dark Ages when blind religious belief dominated, that Immanuel Kant, eminent philosopher of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and a leader of Enlightenment, gave the clarion call to people to dare to think for themselves (*Sapare Aude!*). The Enlightenment Era ushered

in the age of modernisation and stimulated new thinking on rationalism and secular humanism, which did not need – at least as claimed – religion to make human beings morally aware and sensitive. Religion had always been thought to be the fountainhead of moral values for humanity, but now religion seemed to be a very mixed bag turning out to be more a factor of hatred and sadism than peace. It was, therefore, thought that it was not needed to keep man moral. Secular humanism could do it without the evils which accompanied religion. Rational Humanism asserted that morality was derived from human experience and was meant for human survival and progress and not sourced from God or religion. It was, therefore, hoped that rationalism and secularism would take the place of religion henceforth and guide the affairs of human beings. Jurgen Habermas argued that three developments reduced the relevance and influence of religion: “First, the progress in science and technology made causal explanation possible [without recourse to metaphysical and theocentric world views]. Secondly, the churches and other religious organisations lost their control over law, politics, public welfare, education and science. Finally, the economic transformation led to higher levels of welfare and greater social security”.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, religion almost everywhere has not only survived, but seems to have come back with a bang, not excluding public and political arena. T.N. Madan (2001: 12-22) gives detailed instances of how this ‘the return of the sacred to the secular’ took place. He refers to the Iranian Revolution, the Pope’s contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Communism, the role of ‘liberation theology’ in Latin America and emergence of religious fundamentalist movements. Even countries which were not known to be very religious, such as Japan, Russia and China, have witnessed this return of the sacred. Madan notes that the midnight Christmas mass in St. Peter’s Square in Rome is watched by millions of Christians as well as non-Christians all over the world, and there is hardly any decline in the number of people doing the annual Haj Pilgrimage to Mecca. In India, there is a tremendous upsurge of masses of pilgrims attending the *Mahakumbha mela* at Prayag (named the ‘greatest show on earth’), the Sabarimalai shrine in Kerala, Vaishnodevi shrine in Jammu, and the Tirupati temple. India is not alone or unique in this ‘return of the sacred’.

Why did such resurgence of religion take place, in spite of the unprecedented progress in science and technology, which gave so much more power to human beings to control, manipulate and even maim nature? It seems obvious that all this progress in science and technology has only increased uncertainties, making man more insecure than before, and thus more prone to appeal to the unseen power for protection. In the Indian metropolitan cities, traffic congestion has increased so much that accidents are common. When a person goes for work in the morning, she or he is not sure to come back safe in one piece in the evening. While old types of epidemics may have declined, new illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and AIDS – more life-threatening than before – have increased. Nuclear stockpiles and plants have added to these insecurities. Tensions both at workplace and home have aggravated to such an extent that they have made us more impatient and psychologically unstable. Road rages are frequent which often lead to physical violence in addition to verbal abuse. Advertisements, TV serials, films and fashions have aroused the erotic so much that cases of sexual assault and even rape have become more frequent. With increased science and technology, peace has become much more elusive on all fronts. It seems obvious again that science

and technology (including progress in psychology and psychiatry) have been of little help in taming the human mind and its temptations and weaknesses. There may be drugs and techniques to deal with depression and other psychological problems in a few 'abnormal' individual cases. But they provide no solution to treat problems of the mind of the 'normal' people whose number is very large. That is where religion seems to hold promise. All religions teach taming the mind and controlling emotions like anger, lust, jealousy and hatred. Patanjali's *Yogasūtras* define yoga as '*Chitta-Vṛtti Nirodhah*' (control of the wayward tendency of the mind). A disciplined mind is a powerful asset; when it is not, it can also be a source of moral degradation and ruin for others and also one's own self. Religion has a rich potential to impart such discipline.

While science and technology have made our life comfortable, it is doubtful if they have led to or can lead to real and lasting happiness. Max Weber observed that science and its techniques do not raise the basic questions of 'whether life is worth living and when', and 'what shall we do and how shall we live?'<sup>8</sup> Hinduism and other religions have acknowledged that the purpose of life is to seek happiness, but happiness does not consist of merely personal want-satisfaction. Such narrow self-centred satiation may give some momentary happiness, but it only whets further desires and wants endlessly. The result is unhappiness and discontent rather than happiness. There is more happiness when one transcends self-centredness and identifies one's own happiness with the happiness of others. Sharing others' sorrows and joys, helping others to enhance their happiness adds meaning to one's own life. Such a person can overcome life's disappointments, frustrations and sorrows with greater ease than a self-centred discontented man. The former type of a person has a much more expanded Self than that of a narrow self-seeker. One does not have to renounce this world or life in this world for this purpose. Nor does one have to reject scientific progress and technological and economic advance. Even while living in this world, such a person can find inner contentment and peace through a disciplined and mature mind, and can contribute to making material progress such as in science, technology and economy much more meaningful, humane and sustainable.

The emphasis on inner contentment and peace by religions is quite likely to be misunderstood. Karl Marx, for example, termed religion as the opiate of the poor, making them accept their oppression and exploitation without any murmur or protest. However, religions, especially Hinduism, have never glorified involuntary poverty, nor have endorsed injustice and exploitation, though they may have lauded voluntary poverty, austerity and simple living. Swami Vivekananda went so far as to declare that teaching Vedānta to the poor and the hungry is a cruelty, a sin. A restraint on the wants of the rich on the one hand and giving generous help for the poor unassumingly on the other are the two mutually complementary ways by which religions, including Hinduism, have tried to tackle the problem of poverty and hunger. It may be conceded, however, that religions till at least the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not try to provoke the poor to rise against their oppressors, because they could not have endorsed violence even if it was against injustice. It was Gandhi's unique idea to use non-violence itself as the means to morally subdue the oppressors making them yield to the demands of the oppressed. This idea would have looked ridiculous to Marx, but Gandhi actually used it against the British Empire itself. It was his religious and moral fervour and commitment that lay behind his success. Gandhi was followed in this respect by several such attempts later, as for example by the Liberation Theology in Latin America which was also inspired by religion.

But can secular or atheistic humanism and rationalism do what Gandhi did? Humanism cares for the dignity of the human, emphasizes enterprise by the human, and deplores exploitation of man by man, oppression, injustice and discrimination. It stands for peace and condemns war as the means to settle disputes. If religion is the fountain-head of moral values, commitment of secular humanism to them is no less intense. Its atheism or agnosticism is by no means rejection of ethics. Where then is the necessity of religion – a mixed bag after all? Mahatma Gandhi had pondered over this question and thought of atheistic rationalism as the Sahara desert. For this purpose, he tried to distinguish true religion based on ethics from fanaticism and narrowness, and found that in the sheer ability to inspire moral commitment, religion scores over rationalism incomparably. By nature, the humans are selfish and without the inspiring role of religion, our reasoning is more likely to be confined to serving selfish ends rather than humanistic goals. These goals cannot be served if only a few enlightened persons believe in them. The large masses of people need to have such moral commitment on a sustained basis. Mere moral exhortations and preaching may not be of much help. Using an Indian adage, morals heard through one ear, go out of the other without registering in the brain! It is in this that religion can be a great inspiration. As we will see in the chapters that follow, morality and spiritual striving (*sādhana*) complement and reinforce each other, provided that religion is understood in its genuine sense without fanaticism. If secular humanists take up such a role for the masses, they are certainly welcome. They are equally welcome to fight superstition and harmful and inhuman practices based on mistaken understanding of religion. In such a task, the roles of true religion and secular humanism also would be complementary and mutually reinforcing. But if rationalism confines itself merely to attacking faith in God, and to deploring rituals and traditions found effective in inducing faith and moral commitment and accepted as being beneficial to humanity through experience of centuries, then such rationalism may well be socially counter-productive. It may only produce hypocrites and opportunists who have faith neither in God nor in moral commitments. Social change for the better comes through participation of the masses, for whom appeal to religion can be a powerful mobiliser, though we need to be cautious about any misuse of religion for political and ulterior purposes.

The ultimate justification for a place for religion lies in the fact that human beings have an inner urge to know what lies beyond and behind the visible and the finite, and to connect our lives to it, making them more meaningful. As Nandy (1988) says, we need a theory of life and a theory of transcendence to give meaning and purpose to our lives. This is what religion provides. It can, however, be argued that it is spirituality which plays this role, and not the organised or institutionalised religion. Organised religion divides humanity into ‘us’ and ‘them’, while spirituality does not. This is certainly a valid point, but it is important to remember that the purpose of religion is to facilitate spirituality, and since there are various paths to spirituality, there are various religions. True religion is essentially spiritual and humane, and not ritualised to the extent that external forms of worship obliterate spirituality and humanism. It is often the external forms of worship which divide people, but religious leaders should remember that external symbols and rituals of religion are only instruments and not *essentials* of a religion. If there is any conflict between spirituality and

being humane on the one hand and religion or its external forms on the other, the latter should give way to the former. Any attempt to organise and institutionalise spirituality results, however, in the establishment of a religion. Philosophers like Jiddu Krishnamurthy endorsed spirituality and humane compassion, but not organised religion. His skepticism about the latter was so much that he urged pursuing spirituality individually without even relying on a Guru. But religion can have a place of its own so long as it is subservient to spirituality and humane compassion. Religion can even help spirituality in being socially engaged, and prevent it from being escapist. Religion when combined with politics, however, can become a dangerous cocktail; it drives out the best in religion and brings in the worst of politics. It crushes reasoning and enthrones fanaticism. It is neither true religion nor good politics. Religion is at its best only when away from politics.

Ultimately, the question of justification of religion cannot be reduced to the issue of faith vis-à-vis reason. Though religion involves faith, it cannot be a blind, fanatical and unreasonable faith. For example, if a religion says that a person born in a certain community can have no human rights and no right to dignity and equal treatment just because of birth, it cannot be a true religion. Similarly if a religion says that all people not believing in it should either be converted or killed or deported or treated as second class citizens, it cannot be a true religion. Wrongs owing to such irrational and inhuman beliefs in religions cannot, however, be attributed to true religions which stand by reasonableness, humaneness and universally accepted moral values. Since all religions are mixed bags, there is need to separate the grain from the chaff, the genuine and reasonable from the false and irrational. Even faith cannot be devoid of reason, which was Gandhi's belief, as seen from the preceding section. But Gandhi also felt that 'attribution of omnipotence to reason' is as bad as idolatry. He said:

"I do not know a single rationalist who has never done anything in simple faith. ... But we all know millions of human beings living their more or less orderly lives because of their child-like faith in the maker of us all. ... I plead not for suppression of reason, but for due recognition of that in us which sanctions reason itself." (quoted in Fischer 1998: 308).

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Translation is by the author, from the original quoted in Kane 1990, Vol. V, Part II, p.1629, fn 2612.
2. We find the use of the word, 'Hindus', for the first time perhaps in *Tarikku'l Hind* or *Kitabul Hind* by Al-Biruni (973-1048CE), an Iranian by origin, who became well known as a mathematician and astronomer. He came to India in the wake of invasion by Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. See Qeyamuddin Ahmad (2005).
3. There is written evidence to this in '*Hindu-Turk Samvad*' by the Marathi Sant, Eknath (1533-99 CE). See Wagle (1997: 139-41)
4. As quoted in Ferro-Luzzi (2001: 295), taken from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1976) – *Philosophical Investigations*, Tr. By G E M Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Para 66.
5. Ferro-Luzzi (2001) lists some features of Hinduism such as worshipping Rama, Krishna, Shiva and Ganesh and belief in *Karma*, *dharma* and *moksha*, and respect for (not necessarily adherence to) asceticism and vegetarianism as 'prototypical'. Her insistence on avoiding claims to essentiality of different criteria for defining Hinduism and absolute statements, is helpful in understanding Hinduism.
6. For example, code of ethics (*dharma*) common to all *varnas* was supposed to be basic and absolute. The separate *dharma*s applicable to respective *varnas* could be said to be relative. The whole system of *varnas* could be said to be of only instrumental value, in so far they contributed to the stability and sustenance of the *then* society. When the *varna dharma* conflicted with the basic values of compassion, dignity of all human beings, equity and equality, there could be no doubt that the basic values would prevail.
7. Jurgan Habermas's views in his book *Between Naturalism and Religion* (esp. the last chapter on 'Religion in the Public Sphere') as paraphrased by K N Panikkar (2009).
8. Weber said this quoting Leo Tolstoy. cf. Madan (2001: 10).





# 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 (*Ekamevadvitiyam*, 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.

Interestingly, there are several accounts in different texts of how the cosmos or the world came into being. But none of them suggest that the world is false or illusory. For example, in two places of *Rgveda* (10.81.1 and 10.5.7), God is said to have brought the world out of himself and entered into it. In the famous *Purushasukta* of *Rgveda* (10.90), the world is said to have come out of the Purusha or the Primeval Being, using the allegory of a sacrifice. The *Taittiriya Brahmana* implies that God is both the material and efficient cause of the Universe. That is, the world was created out of God himself as his own part (material cause), and He created it out of his will and intelligence (efficient cause). Thus there are both accounts – the world as a creation resulting from the Divine will (as in the *Nasadiya Sukta* of *Rgveda*, x.129), and evolution of the world from God himself. (Harshananda 2008, Vol.I: 438). Though Shankara used the word *Maya* to indicate how the real nature of Brahman is projected upon and is thus hidden by the world of name and form, *māyā* has been used by others to indicate the power of God by which He created or brought forth the world out of himself. The world is thus his manifestation. It is, therefore, important not to be misled by Shankara's choice of words, *mithyā* and *māyā*. The misunderstanding that Advaita views the world as false or illusion has led to serious criticisms of Hinduism (and even other Indian religions) that we are so other-worldly that we have no serious interest in the world, that we are therefore indifferent to poverty, hunger, illness and such other human deprivations, and that such a view of the world cannot provide any basis to any code of ethics or a theory of ethics.<sup>1</sup> As argued here, this criticism is not valid even for Advaita. But even if what the critics said were true of Advaita (which actually is not), such critics have unfairly assumed that the Advaita view is representative of the whole of Hinduism with all its various schools and even of all Indian religions at least in this respect (which again is not true).

Support to Advaita view of basic reality comes from an unexpected source – the Quantum physics, according to which the basic reality consists of particles (see Capra 1992). But does it mean, therefore, that the matter as we see is illusory and false? The table which I use for writing this is very real and of immense significance to me, though the reality behind it may be quanta. Similarly the world also may be a matter of form even if its basic essence is the Brahman. In the practical day-to-day world, called *vyavahara*, I cannot afford to ignore the world, because in such a world 'I' operate as a part of this world. Shankara acknowledges this and recognizes two forms of reality – *Vyavaharika Satya* (the reality of the practical world) and *Paramarthika Satya* (the ultimate reality). Where else but through this world can we realise the ultimate reality? Shankara was emphatic on the point that even if the world is a play or a drama of the Brahman, we have to play our role as morally responsible human beings. There is an anecdote from the life of Shankara about our practical roles. As is well known, he travelled extensively throughout the length and breadth of India to propagate his philosophy. In a forest he was passing through, he and his disciples spotted an elephant coming and they immediately took to their heels. Once they reached a place of safety, one of the disciples asked him in a lighter vein why he ran, wasn't the elephant *mithyā* (false)? Shankara replied, 'So was my running' (*mama palayanam api mithyā*)!

Though there is a separate chapter in the book on the moral philosophy of Hinduism, we may briefly note an ethical implication of the Advaita view here: since everything is divine, both human beings and nature have to be treated with respect and dignity due to them. I have to treat others in the same way I would like others to treat me and wish well of others. I have to have faith that these wishes will be effective and materialize both for me and others.

Interestingly, in the very conceptualisation of the nature of this ultimate reality, there are moral dimensions. Though the Brahman is said to be beyond description and even *nirguna*, that is, beyond attributes, certain attributes have always been assigned to It. The Upanishads describe the Brahman as *Sat* (existence, Being), *Chit* (consciousness or pure awareness) and *Ananda* (Bliss, ecstasy, pure joy). These three are said to be not just attributes but they constitute the very essence of Brahman. There is also the concept of *Saguna* Brahman which becomes relevant particularly when in manifestation. Reality is often paradoxical and may not always be subject to the criterion of consistency at a mundane level. Thus Brahman is both *Nirguna* and *Saguna*. This dilemma comes out clearly in a very insightful and charming Marathi poem by Sant Jnaneshwara (also called Jnanadev) who started the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century CE. It is given below both in the original and in translation.

*Tuza saguna mhanu ki nirguna re,  
Saguna nirguna eku Govindure/  
Anumanena Anumanena  
Shruti 'Neti Neti' mhanati Govindure /  
Tuza sthula mhanu ki Sukshma re,  
Sthula sukshma eku Govindure /  
Tuza drshya mhanu ki adrshya re,  
Drshya adrshya eku Govindure /  
Nivrtti prasade Jnanadeva bole,  
Bapa Rakhumadevivaru Vitthalure /*

What shall I call you - Saguna or Nirguna?

Both Saguna and Nirguna Govinda are one and the same!

With lot of thought upon thought

Shruti said 'Not This, Not This', Oh Govinda !

What shall I call you - Gross or Subtle?

Both Gross and Subtle Govinda are one and the same!

What shall I call you - Visible or Invisible?

Both Visible and Invisible Govinda are one and the same!

Blessed by Nivrtti, Jnanadeva says,

Our Father, the Spouse of Rakhumadevi,

Vitthala is the same!

Whatever you call Him, *Saguna* or *Nirguna*, Gross or Subtle, Visible or Invisible, *Vitthala*, the Supreme, is the same! This is the conclusion of the mystic poet Jnanadeva. He was also a great philosopher and the author of *Jñāneshwari*, a Marathi version of the Gita, which is more of a poetic commentary than a mere translation. Jñāneshwara's conclusion about the Brahman being both *Nirguna* and *Saguna* is put in a different expression by Arvind Sharma. He takes the simile of H<sub>2</sub>O which is in a sense *nirguna*, but becomes *saguna* once it takes the form of ice, water or vapour (Sharma – 2000: 3). The same *Nirguna* Brahman becomes a personal God too, and becomes *Saguna* *Ishwara* of the relative or dualistic world amenable to devotion and love from those who seek Him. Even Shankara saw no contradiction or inconsistency between his Advaita philosophy and his composition of *stotras* (verses of devotional praise) for several popular deities of Hinduism. These *stotras* by him are known for their lucid language and mellifluous poetry, and at the same time serve as stepping stones to the realisation of the Ultimate. There has, thus, been no difficulty in conceptualising the ultimate *Nirguna* Brahman as personal God or deity, an intervening God, who can bring peace, prosperity and happiness to devotees who propitiate Him.

The Brahman, is represented by the mystic sound of *Om* or Aum. It is believed that it was the primordial sound emanating from the Brahman, and was the first step towards His manifestation as cosmos or cosmic creation. *Om* is the symbol of vibrations of the primal energy which pervades the whole cosmos, including vibrations which may not be heard by the human ear (the ultrasonic and the subsonic). It is the symbol of His transcendence as well as immanence in the world. *Om* is a combination of three sounds – A, U and M, which reflect the Brahman's essence – *Sat*, *Chit* and *Ananda*. Hindus while conveying their deep respect and adoration for their respective favourite deities, invariably use *Om* as prefix to the deity's name, because they take their deity as the One Supreme. For example, *Om Namah Shivaya* (I bow to the Supreme – Lord Shiva), or, *Om Namō Vasudevaya* (I bow to the Supreme – *Vasudeva*), or *Om Namō Ganapataye* (I bow to the Supreme - *Ganapati*). This incidentally also shows that Hindus, even while worshipping many deities, take each of them to be the forms or versions of the One Supreme. It is thus misleading to call Hinduism as polytheistic in the Western sense of the term.

*Om* is called as *Pranava*, and referred to as 'It' or 'That' (*Tat*), rather than as 'He' or 'Him'. The Supreme is beyond gender. But it does not mean that the Hindu conception of the Supreme One is only the Primal Energy which brought forth the creation. The Supreme in the Hindu conception is not only Energy (*Shakti*), but also *Sat*, *Chit* and *Ananda*. The Supreme is pure consciousness, while physical energy is not considered to have a consciousness of itself. The Supreme, even in the aspect of *Chit*, is also pure intelligence, compassion and love for devotees (*Karunānidhi*, *Bhakta-vatsala*). Its love is pure bliss, *Ananda*. It is out of this supreme blissful love, that creation took place with the Divine permeating and manifesting in all life forms. That is why the Supreme can be worshipped not only as Father, but also as Mother, or even in animal forms! Animals, like humans, are also permeated by the Brahman. The Supreme is seen in all these forms and as also beyond them. Hinduism has male deities – Rama, Krishna, Shankara, Ganapati, Shanmukha, Ayyappa and so on. It has female deities too, especially in Village Hinduism or folk Hinduism. In Village Hinduism, goddesses greatly outnumber male gods to the extent that the latter are rare. These goddesses have both a community-wise and region-wise variation. They often have different roles, each goddess with a separate 'portfolio'. Goddess *Māṛamma*

protects her devotees from epidemics that used to take a heavy toll of both human and animal life in villages and impose immense economic deprivation as well. Goddess Kattamaisamma ensures that village tanks are full. Goddess Polimeramma guards the village from robbers and invaders. Kancha Ilaiah has listed several such village deities, whom he calls Dalit gods and goddesses. They have important economic or mundane roles to fulfill. They are intimately connected with this world and its suffering which they alleviate. Ilaiah observes that the female deities are tough and robust in Village religion (Ilaiah 1996: 90-101). The Tantra school, which is close to Village Hinduism, sees the Supreme as *both* male and female – Shiva and Shakti being its two dimensions. Hinduism gives freedom to its followers to conceptualise God in any form they like. God in Hinduism is not a jealous one who spites those who worship other gods. The Lord assures in the Gita that whatever form devotees seek to worship with dedication. He accepts their worship and grants their desires.<sup>2</sup> There is no question of any quarrel between Gods, because God is one and the same. It may be noted that the belief that all forms of God are of the same one God, need not necessarily mean acceptance of the *advaita* view that all or everything is One. Unity of God holds irrespective of whether this world is treated as separate from Him/Her or only as a manifestation of His/Her.

The *dvaita* view, for example, regards the cosmos as separate from God but as dependent on Him, and yet believes in the unity of God, even if worshipped in different *saguna* forms of the devotee's choice. Visible or invisible, he is *saguna*, an intervening personal God, accessible to each and every devotee. Among the qualities attributed to him are that he is all-powerful (*Sarva-shakta*), all-knowing (*Sarvajna*), and present everywhere (*Sarva-sthita*). He is also compassionate and merciful (*Karunamayī*, *Dayaghana*) to all irrespective of any distinctions and without discrimination, but is especially loving and lovable for His devotees (*Bhakta-vatsala*). He is also *Satyam* (Truth), *Shivam* (auspicious, good) and *Sundaram* (beautiful, charming, with magnetic personality). These epithets correspond to *Sat*, *Chit* and *Ananda* referred to above. *Satyam* arises from the existence principle, *sat*, since Truth alone exists. *Chit* as consciousness or awareness can be interpreted in terms of three dimensions: existential consciousness, moral consciousness and aesthetic consciousness (which can appreciate *Sundaram* and leads to *Anandam*).

Interestingly, all these above mentioned virtues including those of power and strength, are sought among people themselves. All civilisations have been striving to inculcate what is true, good and beautiful since ancient times. Dialogues of Socrates with friends and disciple basically centred around questions of what constitutes truth, goodness and beauty.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately we are not very certain about what constitutes these virtues, and even to the extent we know it, we are aware that we are not perfect in inculcating them. But if they are ideals to be followed, there should be some model where they are present in a perfect form, and thus they were sought in God. This is what Hinduism also did. This was an ingenious way of combining the ethical with the religious or spiritual. Our search for truth, goodness and source of beauty led inevitably to search for God. What is more, God was viewed as a repository of all these virtues, in harmony with each other. In the case of the human world, there can be discordance between them; a truth may not necessarily be good or beautiful. But there is no such discordance in God, since He is perfect in whom everything is reconciled. The attribution of perfection to God is an admission of our own yearning for perfection.

The significance of *Satyam*, *Shivam* and *Sundaram* as attributes of the Divine, for understanding any religion, particularly Hinduism, is great enough to justify some elaboration. *Satyam* is the first

attribute of the Divine, which means not only the existence principle, but also the moral principle. Gandhi defined Hinduism as constant search for truth.<sup>4</sup> Initially he used to say that God is truth, and search for God is search for truth and living a life of truth. Later he said Truth is God, and there is no other God, and everything other than Truth is illusion. The pursuit of truth is itself the pursuit of God. In his own words, “Instead of saying that God is truth, I say that Truth is God. ...My conduct has been unconsciously based on that realisation. I have known God only as Truth. There was a time when I had doubt about the existence of God, but I never doubted the existence of Truth. This Truth is not something material but pure intelligence. It rules over the Universes; therefore, it is Ishwara (the Lord)”.<sup>5</sup> He also believed that God in everyone means that every human being is capable of following truth, and thus he trusted every one. His trust, as Fischer observes, exalted ordinary human beings including illiterate peasants and workers (Fischer 1998: 374), and gave them such moral strength that shook a whole empire and won them freedom. Truth for Gandhi, was not just an abstraction, but an agenda for action. The search for truth meant that wherever there is untruth in the form of injustice and corruption, it must be fought so that the truth can reign.

Consistent with the culture of constantly seeking Truth, open, frank and free dialogues have played an important role in the development of Indian religions. The search for truth leads to tolerance and humility, and also therefore, to liberalism and pluralism. It also made Hinduism open to new streams of thought consistent with the principle of truth. As Gandhi said, the beauty of Hinduism lies in its all-embracing inclusiveness and whatever substance is there in any religion, is also found in Hinduism.<sup>6</sup>

The question of what is truth has bothered Indian thinkers right from the Vedic period. The concept of satyam is cognate with the concept of *ṛtam*. The term *Ṛtam* occurs in the *Rgveda* more often and also with multiple meanings depending on the context, - cosmic law behind the functioning of the physical universe, the moral law which makes for the smooth functioning of humanity and achieves welfare for all, and aesthetic law that lends beauty and harmony both to the world of nature and human beings. The term *satyam* was initially used in ontological or existential context and, in its ultimate and absolute sense, Truth and God were the same. Knowledge by itself was not Truth, but only a means of striving for Truth. Even the Vedas were aids to know Truth, but were not themselves Truth per se. With the passage of time, the term *satyam* began to be used more often than *ṛtam* and, in the process, acquired moral dimension too. While philosophically the existential aspect of *satyam* was stressed - derived from *sat* (being, existing), when it came to be applied to mundane matters the moral aspect was stressed. It does not mean that the moral aspect of truth is different from Truth as God, but only that the moral aspect is also part of the same Truth. As conflicts between values became apparent, the *Mahabharata* took a consequential or welfare view of ethics, or of what constituted moral truth. It becomes clear in the following verse in its *Shantiparva* (329-13):

*Satyasya vachanam shreyah satyadapi hitam vadet /*

*Yadbhutihitam atyantam etat satyam matam mama //*

(It is good to speak the truth; to speak what does good is still better. What is ultimately good for the welfare of all beings is what I consider as Truth.)

Though search for truth can be endless for humanity, Hinduism believes that for an individual it need not be so at least as far as the spiritual truth is concerned. Every person can realize truth intuitively,

which is also the goal of human existence. When this truth is realized, it is liberation (*mukti*) even while leading a normal life. What distinguishes human beings from animals is not only the observance of *dharma* (ethical code of conduct) by the former, but also that while a human being has this goal, animal life is mired in day-to-day struggle for survival. Swami Anandashram (1902-1966) expressed this goal in the following words:

‘Our sages have held in the Upanishads that the emancipation of our soul lies in its realizing the ultimate truth of our existence. When we know the multiplicity of things as the final truth, we try to augment ourselves by the external possession of them; but when we know the Infinite Self as the final truth, then, through our union with it we realize the joy of our Soul. Our sages could not think of our surroundings as separate or inimical. Their view of truth did not emphasise the difference, but rather the unity of all things.’<sup>7</sup>

Any person, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or level of learning can attain this Truth and experience the joy that comes with it. The study of the Vedas is not indispensable for it. When the untouchable saint poet of Maharashtra, Chokhamela (14<sup>th</sup> century), realised it, he expressed his experience in the following poem:

*‘Filled with joy is the whole self,  
I saw He Himself within me.  
Seeing ceased,  
Looking was erased,  
He filled my being with wonder’<sup>8</sup>*

**Shivam** means auspiciousness benevolence or goodness in the sense of promoting welfare. Goodness in the sense of moral integrity comes under the connotation of truth, but goodness in the sense of taking care of, nourishing and creating happiness comes under the attribute of *Shivam*. Once God takes such an attribute, She/He becomes a personal God, amenable to prayer and personal communication, merciful and loving. It is because of the loving nature, God is seen as Mother, for whom all living beings are children. Grace is another English equivalent close to *Shivam*. *Shivam* is not confined exclusively to Lord Shiva or Shankara, though both ‘Shiva’ and ‘Shankara’ mean the auspicious and the gracious one, who does good. *Shivam* is an attribute of God in every religion where there is a belief in personal God. He or She need not necessarily be visible in some form, but may also be formless or invisible. A personal God stimulates or inspires devotion and love, or Bhakti, to use the popular Sanskrit word. Whether such personal God is in one or many forms is entirely upto the devotee in Hinduism. It is the form which makes the devotee closest to the Divine that is selected, which thus is truly personal. The metaphor of *Rasalila* brings out the ‘personal’ aspect of Shivam clearly. In *Rasalila*, each *Gopi* (milkmaids who adore Kṛṣṇa) feels she is physically close to her Lord who is dancing with her only.

When the Lord is so good, compassionate and merciful to us, we are also expected to reciprocate it, and one way of this reciprocation is for us also to be similarly good, compassionate and forgiving. If Satyam requires us to have truthfulness, Shivam requires us to be kind and considerate, and be

helpful. If Satyam asks us to be pure at heart, in deed and speech, Shivam asks us to be generous in action and friendly in mind and conduct. That is how we find and realise God in humanity and even in nature at large.

**Sundaram** is the third important dimension of God, which means Beauty. Because She/He is Beauty, She/He is also Bliss (*Anandam*). It is this beauty of the Divine that inspired Vedic *Rshis* and made them poets too. The following hymn from *Rgveda* (II. 13-7) illustrates the tribute paid to the Divine who is the source of beauty in nature:

*“Thou who by Eternal Law hast spread about  
flowering and seed bearing plants,  
and streams of water;  
Thou who has generated the matchless lightning  
in the sky;  
Thou, Vast, encompassing vast realms, art a fit subject for our song”* <sup>9</sup>

There is another verse which looks upon God as a poet and the universe as his poem. Manifold forms (*pururupa*) of the beauty of nature and its elements are His poems.<sup>10</sup> God is seen as the Supreme artist who expressed himself in terms of the Universe for the mere joy of creation, just as a human artist would do. The natural elements like wind, fire and the Sun so fascinated the Vedic *Rshis* that they conceptualised them as deities or gods, and sang hymns in their praise though, at the same time, they were taken as the manifestation of the One (*Ekam*). Probably, the Vedic *Rshis* were the first in the world to see God as Beauty and to realise that an aesthetic experience was also an authentic spiritual experience. They also expressed their awe and appreciation in beautiful lyrical form - the first known poetry in the world literature. It is no surprise that Hindus developed music, dance, painting, sculpture and architecture as different ways of worship of the Divine Beauty. The language of music is probably more suitable to invoke divinity than the language of words in prose. That was why the Vedas put so much emphasis on music, as did the Bhakti movement through its devotional songs. Though secular art also had its place, especially in Hindustani Classical Music, most of the art forms were expressions of religious devotion. Hinduism thus encouraged music and other art forms quite liberally.<sup>11</sup>

The awe and appreciation for nature has also expressed itself in the form of nature worship, including worship of plants and animals. Nature or universe itself (including all its life forms) is not God in Hinduism but only a partial manifestation of God. God, according to Hinduism, is not only immanent in the universe, but also transcends it. God is not the same but greater than the universe. The universe shines because of Him, as is clear from a verse in the *Mundakopanishad* (II. 2-10): ‘*Tameva bhantamanubhāti sarvam, tasya bhasa sarvamidam vibhāti.*’ (All shine by the reflection of His shining, and by His splendour, all the World is splendid).<sup>12</sup> As such, Hinduism is more sublime and complex than simple Pantheism. Hinduism does not have to disown either Pantheism or Paganism; they are a part of the rich tradition of Hinduism. “In the pagan vision, the gods, nature and mankind were bound together in sympathy” (Armstrong 1999: 41).<sup>13</sup> Though Hinduism transcends both Pantheism and Paganism, it involves respect to nature and to the cause for its conservation, living as close to nature as possible, opening the mind to subtle cosmic laws through yoga, and appreciating the oneness of

all sentient beings. *Prāṇi-daya* (compassion for animals) and looking upon *nara* (human being) as a manifestation of *Narāyaṇa* (God) follow from this world-view. The so-called Hindu polytheism is essentially due to the diversity of nature, which is recognised as the several ways in which God manifests himself (*Rupam rupam pratirupo babhūva*, *Rgveda* 6.47.18). One can realise God as Beauty only through such a conceptualisation.

Nature is not only beautiful, but it can also be terrifying (*Ramya-bhayankara*, using Kannada poet Bendre's words). Human beings need nature to survive, but are also vulnerable to its fury. A *Rgvedic* hymn to the Sun God, while expressing awe and devotion, also prays to Him not to scorch the people with his overpowering heat. A hymn to Mother Earth (*Prthivi Sukta*) in the Atharva *Veda*, while praising her for her munificence, also prays to protect us from her anger (natural disasters). In the eleventh chapter of the Gita, the 'Cosmic Vision' of the Lord (*Vishwarūpa-darshana*) terrifies Arjuna, for what Arjuna sees is not a gentle, compassionate vision of God, but of one who dissolves the Universe, whose flaming mouth swallows whole worlds from every side. A few Western scholars have termed it as highly problematic, finding it difficult to reconcile it with the Lord's concern for *lokasangraha* (welfare and maintenance of the world) expressed in the same Gita elsewhere (Nelson 2001: 146). But this cannot lead us to conclude that the Supreme Being is cruel. Just as plants, animals and human beings go through a cycle of birth, life and death, whole solar systems, galaxies and the Universe itself undergo a cycle of creation, sustenance and dissolution as per Hinduism. The Supreme looks after all these three aspects. Without this dynamics of creation, preservation and dissolution, it is difficult to conceive of the universe, and life-cycle itself. Though, according to popular or *Purāṇic* Hinduism, these aspects are looked after respectively by Brahma, Vishnu and Ishwara, philosophical Hinduism sees all the three of them as one God only. The point is that however much human beings may want the universe/nature to be only or exclusively compassionate and kind, all the three aspects of creation, preservation and destruction are a part of the same Divine process.

It is interesting, however, that Kṛṣṇa of the same Gita who showed the terrifying spectacle of Vishwarūpa to Arjuna is also a very popular deity - loved, adored and worshipped by Hindus (at least by most of them) and is looked upon as a manifestation of the Beauty of the Supreme Being. It is significant that Rama and Kṛṣṇa are taken to be the most handsome and captivating, particularly the latter, and personification of the Beauty of the Supreme Being. Kabir, a Muslim weaver turned devotional poet, and accepted by Hindus as a saint, defined Rama as one in whom we can rejoice and have supreme enjoyment (based on the Sanskrit verb 'Rama', both 'a's pronounced as 'u' in 'cup'). Chaitanya and his followers and the present day ISKCON also look upon Krishna as an embodiment of love, beauty and bliss, who bestows infinite grace on his devotees. The *bhakti-marga* - the path of devotion - developed right from the *Rgveda* to the medieval Bhakti movement, which continued further on, has emphasised God as a source of supreme happiness both in this life and for liberation or bliss thereafter. God takes an intensely personal form here, loved and worshipped as a *sakha* (friend), father, mother, lover, guru, or simply as the Master.

Let us recall that attributes of God like *Satyam* and *Shivam* have also been looked upon as ethical values for inculcation amongst us. It holds in the case of *Sundaram* too. Creating beauty and joy in our lives means pursuit of God as *Sundaram*, subject of course to consistency with *Satyam* and *Shivam*. That is, we beautify our lives in a morally acceptable way and by doing good to others and

not by harming others. We have much avoidable ugliness in our lives, without even being aware of it. Indians are notorious for spitting and littering on the roads, breaking queues, noisy talking, and mindlessly polluting rivers. We do not even keep our temples and their surroundings clean and tidy. We have such a noble, inspiring and holistic conception of God, but we don't bring its implications in to our behaviour.

The conceptualisation of **God as Love** is typical of the *Bhakti-mārga* (the path of devotion and love to God). God in *Bhakti-mārga* transcends all the above concepts and is simply symbolised as love. This love is intensely personal and mutual and, at its highest level, is for its own sake without expectation of any material reward. The relation between devotee and God here is not one of a helpless devotee persuading a hard-to-please god to grant favours. Such a relation may be true at the initial level in *bhakti* till the devotee is sincere, but it grows itself to a higher stage where God Himself/Herself is devoted to the devotee in all compassion and love. Nirad C Chaudhuri observes:

“No Hindu god or goddess, except a minor or local goddess... in the Little Tradition, has been represented as pursuing any human being with the vindictiveness of Hera, Athena, or Aphrodite. ... Siva [Shiva] is the god of destruction in mythology, but in worship he is the god who guarantees welfare and safety, and is easily pleased. Kālī, so terrifying in her image as killer of demons, is a mother full of love and mercy. What characterises the god-man relationship in Hinduism is benignity on one side and devotion on the other” (Chaudhuri 2003: 18).

More about the *Bhaktimārga* will be discussed in the chapter 4 on ‘*Sādhanā*’ as one of the several paths to God realisation. The chapter 8 is about the Bhakti Movements which created a revolutionary phase of Hinduism, projecting religion as simply one of devotion to God, diminishing the significance of rituals and the priestly class in the society. As Bhakti was accessible to and possible for all, it opened the door to the masses as never before. Bhakti-mārga added more attributes to God, as *Dīnabandhu* or *Dīnarakshaka* (Protector of the poor), or *Dīnoddhāraka* (Uplifter of the poor). Love of God also combined with humility, honesty and readiness to help others. Love of God meant love of all, making the devotee compassionate in disposition.

Let me overview different perceptions of God in Hinduism. Hinduism cheerfully permits all imaginable perceptions of God within its fold, found in different religions of the world. Its most sophisticated and highest perception achieved in its search for Truth is that of *Ekam* (the one) Brahman, who is both transcendental and immanent. Billington (2002: 63) translates the Brahman as ‘the ground of being’, a rather cumbersome phrase, but it indicates that the Brahman is the source of all being. The Brahman is *Purnam*; nothing can be added to it, and nothing subtracted. There is nothing else beside it. It is boundless, or infinite (*Anantam*). It is not void or *shūnyam*, as sometimes wrongly interpreted. It can be felt or experienced but cannot be described. The search for God here is not outward, but inward. Even a prayer to God is more to invoke internal strength and potential, rather than to appeal to an external source, for ultimately the Self is the Brahman in the Advaita or monistic view. In this view, neither the self nor the world is separate from of the Brahman. (We shall discuss in the next section what is Self and how it is viewed differently by different schools in relation to the Divine).

Hinduism, including Advaita Vedānta, mercifully permits the Brahman to co-exist with other perceptions of God, including personal gods and deities. A believer has an earnest need to establish a personal relationship with the Supreme, and the concept of an impersonal Absolute is not convenient

here; it is not emotionally satisfying. The devotee wants a God whom he or she can love, and experience His/Her love in return. Thus Hinduism also has a monotheistic conception of God like Christianity and Islam, - a personal God called variously as *Ishwara* or *Bhagavan*. It can be perceived as formless (*Nirakara*), or as with some form (*Sakara*) but with attributes in either case – compassionate, responsive to prayers, and upholder of justice, apart from being omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. While worshipping or meditating upon, such a personal God is taken to be the same as the Brahman. There are personal gods in feminine form also – Durga or Shakti or Devi (Goddess of strength and power), Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth) and Saraswati (Goddess of learning, knowledge and arts).

Hinduism is ‘ditheistic’ too, a term used by Billington (2002:23) - not to be confused with Dvaita or dualistic philosophy in Hinduism. Ditheism in Hinduism consists in seeing God, whether personal or impersonal, as two principles rather than a single one - male and female, *Purusha* and *Prakriti* or Shiva and Shakti, corresponding to Yang and Yin in Taoism. It was the recognition of this ditheism which dominated *Tantra*, and led to the exploration of spiritual significance of sexuality. Though mainstream Hinduism has regarded this interest in sexuality as an aberration, ditheism is not an insignificant feature of Hinduism. *Lingam* is, for example, a symbol of union of Shiva and Shakti. Krishna is also normally worshipped together with Rādhā; Nārāyaṇa or Vishṇu with Lakshmi, and Rāma with Sītā, rather than alone in male form. Billington’s ditheism is, however, in another context - God *vis-a-vis* Satan, characteristic of particularly Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam. Popular Hinduism also has the concept of *rakshasas*, evil spirits and forces, one of God’s numerous tasks being to destroy them. But in Hinduism, there is no concept of a single evil force corresponding to Satan constantly tempting humans to sin. Sin is seen more as a result of one’s own ignorance.

Polytheism has been regarded almost as a defining characteristic of Hinduism in popular imagination, particularly in the west, but wrongly so. Seeing the enormous diversity in nature, a perception developed, no doubt, during the early Vedic period, that different gods controlled different aspects of nature, but a unity (*ekam*) behind this diversity was also perceived. Polytheism is more the result of liberalism in Hinduism, permitting its followers to worship God in any form they like. Thus, different people may have different images of God, and possibly some persons may like to have more than one image of God. Polytheism in Hinduism is also a reflection of the Hindu tendency to assimilate different traditions and customs, allowing at the same time continuation of their identity. Narasimha, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Tirumala (Venkatesha), Shiva, Gaṇapati, Murugaṇ, Ayyappa and many forms of Devi were all probably local folk gods and goddesses who were assimilated into the mainstream of Hinduism and accepted by many more people than the original devotees of respective deities. Some of them may have been local heroes, eventually worshipped as *avatars* or gods. Hinduism thus became colourful and interesting, and drew many people in to its fold, though without any deliberate or self-conscious missionary zeal.

Hindus do not hesitate to crack jokes about their gods even while worshipping them, indicating a relaxed relationship between the human and the divine. A person harassed by bed bugs and unable to sleep has this to say:

*Kamale Kamala shete Harah shete Himalaye/*

*Kshirabdhau cha Harih shete manye matkuna shankaya //*

(Lakshmi sleeps on the lotus, Shiva on the Himalayas, and Hari sl[ee]ps on the Milky Ocean, – I think, because they are all afraid of bed bugs!)

The Hindu *Puranas* even mention 330 million gods. It is clear from their account that these ‘gods’ hardly correspond to God as such, but rather to more evolved beings in the scale of evolution than humans. These gods often get into trouble with *rakshasas*, personifications of evil forces, and are described in *Puranas* as approaching Vishnu to solve their problems. Even Buddhism, regarded as atheistic, has concept of several gods. These gods, both in Hinduism and Buddhism, correspond to angels in Semitic religions.

Freedom to worship God in any form also led to idol worship. This was actually a post-Buddhist development, since *Vedas* and *Upanishads* did not have idol worship. As Karen Armstrong has observed, “Despite the bad press it has in the Bible, there is nothing wrong with idolatry *per se*: it only becomes objectionable or naive if the image of God, which has been constructed with such loving care, is confused with the ineffable reality to which it refers” (Armstrong 1999: 64). Idols or icons help in concentration and, to relate and communicate to personal God in a form the devotee likes. This is considered helpful particularly in *bhakti*, if not in *jnana* and *karma*, as pathways to God-realisation.

The tendency to have a number of images of God on the part of the same set of persons created what Max Muller has termed as ‘henotheism’ or ‘kathenotheism’. Even if a person has several gods in mind, he worships one god at a time and, at that time, the worshipped God is the Supreme, others stepping back to make way for him or her, and wait for their turn with all civility! However, the real reason behind this is the conviction that in whatever form a person worships God, it reaches Him who is the One behind all forms and images. Polytheism in Hinduism is thus only an outward layer of diversity beyond which there is unity of Godhead, the ultimate or Supreme. Both idol worship and polytheism, which are interrelated, are only a stepping stone to greater and higher realisation.

A verse from *Shrimad-Bhagavatam* (1.2.11, as cited in Prabhupada 1983:75)) is of interest in this context:

*Vadanti tat tatva-vidāḥ tatvam yaj jñānam advayam /*  
*Brahmeti Paramātmēti Bhagavan iti shabdyate //*

The Truth (Essence) is termed [variously] as *Brahman*, *Paramātmān*, or as *Bhagavan* by those who know, but the Truth (*tatvam*) is the same One (*advayam*)’

The abstract Absolute can be perceived as *Paramātmān* (Supreme Soul) or in a personalised form as *Bhagavan*., worshipped either as formless or in image form.

Non-Hindus, however, may feel shocked at what they may consider as trivialisation or vulgarisation involved in image worship. Printing the images of deities on calendars and in advertisements leads invariably to littering and disposing off the pictures in ways that can hardly be called respectful and sacred. That is perhaps one of the reasons why Semitic religions and even Sikhism and Arya Samaj in India forbade idol worship. Image worship may be only a transition and a step to more serious forms of *sādhana* like contemplation and meditation. But the inherent risk of getting bogged down to idolatry, and worse still of trivializing the idols, is real. Hinduism has met the risk of profanity of idols and pictures of worship by first praying and inviting the deity being worshipped to invest its life

force or power in the idol, and at the end of worship saying goodbye to it through *visarjan pooja*. This procedure is strictly followed in all ritual worship meant to have a feel of the sacred and performed with ritual purity. Being busy with daily routine, most Hindus, however, do not have time for it. What they do is to bow before their favourite deity after morning bath, lighting an oil lamp, burning an incense stick, offering flowers, and reciting a *stotra* or two in prayer. Women do it again at dusk. In all this, only the idols or pictures installed for worship are considered sacred, but not all the pictures around in calendars and advertisements.

Even more serious risk in idol worship is viewing God as something external to us, instead of seeking Him within. In such a view, the source of strength is outside rather than within us. The Upanishadic tradition, particularly *Advaita Vedanta*, and yoga, however, have taken care of this by emphasising that idol worship at best is only a transitional or preparatory stage and God realisation is achieved when seeking is turned within. Idol worship is not at all mandatory or essential in Hinduism, and more advanced or serious seekers are encouraged to directly realise God within. But they do not frown upon or condemn idol worship, and realise its value in orienting us to the Divine.

Pantheism or animism in popular Hinduism is also a reflection of deeper realisation that God is immanent in the Universe and manifests Himself in various forms. Adoration and worship of elements of nature as deities has been an important feature of Hinduism, especially in the Vedic period. But they were all regarded either as subservient to or manifestation of the Supreme. Since Hinduism regards God as transcending the Universe, being greater than the Universe, it is misleading to define Hindu perception of God in terms of pantheism or animism.

A very interesting aspect of Hinduism is that it has permitted even atheism within its generous space. Whether *Advaita Vedanta* is regarded as atheism depends on how theism and atheism are defined. If theism is narrowly defined as belief only in a monotheist exclusive, external personal god, all the six major orthodox schools of Hindu Philosophy (*Shatdarshanas*) can be termed as atheist including even *Advaita*. But this would be too restrictive a view of theism. *Advaita Vedanta* is monistic rather than monotheist and believed in the impersonal Absolute, though it did not preclude faith in personal gods as a preparatory step to *Jnana* or Realisation. These schools were not concerned with a simple exclusive external personal god. Moreover, *Nyaya* and *Vaisheshika* schools developed a logically argued secular philosophy, and even Yoga could be considered to be universal and secular as it did not need belief in a personal external god, though it also did not exclude those who have such belief. The general opinion about the six schools is that they are theist, explicitly or implicitly, and are, therefore, regarded as 'orthodox' (*astika*), in contrast to heterodox (*nastika*) schools. Leaving aside the six schools, there has been a scope for atheism in Hinduism. The most prominent of atheists were the followers of *Lokayata* propounded by Charvaka, who were rank materialists. We have more to say about the six orthodox schools and three heterodox schools in chapter 7. Though the mainstream of Hinduism has been theistic, it is important to remember that Hinduism also gave room for secular philosophy.

A question arises whether persons not believing in a personal intervening God could be called religious at all. Yes, says Billington (2002) if they are not rank materialists believing that the physical world is the end of everything. If we believe that there is something in us, which is more than purely physical, we can be religious. Buddhism and Jainism are religions, though atheistic. It is also not correct to presume that there can be no morality without believing in a personal, intervening, punishing

God. Buddhism and Jainism are no less moral than theistic Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. *Advaita Vedanta* also is no less moral than *Dvaita Vedanta*. There can be humanism and harmony even without faith in God or religion. On the contrary, narrow-minded views on religion and God (such as Christian God, Muslim God or Hindu God/s as separate from each other; or, salvation taken as possible only in one - their own - religion) have harmed the cause of world peace. Instead of compassion, such views have promoted cruelty. There is thus no case for believers in God or religion to feel superior and condemn non-believers.

## 2. THE SELF AND THE DIVINE

If the discussion in the preceding section seemed a bit abstruse, let me first summarise it briefly in a simple manner. There are at least three points of view of the Divine and Its relationship with the world. From the point of view of the Advaita (Monism) Vedānta, there is the Unity of All Existence, the Divine is *Purnam*, and there is nothing else beside It or before It or after It. The World is only a manifestation of the One Absolute Brahman, and this manifestation does not affect the Brahman a bit. It remains the same. The Supreme is immanent, and not merely transcendental. The whole cosmos is suffused with the Brahman. Once this is accepted, it is superfluous to add that it also means oneness of God (monotheism) and that viewed in whatever form, God is the same. In Vishishtadvaita (Qualified Monism), the world is a part of God; it is incorporated into God as a part of His. The world is controlled by God's will. The world is more real in this view than what is implied by treating it as only a manifestation. In the Dvaita (Dualism) philosophy, God and the world are separate from each other, neither having beginning or end, but the latter is completely dependent on God, subject to His control and its modifications by Him. But He is present everywhere in the World, and the world is very much real.

Now, where do the individual selves come in? What is the status of the individual Self? What is its relationship with the Divine? The answer is different in the three schools of Vedānta. In the case of the Advaita Vedānta, the One appears as many only through manifestation or *Maya*, and the individual self in its pure state unaffected by *Maya* is called *Ātman*. At the micro or individual level, *Maya* becomes *Avidyā* (ignorance or misunderstanding), and when the self is caught in the *Vyavaharik* (practical) world and identifies itself with body, it is called *Jīva*. When the misunderstanding is removed and the self realises its true and pure nature, it is the same as the Brahman itself in its essence as *Sachchidananda*. So, *Ātman* is the same as the Brahman.

In the Vishishtadvaita view, the *jīvas* are also parts or constituent elements in the Supreme, like droplets in the ocean, or sparks from fire. They do not have an independent existence. But they are endowed with consciousness of their own, and it is possible for them to realise their true nature as parts of the Divine, rather than as helpless entities trapped in *Samsāra* (the mundane world) separated from God. Thus in both Advaita and Vishishtadvaita school, divinity of the self is accepted. In the Dvaita view, *Jīvas* are different from God and also from the world as separate entities, but are entirely dependent upon and controlled by God. There are billions of them, and each *Jīva* is different from another *Jīva*, irrespective of whether the *Jīvas* are of human beings or of animals. The Dvaita view of *Jīva* seems to correspond well with the Christian concept of the soul. Dvaita Vedānta speaks of five basic differences (*Bhēdas*) – between God and the world, between God and soul, between the world and soul, between soul and soul, and between different constituents of the world. May it be noted that

only these five *bhēdas* are recognised, and not any *bhēda* between God and God say between Vishnu and Shiva. Thus the unity of Godhead is firmly recognised in all the schools of thought in Hinduism, though conceptualized and worshipped in different forms. But that is another matter.

It was perhaps because of the difficulty in comprehending the Advaita view, not being amenable to what can be called as common sense, and certainly not perceptible through the sense organs, its philosophers had to go to great lengths to explain and defend their *darshana* (school of philosophy). Two stories used for this purpose may be narrated here.

The first of these emphasises the importance of self-awareness. A group of ten men, wanted to cross a river on foot, which they carefully did. Since the flow of the stream was rather rapid, one of them decided to count all to see if anyone was left out. He counted up to nine and cried out – ‘Oh! Someone is missing!’. By turn, each of them similarly counted and reached the same conclusion that really someone was missing. They became agitated and started crying loudly. A passer-by came and asked what the matter was. They told him. He understood the problem immediately. He lined them up and said he would give a slap on the bottom of each, and then each one should keep the count loudly. Surely enough, the last man shouted ‘Ten!’ The passerby then told them that the problem was that they forgot to count their own selves!

The second story, which was a favourite of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, goes a step further and emphasises the importance of identifying the true nature of our Self. A shepherd went to a forest with his sheep, and found a lioness dead after delivery, and a lion cub alive near her. He took the cub home and brought it up along with his sheep, giving it milk. The cub went out to graze like other sheep, thought of itself as a sheep, and even started eating leaves of plants. One day, a lion came there hunting, and all the sheep and the lion cub started running away. The lion was wonderstruck at seeing the lion cub among sheep and behaving like a sheep. It caught hold of the frightened cub, assured it no harm, and took it to a nearby pond to show its own reflection in the water. The lion told the cub – ‘you are a lion, not a sheep; realise who you really are’. Ramakrishna says that lion performed the role of a Guru, in making the lion cub aware of its own true self.

The Upanishads have gone to great lengths probing into the true nature of the Self. More than mere thinking or intellection, they embody the essence of truth experienced through deep meditations of the wise *Rshis* and their disciples. *Rshis* were not interested in polemics; they were only dedicated to the pursuit of truth. But the Upanishads do not reflect the thought and experience of any single seer. Since many seers were involved, and the Upanishads themselves were many (supposed to be 108 in number), they do not present a logically unified, coherent single view of the Truth. They are, therefore, amenable to various interpretations, as reflected in the different schools of philosophy. The three great *Acharyas* – Shankara, Ramanjua, and Madhva – developed their separate views, all claiming support from the Upanishads, the Brahmasūtras (an aphoristic summary of the teaching of Upanishads said to be by Veda Vyasa or Bādarāyana) and the Bhagavadgītā (the Gita). On the criterion of support from these philosophical works, one cannot therefore conclude which of the *Acharyas* was correct. It is left to the personal preference and aptitude of different *sādhakas* (seekers of God Realisation) and the stage of their spiritual pursuit, to see which of the approaches or viewpoints is most suitable and has the highest appeal to them.

There is, however, a fair degree of consensus among Indian philosophers that the Self is not Ego identified with the body, but is the spirit different from body, mind and even buddhi (intellect). My body is not the same now as it was when I was an infant; it grew into a child, a youth, an adult and then into a 'senior citizen'. The body has changed much but I have observed it all along as a different entity. Similarly I am not the same as my mind and its states. The favourite method of separating the self as consciousness (*Chit*), is to analyse the three common *avasthas* (states of mind) – *Jagrta* (awake), *swapna* (dreaming) and *sushupti* (deep sleep). The Self experiences all the three states, is conscious of them and yet is distinct from them. When I wake up after a dreamless deep sleep, I say, 'Oh, I had a good sleep'. Though I may not be conscious of it during sleep, I was a *sakshi* (witness) to the fact that I slept well. Who is this *I*? 'I' is the consciousness with which everything is seen, heard, experienced and enjoyed. 'I' is the *sakshi*.<sup>14</sup>

The Self is analysed lucidly by Shankara in his *Tattva-Bodhah*, a translation of which with an equally lucid commentary by Swami Tejomayananda (2001) is available. An interesting part of this concerns the theory of *Panchakoshas* (Five Sheaths or layers), which are said to envelop the self (ibid: 52-66). The 'outer most' sheath if it can be so called (because, the Self penetrates or permeates all the sheaths) is the *Annamaya-kosha* or the 'Food Sheath', which consist of the body, or rather the gross body (*Sthula Sharira*). As we move inward, we come up with more subtle sheaths. The next to *Annamaya-kosha*, is the *Pranamaya-kosha* (the Life-Sheath) which animates the body and its sense organs. The body functions as an organism because of *Prana* (which literally means breath, and actually implies the life-force). Next comes the *Manomaya-kosha* (the mental sheath) or the mind. Mind is the seat of emotions like anger, jealousy, love and compassion and functions closely with and through the prior two sheaths. It is through the mind that the Self perceives the objects of the sense organs. If the mind is not on the sense organs, there is no perception even if, say, the object is before the open eyes. It is the Self (consciousness) which puts the mind and the senses on the objects in order to attentively see, hear etc. Real perception and its interpretation takes place through the next sheath, – the *Vijnanamaya-kosha*, the sheath of intellect and knowledge. Logical analysis is possible and knowledge is acquired because of this sheath. This sheath is also the seat of moral values and moral judgements. It is through this sheath that the right is distinguished from the wrong, the beautiful from the ugly, and the real from the unreal. Then comes the subtlest of all the sheaths – *Anandamaya-kosha*, the sheath of happiness, joy or bliss. The Self is stated to be beyond all the five *Koshas* including even the inner-most and the subtlest *Anandamaya-kosha*. It is not clear from Shankara's *Tattva-Bodha* why the Self is different from even the *Anandamaya-kosha*, because the Self is also said to be in its essence of the nature of *Sat*, *Chit* and *Ananda*. How is *Ananda* of the last *Kosha* is different from the *Ananda* of the Self? If the former is transient, derived from sense organs, then that happiness belongs to the mind, and not the Self. It is tempting to take *Anandamaya-kosha* itself as the Self, the core of the whole complex, endowed not only with *Ananda*, but also with *Sat* and *Chit*. But while the Self, irrespective of whether it is treated as *Atman* or *Jiva*, is taken to be immortal, the *Pancha-koshas* are not. They perish with the body. The *Ananda* (happiness) aspect of the last *Kosha*, therefore, should be taken to symbolise the inherent and undying quest for happiness in every living being, the quest to live and to enjoy.

This much of the nature of the Self can be said to be common to all the schools of philosophy in Hinduism. But Advaita goes further and makes the fantastic assertion that the Self is the Brahman itself, the Divine, the Ultimate, the Absolute. This needs some explanation. In the simplest possible terms, it only means that there is divinity in all of us, in all living beings and that God is not only transcendental but also immanent. Shankara explains in *Tattva-bodha* that it is like a woman who is searching for her golden necklace all over the house, only to find it finally on her own neck. Similarly, we search for God all over, but finally, we have to find Him in our own selves.

One way in which Shankara tries to establish the identity of the Self (*Ātman*) with the Brahman is to explain that both have the same unique nature. The essence of both is the same, and they can't be different. The common essence of both the *Ātman* and the Brahman is that they are immortal (*nitya*), beginningless (*anādi*), endless (*ananta*), *Sat*, *Chit*, *Ananda*, and *nirvikara* (changeless). Both shine by themselves (*Svayam Prakāśhamāna*) and others get their light only through the Brahman at the cosmic level and through the *Ātman* at the micro level. The Brahman is also stated by the Upanishads to be immanent, *i.e.*, as present in all and everywhere, not excluding the *Jīvas*.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, even the body acquires sanctity. The Chhandogya Upanishad calls it the abode of the Brahman (*Brahmapuri*) (Chapter VIII.1.1). The Upanishad even explains how the term *Hṛdayam* (heart) was coined: *Hṛdi ayam iti hṛdayam* (it is heart because He is present there) (Chapter VIII. 3.5). Shankara clarifies, however, that the identity of the *Ātman* with the Brahman is not merely logical, but it can also be experienced through dedicated *Sādhanā*.

What are the implications of this metaphysics, this theory of transcendence, for leading a meaningful life in this world, or for a theory of life? A theory which says that everything is one and only one may seem to have little significance for the diverse and manifold life in this world. Even a theory which treats an individual *jīva* as a drop in the ocean of the Divine, or a theory which holds that there are billions of *jīvas*, all real, but all dependent on and controlled by the Divine, may seem to have little solace for an individual who wants to make his or her mark. And this surely was the basis of attack by Max Weber and others, who said that such a theory cannot even provide a basis for building a system of ethics or ethical code of conduct for humanity. However, this criticism is based on a very wrong understanding of the Indian philosophy, as we can see below.

### 3. THE SELF AND THE WORLD

This leads to the question of the relation between the Self and the world, – a question which logically follows the two questions dealt with in the preceding two sections about the relation between the Divine and the World, and the Self and the Divine. Let us be clear that in all the schools of metaphysics in Hinduism, except Advaita, the world is treated as absolutely real. Even in Advaita, as explained above, the world is a manifestation which is neither absolutely or basically real (*sat*) like the Brahman nor false (*asat*). As Shankara explains in *Ātmabodha* (verse 8), the world and its diversity are like bangles and bracelets; they are made of gold, and the Brahman is the gold here (See Nikhilananda 1947: 133). The Brahman is both the material and efficient cause of the world, and the world made by his creative power (*mayā*) and will (*ichchhā*) cannot be false. It is not as real as the Brahman, since the world is not the ultimate reality, while the Brahman is. Since human beings through their selves operate in this world, they are part of this reality, and play their role.

The Advaita philosophy is sometimes blamed for neglecting the individual. The analogy of a drop in the ocean is misleading as a description of Advaita philosophy. The individual self is itself identified with the Brahman. Note the *Mahavakyas* from the Upanishads from which Shankara drew support: ‘*Soham*’ (He is myself), ‘*Tat tvam asi*’ (That art Thou), ‘*Aham Brahmasmi*’ (I am the Brahman). And so are all the individuals. It means, no one is inferior, and no one superior to others. An intuitive realization of this can be a great experience. It means that a person can feel tremendously confident. She or he need have no guilt complex of being a sinner because she or he is the Divine Self, no less. As the Vedas declare, we are the children of the Immortal (‘*Amrtasya putrah*’). This is what Swami Vivekananda emphasised in his famous Chicago Address in 1893 (Vivekananda 2000: Vol.1:11). At times, we may feel like grains of sand on a vast beach, each by itself insignificant in the scheme of things. And yet, this grain of sand can hold the whole universe in its mind, conceptualise the Divine and make It its own. No other religion has given such tremendous self-confidence to individuals. What is presumed to be anti-individual, actually turns out to be a most potent tonic for them.

But this self-respect and self-confidence does not have to lead to arrogance. This is so for the simple reason that *all* are the children of the Immortal, and not just one person. It should therefore lead to equal respect for others too, no less than respect for one’s own self. Humility (*vinaya*, *namrta*) is emphasised as a great virtue in Hindu ethics, which has to be cultivated as a necessary part of one’s *sadhana* for self-realisation. It is when I have love and compassion for others, that my personality is enriched and my real self is realised. If not, I undermine my own personality. This is implicit in Advaita.

Advaita thus is fully capable of providing a logical and coherent basis for evolving an ethical system and guidance to individuals for leading a meaningful life even in their mundane world. Other schools of Indian philosophy too provide this basis and guidance, but I have given more attention to Advaita here because this has primarily been the favourite object of attack on Indian philosophy. Hinduism developed a theory of *Purusharthas*, with *Dharma* (moral obligation) as the integrating and commanding principle, acknowledging also the importance of earning wealth (*Artha*), of satisfying one’s desires (*Kama*), of pursuing *Moksha* (liberation from rebirth), the last three being subject to Dharma. The next chapter deals with the moral philosophy of Hinduism which all schools of thought in Indian religions accept. We can see there that Hinduism did develop a robust system of ethics to help individuals lead a morally responsible life.

Hinduism did not underplay either the significance of this world or the enjoyment of the worldly pleasures, though it insisted that it be done in morally acceptable ways. The motto, following a Vedic prayer, was ‘*Jivema sharadah shatam, Nandama sharadah shatam*’ (Let us live a hundred autumns; let us enjoy ourselves a hundred autumns). Nor did the Hindus ignore the significance of studying the mundane world and the natural laws governing its operation. They had practically a lead over the rest of the world in the development of health care, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy and chemistry, almost until the advent of the medieval age. Our ancestors would not have had the urge to develop the science of yoga, which is universally accepted as a valuable contribution of Hinduism, if they had believed in the doctrine of world negation and life denial as alleged by some western schools. Yoga is designed to tone up the whole body along with mind, and control several illnesses in addition to improving general health. Hindu physicians also developed a sophisticated system of medicine – Ayurveda, based both on herbs (*vanaushadhi*) and chemicals (*rasaushadhi*). Surgery was

also developed on a scientific basis. *Sushruta Samhita* refers to as many as 120 surgical instruments. The ancient text also gives instructions in pre-operative and post-operative care, including precautions against infections (Thakur 2001). To ignore the human body and its illnesses was not considered proper, because it is primarily through our body and when we are alive that we can move along the path of dharma and realise the Divine (*Sharīramādyam khalu dharmasādhanam*). As to India's lead in developing other sciences of the 'mundane', Amartya Sen (2005: 28-29) has referred to Arya Bhatta's pioneering work completed as early as in 499 CE, which included '(i) an explanation of the lunar and solar eclipses in terms respectively of the earth's shadow on the moon and the moon's obscuring of the sun, ... (ii) rejection of the standard view of an orbiting sun that went around the earth in favour of the diurnal motion of the earth, (iii) an identification of the force of gravity... and (iv) a proposal of the situational variability of the idea of 'up' and 'down' depending on where one is located on the globe.' Ancient Indians are credited with developing the concept of zero and decimal numerals, a breakthrough of fundamental significance, which paved the way for later advance in mathematics and sciences, and facilitated day-to-day business.

Even the economic system in India had reached a fairly sophisticated level, compared to the western economies at that time. Correspondingly, economic ideas had also become fairly sophisticated, as evidenced from several Hindu texts. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE), *Shukra Nītisāra*, and some of the *Dharma-Shāstras* are sources of economic ideas that prevailed in the ancient period. Aiyangar (1934) has made use of such sources to explain ancient Indian economic thought. Ajit Dasgupta's *A History of India's Economic Thought* (1993) also deals with ancient Indian economic thought. Ancient Hindus developed a code of ethics for governance and administration, popularly referred to as *Rajadharma*. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the *Shānti-Parva* in the Mahabharata, besides several other texts, deal with this dharma. Thus practically every field of mundane world received attention for analysis.

India's economic backwardness and poverty have been attributed to the alleged world-denying nature of Indian philosophy. It should be noted however, that this backwardness developed during the colonial period and not earlier. Angus Maddison's monumental research under OECD has shown that between 1 and 1700 CE, India accounted for a quarter to one-third of the total World GDP, but began to decline sharply from 24.4 per cent in 1700 to 16.0 in 1820 CE, 7.5 per cent in 1913, and 4.2 per cent in 1950 (Maddison 2003: 261). The pre-British Indian economy would not have attained the diversity, complexity and the level of development it did, if most of its inhabitants had a negative attitude to creating wealth and had no interest in mundane matters. The next chapter on the moral philosophy of Hinduism briefly presents Hindu economic philosophy and shows how it has a strong ethical dimension also.

This leaves two more points of criticism. One of them relates to the law or the doctrine of karma which is alleged to deny freedom to individuals since their life is determined by their karma. The second relates to the social laws of the *varna* system (mistakenly identified with the caste system) which also is alleged to suppress the freedom of the individuals on the ground that their occupation and conduct is determined by birth. The next section deals with the law of karma, which is a distinguishing characteristic of all Indian religions, not of Hinduism alone. Chapter 5 below deals with the caste system and tries to remove some misunderstandings about it.

#### 4. LAW OF KARMA – NOT FATALISM

Karma means action. The Law of Karma applied to human situations is the law of action and reaction. A belief in the Law of Karma is common to all Indian religions including Buddhism and Jainism. The Law essentially belongs to the mundane world; it does not need heaven and hell for retributive justice. Justice is dispensed in this world only, through the Law of Karma. It is considered so inexorable and automatic that it does not need a belief in the presence of a ruling God to operate it. That is how it became a part of Buddhism and Jainism too. Vinoba Bhave is reported to have once wittily observed that Vishnu, though responsible for the management of the whole Universe, reclines totally relaxed on his cool bed of the giant serpent Shesha in the company of his consort Lakshmi, because he has decentralized all his administration through the Law of Karma! (as quoted in Ananthamurthy 1982).

The Law of Karma nevertheless requires a belief in soul and its transmigration, because it operates through several births or reincarnations of the soul, and the effect of karma, if it is not exhausted in this birth, extends into the next birth too. As C Rajagopalachari observes (1999: 63), ‘The account is not closed by death, but carried forward from one birth to another’. Both Hinduism and Jainism share the belief in soul. Though Buddhism does not, it nevertheless believes in transmigration and reincarnation. Because Hinduism (at least the mainstream of it) believes in God, the Law of Karma has two special features in Hinduism which are not shared by the other two religions: the role of Grace of God in alleviating the effect of the Law of Karma (*karmaphala*), and the liberating role of *Karmayoga*, a valuable and unique contribution of Hinduism not only to the world of religions but also to the field of management and governance and to the principles of work ethic in general. The Law of Karma has universal application according to Hinduism (and also Jainism and Buddhism), and is not confined only to those who believe in it. Whether one believes in the law of gravitation or not, everyone is subject to it. The Law of Karma is supposed to be as inexorable in the ethical/spiritual world as the law of cause and effect, or to take a more specific example, the law of gravitation in the physical world.

In a perceptive essay, Arvind Sharma explains the Law of Karma:

“To an Australian aborigine, the operation of the boomerang could well symbolise the operation of *Karma*. In other words, what you give is what you get; what you send out is what you receive back; the way you treat others is the way you get treated. One might protest that this is not the way the world is, where the virtuous suffer and the wicked prosper. In the face of this *immediate* fact, the doctrine of *Karma* asserts the *ultimately* just nature of the Universe. The expression ‘ultimate’ is important. We say, for instance, that justice prevails in the State of Quebec. Does it mean that no theft or robbery, no crime is committed in Quebec? Quite obviously crime is committed in Quebec. What it really means is that when crime is committed the criminals are apprehended and brought to book. The principle of justice implies not the absence of the violation of law but the principle of its ultimate assertion after a phase of its apparent lapse. So it is with *Karma*. *Karma* is payback.” (Sharma 1996: 24).

The Law of Karma, thus, is not the same as fate or destiny determined by someone else. This is because karma is determined by one’s own action, may be past actions. What is more, it is possible to determine our future destiny also by our own action in the present and move towards happiness.

The Law of Karma does not, strictly speaking, admit of fate, in the sense of caprice of God. It tells us that the present is our own creation and as for the future also, we determine it ourselves. And that is how the Law of Karma is a moral or ethical law rooted in this world. As Hiriyanna says: ‘the doctrine presupposes the possibility of moral growth, and the conclusion to be drawn from it is that freedom is not merely compatible with, but actually demanded by it’ (Hiriyanna 1999: 32). Thus, the Law of Karma does not curtail our freedom but urges us to use it to move towards our own moral and material good through right conduct or living according to dharma. As Sharma (1996: 30) says: ‘The doctrine of Karma no more prevents us from acting freely than the law of gravitation prevents us from moving around freely’. That human beings have freedom of will is made clear in the Gita itself, which says, ‘Reflecting critically over (whatever I said), you make your own decision’ (XVIII.63). Free will is evident also in a popular verse from Gita: “A person should uplift oneself by own self (own effort); one should never destroy one’s self; self is the (best) relative (friend) of self; and<sup>16</sup> self is also the (worst) enemy of self” (VI.5). Radhakrishnan observes here: “Even God acts with a peculiar delicacy in regard to<sup>17</sup> human beings. He woos our consent but never compels”.

The question of whether human beings have freewill or not, has long bothered philosophers and religious thinkers. In his *Introduction to Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, A C Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupada says: “There is Ishvara which means the controller and there are *jīvas* which are controlled. The living being is controlled in every respect, at least in his conditioned life” (Prabhupada 1985: 8). On the contrary, our preceding discussion points to free will. The two (apparently) opposite standpoints can be reconciled. If we have no freedom of will, the Law of Karma is meaningless. God cannot punish or even reward us for acts which are fully directed by Him on which we have no control at all. Puppets cannot come under the Law of Karma. But our freedom of will is not absolute, and so is our capacity to act. We are subject not only to laws of nature (or general laws of God) but also to the freedom of will of others and, therefore, to social conditioning. Freedom of will for everyone means that no given individual has absolute freedom. Our body-centric egos are like tethered animals, moving about freely within a limit set by the length of the rope. But the freedom given to us is large enough to realise our human goals. It is also within us to even enhance this freedom and stretch the limits imposed on us by either nature or society. And God is with us when we do it for morally justifiable ends. Moreover, these limits are relevant only in the case of body-centric egos, according to Advaita Vedānta, but not to the real Self which is totally free.

Though we are bound by our karma, the Lord also guides us to reduce the burden of our karma (esp. Gita IV.17). The secret lies in understanding what action or deed we have to do as duty (karma as *kartavya*), how to have freedom from karma (*akarma*), and what forbidden action (*vikarma*) to avoid. The Gita teaches us that it is morally degrading not to do what is necessary to do. It is as sinful as doing a bad deed. Arjuna thought that inaction could save him from sin. But, ‘No!’ said the Lord. The moral responsibility for a deed - whether good or bad (and for not doing what is necessary to do) - is not that of the direct doer (or, non-doer) alone. It is shared equally by those who get the deed done, who suggest or inspire it, and also by those who directly or indirectly consent to it (*‘Kartā karayitā chaiva prarakṣaṇumodakah/ sukṛte dushkṛte chaiva chatvāri samabhaḡinah/’*).

The traditional exponents of the Law of Karma make a distinction between *sanchita* karma (accumulated karma) and *prarabdha* karma (that part of accumulated karma which has begun to bear

fruit and has started operating like the arrow released from a bow). Taking Arvind Sharma's (1996) example of a smoker, a person smoking for the last five years has an accumulated effect on his lungs, which may produce cancer even if he stops smoking now. The arrow is already released. But, according to Hinduism at least, the effect of *prarabdha* karma can be alleviated or softened through appropriate present action, just as a person diagnosed with cancer may still reduce his pain, prolong his life, and even cure his cancer by proper treatment, even if he could not avoid cancer altogether.

According to J P Vaswani, the Law of Karma is not punitive but reformatory. He says: 'The Law of karma does not wish to punish us for what we may have done in the past. The Law of karma wishes to reform us and so sends us experiences which may help us in our spiritual advancement. ... It puts us in an environment which may afford us opportunities for self-growth.' (2002-b: 19 & 41-42.)

This is where the role of grace of God becomes relevant which can be obtained through morally high conduct, selfless service to society, and devotion (*bhakti*). Though all are equal before the Law of Karma, there is still scope for remission of punishment but this depends on the discretion and grace of God who will judge one on the basis of *paschattapa* (repentance) and *prayaschitta* (corrective and expiatory action) undertaken by the individual to destroy sin (*papa*). Though Hindus believe in taking ritual baths in rivers to destroy their sins, it is not so much the act of taking bath as it is the determination to take corrective action and the decision never to repeat the sin and follow a morally right code of conduct, which have that effect. Ritual bath is only a symbol of such a determination. Hindu saint poets, especially in the medieval age, have made fun of persons who blindly and mechanically follow rituals to earn merit and destroy their sin.<sup>18</sup> Ritual baths and other such procedures prescribed in the *Shastras* can only be a symbolic and psychological help, to help the person in turning a new leaf, starting a new life. *Prayaschitta* rituals have no meaning and no effect in the absence of genuine repentance and a firm determination to follow high moral standards. Lord Krishna assures us that sincere devotion to God (or *bhakti*) can even help the wicked by purging them of evil thoughts and diverting them to the path of righteousness. He says: 'I promise, my devotee will never perish' (Gita IX.31). The concluding part of the Gita assures again that God will liberate all such persons from sin who completely surrender themselves to His Will (XVIII. 66). But such surrender is not possible in the absence of full devotion (*bhakti*), genuine repentance and the decision to honestly follow morally upright conduct. There can thus be no release or liberation for persons like Duryodhana who felt: '*Janami dharmam, na cha me prvr̥ttih / Janamyadharmam, na cha me niv̥rttih*' // ('I know what dharma is, but I have no inclination to it. I know what is against dharma, but I cannot refrain from it').<sup>19</sup>

The Gita shows another important way to liberation from the Law of Karma, at least from the present and future karma, if not from the *prarabdha-karma* (whose arrow is already released from the bow). This is the famous *Karmayoga*. It is intended to ensure that worldly life goes on smoothly on a dharmic path, and at the same time promises liberation from the bondage of the law of karma, giving a sense of spiritual dignity to the individual. The logic of *Karmayoga* is simple. Since desire induces attachment and attachment leads to the operation of the law of karma, the prescription is simply to snap the link between action and desire for fruits of action or attachment. It is the motive, the attitude of the mind, which binds and not the action or work itself. Gandhi called *Karmayoga* as *Anasakti-yoga*, the yoga of detachment or disinterestedness. But is it possible to work without taking interest in it? Such a work is bound to be shoddy, inefficient and mindless. Gandhi certainly did not mean this. The

Gita also makes it clear that work has to be performed with dedication and commitment (*yogasthah kuru karmanī*), and with skill or efficiency (*Yogah karmasu koushalam*), but by renouncing attachment (*sangam tyaktvā*). Obviously, the path of karmayoga needs more explanation, which is offered below in the chapter on *Sādhanā*. Karma-yoga is a part of *Sādhanā*, and therefore its discussion fits there.

The Gita also shows another way of liberation from the law of Karma, viz. *Jñāna*, the path of knowledge of the Brahman or the ultimate Reality. The law of karma and rebirth are applicable only so long as a person with a body-centric ego is mentally immersed in the world and its attachments to objects of desire. Once this stage is transcended and identity of the self with the Brahman is realised, there is liberation from the law of karma, and there is no rebirth. If the path of knowledge is taken to mean renunciation of action, then karmayoga is announced as clearly superior between the two by the Gita (V.2). The Gita, however, also indicates that ideally the two should be combined and there need be no conflict between the two (V. 4 & 5). Experiencing divine immanence everywhere with immensely expanded consciousness, a jñani (knower) develops an attitude of compassion and empathy towards all, but so long as one is still in this relative world, one cannot avoid one's duty to the world. The Gita is very much concerned with this world itself, and is a guide on how one must live in it without being tainted by karma, and realise one's full potential. This is what inspired Aurobindo also to advocate Purna Yoga, integrating all the three paths. More about these three paths is covered in the chapter on *Sādhanā*. This section is intended to serve as a bridge between theology and metaphysics of Hinduism on the one hand and moral philosophy and *Sādhanā* of Hinduism on the other.

Gandhi was a firm believer in the Law of Karma. So much so that when Bihar was struck by a powerful earthquake in 1934, Gandhi declared that it was a punishment from God to caste Hindus for their practice of untouchability!! This was a very unkind observation considering that some fifteen thousand people died, three thousand square miles of land was devastated, and whole towns were laid flat in a matter of three minutes. Rabindranath Tagore, who had a considerable scientific temperament for a poet, wrote politely to Gandhi, asking why would God choose only Bihar for expressing His displeasure. He questioned how one could presume that natural catastrophes were harnessed to moral ends. Were all those who died sinners? How could God punish whole peoples? Tagore agreed, however, that God would not be pleased with the oppression of Harijans practised by caste Hindus. But Gandhi stuck to his point that God had a purpose in everything (see Payne 2005: 456).

The main point of this section is that a belief in the law of Karma and its operation has a great ethical strength and persuasive power. Had it been mere fatalism, it would not have had such power. Fatalism means that man is a puppet in the hands of an all-powerful tyrant like God, which cannot give any scope for discretion to man to do good karma and avoid bad karma. Fatalism and the Law of karma are not consistent with each other.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. Among several such critics, a few may be mentioned: Max Weber (1930, 1958), Albert Schweitzer (1936), and KW Kapp (1963). For a reply to these criticisms, see Nadkarni (2011: 157-61).
2. The Gita's liberalism and catholicity is quite explicit. A few relevant verses are quoted here with translation:

*Ye Yathā māṃ prapadyante taṇ tathaiva bhajāmyaham /  
Mama vartmanuvartante manushyah Partha sarvashah //* (IV.11)

In whatever way people try to reach me, I accept and reward them; O Partha (Arjuna), people can follow the path to me from all sides.

*Yo yo yam yam tanum bhaktāḥ shraddhayarchitum ichchati /  
Tasya tasyāchalam shraddhāṃ tameva vidadhamyaham //* (VII.21)

Whatever form devotees choose to worship with dedication and faith (*Shraddhā*), I make that *Shraddhā* steady.

*Sa tayaḥ Shraddhayaḥ yuktah tasyarāḍhanam ihate /  
Labhate cha tatah kāmāṇ mayāiva vihitāṇ hi taṇ //* (VII.22)

Infused with that *shraddhā*, the devotee worships that form and gets his desires fulfilled, but it is Me alone who fulfills them.

3. Fortunately for humanity, Plato (390s - 347 BCE) has recorded most of these dialogues in his writings; see *Plato : Complete Works*, ed, by J.M. Cooper (1997), Indianapolis: Hackett. Some of these works like the *Republic* are available separately also. For a selection from Plato, see Cahn and Markie (eds) (1998): *Ethics - History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, New York: OUP, pp.3-115.
4. Gandhi wrote: "If I were asked to define the Hindu creed I should simply say: Search after truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe even in God and still he may call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is relentless pursuit after truth." (*Young India* 24.4. 1924; reprinted in Gandhi, 1950: 4).
5. In a letter dated 21.3.1932 to Ashram Children, as in Gandhi (1987: 48).
6. Cf. *Young India* 17.9.1925, reprinted in Gandhi (1987: 37).
7. As reproduced in the *Chitrapur Sunbeam* X(2), Feb.2003, p.3.
8. As translated by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (2002: 5). The original is

*Amhaṇ ananda jhālā amhaṇ ananda jhālā /  
Devochi dekhilā dehamaji /  
Dekhane udalen pahane lapalen /  
Deven navala kelen dehamaji //*

9. The original, as given below, and the translation in the text taken from Bose (1999: 187):

*Yah pushpinischa prasavascha dharmanadhi dane vyavaniradharayah /  
Yaschasama ajanā vidyuto diva ururūya abhitah sasyukthyah //*

10. The part of the concerned verse is: 'Sa kavīh kavyyā pururupam dyouriva pushyati'. It means: 'He, the poet, cherishes manifold forms by His poetic power, even as heaven' (*Rgveda* VIII. 4.5; original and tr. from Bose (1999: 190).

11. For a classic work on Indian aesthetics, see, Hiriyanna (2000-a), a collection of essays published earlier from 1919 to 1951 in different places; also, Edwin Gerow 'Indian Aesthetics: A Philosophical Survey' in Deutsch and Bontekoe (eds) (1997: 304-23).
12. The original and tr. from Bose (1999: 185). Bose here has a whole chapter on the 'Path of Splendour' where he cites as many as 77 verses from the Vedas alone in adoration of God through nature.
13. As Dan Brown has observed, it is a gross misconception to equate paganism with devil worship. Pagans, literally, were countryfolks who clung to nature worship. In Latin, *pagannus* means country dwellers (Brown 2003:60). But 'pagans' were not all simple country folk. They had many educated people and luminaries among them like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagorus and Epictetus (Armstrong 1999: 110).
14. There is an insightful explanation offered by the teacher to his pupils in *Aitareya Upanishad* (3.1):

*Koyam atma iti vayam upasmahe, katarah sa atma,  
Yena va pasyati, yena va shrinoti, yena va  
Gandham ajighrti, yena va vaccham vyakaroti,  
Yena va svadu chashvadu cha vijanati*

It means 'Who is he whom we worship as the Self? Which one is the Self? He by whom one sees, or by whom one hears, or by whom one smells odours, or by whom one articulates speech, or by whom one discriminates the sweet and the unsweet'. (Tr. Radhakrishnan 1994: 523). There is a similar passage also in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* (III.7.23) (ibid: 229-230).

15. For example, *Taittiriya Upanishad* (II.6) declares that 'He, having the world, entered it Himself' (*Tat Sṛstvā tad-eva anupravishat*); the *Chhandogya Upanishad* (vi.3.2) says that thus He entered the Jīvas too as *Ātman* (*anena jivenātmananupravishya* (both quoted in Chinmayananda 1981 reprinted 1994: 38 in the footnotes).
16. In the context of free will, Radhakrishnan (1998: 33) observes: 'When once God has granted us free will, does not stand aside leaving us to make or unmake ourselves. Whenever, by the abuse of freedom, unrighteousness increases and the world gets stuck in a rut, He creates Himself to lift the world from out of its rut and set it on new tracks.' Out of his love for us, he reincarnates Himself again and again as Gita promises us (The pertinent verse in the Gita is in IV.7).
17. Ibid., p.48. Radhakrishnan makes some further observations: 'It is our past karma that determines our ancestry, heredity and environment. But when we look from the standpoint of this life, we can say that we were not consulted about our nationality, race, parentage or social status. But subject to these limitations, we have freedom of choice. Life is like a game of bridge. We did not invent the game or design the cards. We did not frame the rules and we cannot control the dealing. The cards are dealt out to us, whether they be good or bad. To that extent, determinism rules. But we can play the game well or play it badly. A skillful player may have a poor hand and yet win the game. A bad player may have a good hand and yet make a mess of it. Our life is a mixture of necessity and freedom, chance and choice' Ibid, p.49.
18. In a devotional song in Kannada, Purandaradāsa, considered as the father of Karnatak (Carnatic) classical music, says that the Lord can never like a person who merely bathes like a crow in water but cannot rid his mind of poisonous thoughts and jealousy. Cf. Song No.272 (beginning with '*Oppanayya Hari mechchanayya*') in Parthasarathy 2000a (I):136. Many other saint poets of Bhakti Movements have also made fun of meaningless rituals intended to wash away sins.
19. The original verse and the translation as in Daya Krishna (1996: 124 and 156). The source for the Sanskrit verse is the *Mahābhārata*.

# 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.

*Nindantu nīti nipunāḥ yadi vā stuvantu  
Lakṣmī samavishatu gachchatu vā yathestham /  
Adyeḥ va maraṇamastu yugantare vā  
Nyayātpathah pravichalanti padam na dhīrah!!*

(Bhartrhari's Nītiśataka, verse 81)

(May scholars on ethics censure or praise; may the goddess of wealth come or go as per her wish; may death strike now or much later; the (morally) courageous do not deviate from the path of what is just even by a step.)

It may look strange that Bhartrhari, himself a scholar on ethics, should indicate some indifference to the opinion of scholars on ethics (in the first line of the verse). This may be because he knows the weakness of scholars, - they always get into disputations and debates and their opinions may differ. The morally courageous, suggests Bhartrhari, should rather rely on own conscience honestly and do what seems right. Honesty was always commended and hypocrisy condemned. One of the Subhashitas (a good saying) goes like this:

*Yathā chittam tathā vachāḥ, yathā vachastathā kriyāḥ /  
Chittē vachī kriyayāṁ cha sadhūṇāṁ ekarūpātā //*

(original as quoted in Herur 2001: 75)

(As in mind so in speech, as in speech so in deeds; good persons are the same in mind, speech and action.)

Conscientiousness leads to consistency and integrity. A person with moral integrity does not break down under the burden of difficulties. This is illustrated by the popular Hindu mythological story of Raja Harischandra, who did not mind giving up his kingdom, even leaving his wife and son and accepting the position of a watchman at a crematorium, all because he had to keep his promise and stick to truth. It may look like an improbable and extreme case even for illustrative purposes, but the popularity of the story which became a theme for several plays and films, shows the earnestness of Hinduism for absolute respect for moral principles. Gandhi writes in his autobiography that this story greatly influenced him. *Charucharya* (verse 13) declares, taking the example of Harischandra, that one should never transgress the limits of dharma even during a difficult phase of life ('na tyajet dharma-maryadām api klesha-dasham shrītaḥ', quoted in Herur (2001: 244). The *Mahābhārata* (*Udyoga Parva* 40.12) also says the same thing: 'one should not abandon dharma under the influence of sexual desire, fear or

greed. Dharma is eternal, our pains and pleasures are only passing.’ These quotations show clearly that ethics in Hinduism is not expediency, - accepted when convenient and rejected when not. Yet, there are ethical dilemmas when values themselves conflict, – a topic taken up later in this chapter.

Critics then reply: be it so, but the ethics you have in Hinduism is an assortment of ‘do’s and don’ts, and it does not constitute a moral philosophy. Even the six *Darshanas* gave scant attention to developing a theory of ethics, trying to theoretically or discursively differentiate the good from the bad, and the right from the wrong. The reason for alleging failure on the part of Hinduism in developing a moral philosophy is due to the fact that the method adopted by Hinduism and other Indian religions is not the same as the one adopted by the Western philosophy. As Matilal observed (See Ganeri 2002:42), the didactic and the narrative were fused together, so that the moral lesson is well received and remembered by the people. Hinduism used a wide variety of texts to impart moral lessons to people and to stimulate thinking about how to lead an ethical or dharmic life, - the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* (esp. the *Gita* and *Shantiparva*), the *Puranas*, story books like the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha*, and the *Smritis*. They also taught how to face ethical dilemmas, providing a lot of illustrations. The intended audience were not intellectuals alone, but essentially people at large. About the alleged neglect of ethics in the six *Darshanas*, Hindery observes:

“... applied Hindu morality was so capably administered by law codes (*Dharamashastras*), epics, and other popular classics and oral traditions that philosophical systems could simply bypass the ethical task entirely. ... The Indian philosophers need not have feared either de-emphasis or downright detraction of moral law and order, because morals were already adequately secured in the *Shastras*, rituals, dramas and hearts of people.”

(Hindery 1978:188)

There is, however, an interesting difference between the way the West and India, especially Hinduism, look at evil. The evil is not looked upon in Hinduism as incorrigible, because its source is not something like Satan or Devil who is irreconcilably opposed to God and goodness, but in *Avidya*. *Avidya* is ignorance, which gives rise to evil thoughts and action, and is amenable to removal through *vidya*. *Vidya* is right knowledge. This does not mean that there can be a compromise between good and evil. It only means that evil can be subject to correction or even removal, through imparting knowledge. There is thus hope even for an evil person to become good. That is how any concept of permanent damnation is not consistent with Vedanta or Hindu philosophy.

The Hindu ethical thought, though scattered in a variety of texts, did not fail to address theoretical issues like what is truth and what is not, what is *dharma* and what is not. This should become clear in the next two sections of this chapter. The fourth section deals with Hinduism’s unique contribution to ethical theory, in the form of developing ethical grading. The fifth section here is concerned with virtue ethics, emphasised strongly by the *Sants* of the medieval age. The sixth section is addressed to human goals in Hinduism (*Purusharthas*) and Human values to be observed in the treatment of others. An attempt is also made here to present an outline of what could constitute an ethical economy based

on dharma. This leads to the eighth section on environmental ethics in Hinduism, which has universal relevance. We will also have to ultimately face the question of why, if ethics was indeed given so much attention, the Hindu society permitted such heinous practices like Sati, discrimination against women especially widows, and untouchability and other excesses of the hierarchical caste system. This leads us to the final section of the chapter on ethics in practice. The development of Hindu ethics through different stages in a roughly chronological order has been discussed by me elsewhere (Nadkarni 2011:218-39).

## 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 *ṛtam*. Initially, *ṛtam* 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 – *ṛtam*. *Ṛtam* 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.

*Ṛtam 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 bhūmih* (X. 85.1) (The Earth is upheld by Truth. *Ibid*: 135).

*Satyah Satyasya dadṛshe 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.

The principle of nonviolence flows from the moral and consequential dimension of truth, namely from the definition that truth is what is conducive to the welfare and unity of life of all beings. The Mahabharata gives the above definition clearly: *Yad bhūtahitam atyantam etat satyam matam mama* (*Shānti Parva* 329.13). Gandhi, therefore, asserted that Truth and Non-violence (*Ahimsa*) are two faces of the same coin. Hindu scriptures often mention the two together, like an eternal couple. For example, the Mahabharata declares that ahimsa is the highest form of truth (*‘Ahimsa paramam satyam’* in *Anushāsana Parva* 115. 23), and that *ahimsa*, which is also the highest dharma, is based on or established in truth (*‘Ahimsa paramo dharmah sa cha satye pratishṭhitah’* in *Vana Parva* 207.74, quoted in Badrinath 2007: 116)). The principle of non-violence is so important in all Indian religions that the maxim, *‘Ahimsa paramo dharmah’* (Ahimsa is the highest dharma) is common to all.<sup>1</sup> Non-violence does not mean mere avoidance of hurting others, which of course is an important principle. Patanjali’s *Yogasutra* (2.35) says that enmity, hatred and anger should also go away. According to *Vishnu Purāṇa* (1.18.32), violence can be caused in three ways – *Karmaṇa manasā vācā* (by action, mind and speech) and all these are heinous. The concept of non-violence is also used as a positive word with connotations of compassion and love for others, doing good to others, and helping others, which is consistent with the welfare definition of *satyam*.

Hindu ethics is often considered as deontological (duty-oriented), for example, by Amartya Sen in his critique of the Gita (Sen 2009: 208-21). The same *Mahabharata*, of which the Gita is a part, indicates here a consequential approach to ethics as quoted above. The Gita itself does not advocate ignoring the consequences. It condemns action taken without regard to consequences as *tamasika*, that is, morally of the lowest kind (XVIII.25). The truth is, Hindu ethics integrates approaches. The right duty is itself based on expected consequences or welfare benefits. The approach to truth and goodness is holistic, rather than merely analytical or compartmental.<sup>2</sup> Consequences of one’s actions on others, whether they will hurt, involving violating others rights, cannot thus be excluded from one’s notion of what constitutes *Satyam*. However, action guided only by consequences, especially personal

consequences, disregarding one's moral duty and the good of the society at large, could mean sliding down into a relativist and opportunistic ethic of the end justifying means, which Gandhi deplored. To illustrate, let us say, a powerful minister's son was found by the police to have caused an accident by driving under the influence of alcohol, resulting in a fatality. Should the police pursue the case and do its duty, or, suppress it in collusion with the minister fearing the consequences of pursuing the case on the career of the young lad whom the minister adores? Clearly duty should prevail over personal consequences and considerations, which is what the Gita teaches. Moreover, outcomes may not always be under one's control; they are determined by several variables, all of which cannot be predicted. When consequences are uncertain, a sense of duty can be a more reliable guide, and that is where dharma enters (discussed in more detail in the next section). In spite of his emphasis on *ahimsa*, Gandhi stuck to the Hindu tradition of prioritising duty over rights, if and where conflicts arose between duty and rights. Ultimately, even rights cannot be operative unless translated into corresponding duties. But *dharma* or duty-centred ethic should itself be based on *satya* and *ahimsa*; otherwise it will not be *dharmaic* (sanctioned by dharma or ethics).

A question arises whether *Satya* and *Ahimsa* are absolute values to be followed whatever be the circumstance. In theory, 'Yes!', as illustrated by the story of Raja Harischandra and the teaching of *Nīti-Shataka* quoted in the preceding section ('*Nindantu...*'). However, following them as absolute values in practice is extremely difficult, if tried to be applied strictly in all circumstances. This is particularly so in the case of *Ahimsa*, because the texts recognise the fact that life depends on life (*jīvo jīvasya jīvanam*). Even plants have life. A follower of *Ahimsa* as an absolute principle should then live only on fallen leaves and fruits, and on greens which have died by themselves. This has not been the principle followed in practice in any case. Accepting this fact of life does not have to make ethics relativist. If ethical principles are so suffocatingly strict and therefore hardly followed by anyone, they cannot serve as a dependable guide for action. Some thinkers have tried to suggest a way out of this for the principle of *Ahimsa* by arguing that we can, for the sake of survival, cause hurt to plants and animals which have no awareness or consciousness of the self. But how would humans know which living things have this awareness and which do not? Greens may *perhaps* be taken as not having such awareness, but, what about fish for example, let alone higher species like goats and cows? Where do we draw a line without being arbitrary?

Gandhi had thought over this problem and said *Satya* and *Ahimsa* have to be accepted as ideals to be followed as honestly as possible. He candidly admitted: "The world is not entirely governed by logic. Life itself involves some kind of violence and we have to choose the path of least violence" (*Harijan*, 28.9.1934, p.259). He was practical enough to admit a distinction between absolute and relative truth and non-violence. According to Douglas Allen, Gandhi avoided both 'unlimited relativism of values' and 'narrow intolerant absolutism' (2008: 49). Absolute values are like Euclid's line, Gandhi used to say, which has no breadth. But nobody can draw such a line. 'All the same, it is only by keeping the ideal in mind that we made progress in geometry. What is true here is true of every ideal' (Gandhi 1960: 261). The distinction between absolute and relative truth was not to defend expediency, but to emphasise honesty about the pursuit of our ideal, and also humility so that we do not become morally arrogant. No human being and no religion could lay claim to monopoly over truth. Truth emerges

not only out of dialogue and discussion, but also out of life's experiences, honesty in admitting our mistakes or wrongs, and accommodation of others' points of view. This was particularly important in conflict resolution through non-violence.

Gandhi put tremendous emphasis on the purity of means also in achieving an end, as this made it consistent with our pursuit of truth. Having a noble end was not enough to justify unfair means. The law of Karma makes unfair means yield unfair outcomes. Based on this faith in the organic unity between means and ends, he asserted that only *ahimsa* can bring about peace and justice ultimately. In insisting upon purity of means even in fighting oppression and exploitation, he was only reiterating the basic principles of Hindu ethics. That moral force can counter and win over brute force was recognised long back. A verse in the *Mahabharata* becomes relevant here;

*Akrodhena jayet krodham, asādhūm sādhuṇa jayet /  
Jayet kadaryam dānena jayet satyena nānṛtam //*

(*Udyoga Parva* 39.72, original quoted in Herur 2001: 225).

(Win over anger without anger, evil through goodness, meanness through generosity, and falsehood through truth.).

Gandhi, however, would not consider confronting violence by merely turning the other cheek. Non-violence meant seeing the wrong doer in the eye with courage and redressing the wrong without inflicting any injury on the other party (Bilimoria et al. eds. 2008: 335). Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence, put such *ahimsa* into practice to end imperialism and colonialism, and even oppression within the country like the exploitation of peasants and factory labour, and proved that *satya* and *ahimsa* are not impractical ideals. However, he also admitted that there could be circumstances when it may not work, and violence might have to be used to counter greater violence and in self-defense where there is no alternative. Such cases may arise, for example, when a rapist makes a sexual assault, or when a suicide bomber is about to kill innocent people. Gandhi made it clear that meekly submitting to evil is cowardice, not *ahimsa*, and in his moral rating, he preferred *himsa* (violence) to cowardice.

Though a strict vegetarian himself and he propagated the virtues of vegetarianism, he did not insist that everybody be like him in this regard. If some people lived on eating meat all their life, and particularly if enough vegetarian food was difficult to come by in the regions where such people lived, Gandhi conceded their right to eat meat and survive. He clarified that his belief in the sacredness of sub-human life did not mean being kinder to this life in preference to human life (CWMG 84:231). All the same, he expected human beings to be kind and considerate both in principle and practice to subhuman life. He would approve meat eating if it is for survival, but not if it is for mere fancy or pleasure when good vegetarian food is available and affordable.

Gandhi deserves special attention wherever there is some discussion of truth and non-violence, and so it is in this book on Hinduism. He may not have been a scholar or expert on all Hindu scriptures. But more than any one who claims to be such or is deemed to be such an expert, Gandhi went deep into the very essence of Hindu ethics and brought it out from the morass of orthodoxy that had covered it. He gave a freshness to these two principles of truth and non-violence, – a freshness which was

authentically his own, though of course the two principles had since long been a part of the basics of Hinduism. But it was Gandhi who realised and discovered this essence, at a time when rules of caste purity and pollution were regarded in practice as Hinduism.

### 3. DHARMA AND ITS DILEMMAS

The concepts of *Rtam*, *Satyam* and *Dharma* are so deeply interrelated that they can even be used interchangeably. Yet, the emphasis of Dharma is more on actual conduct, while *Rtam* and *Satyam* are at the level of ideals or conceptualisation. When *satyam* is put to action, it becomes dharma. Thus dharma has *satyam* as its foundation. *Satyam* is seen also as a part of dharma, as in the following *shloka*:

*Ahimsa satyam asteyam shaucham indriya-nigraha /*  
*Danam damo daya shantih sarvesham dharma-sadhanam //*  
 (Yajñavalkya Smṛiti 1.122 as quoted in Herur 2001: 228)

(Non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, cleanliness, control of the sense organs, charity, self-control, compassion and calmness are the means of dharma for all).

It is inculcating the above mentioned virtues which constitutes dharma, not merely performing rituals, or being religious. In the texts, the word dharma has hardly ever been used to indicate religion or even faith. The essence of dharma lies in ethical living, which comes both from good intentions based on compassion and knowledge of discrimination between good and bad, right and wrong, true and false. Bertrand Russell put it very succinctly when he observed, “Good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge” (Russell 2009: 257). Even if dharma or morality is pursued for its own sake and not for any benefits, it never fails to shower its benefits, and these benefits are both individual and social. At a personal level, it imparts tremendous confidence in oneself, a sense of elation and freedom from guilt. Gandhi’s observation quoted at the beginning of this chapter is pertinent here – a person following dharma never feels helpless. Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata* that dharma (in the sense of righteousness) is the truest and most dependable friend of human beings, protecting them not only during their life time but also after death. At the level of the society, even when most people follow dharma, if not all, the benefits are all the more.

To appreciate these benefits, imagine a society where everyone hates everyone else. In fact, a society as such would be impossible here, no family life can survive, and bringing up children will be impossible. Imagine again a society where everyone is a compulsive liar. None can trust another here, and no institutions, no business transactions would be possible. A society, a polity or an economy can run only on the basis of mutual trust. That is why, dharma is said to uphold and maintain the society. The *Mahābhārata* succinctly brings out the significance of the role of dharma thus, and in the process defines it too:

*Dharaṇat dharma ityāhuh dharmo dharayate prajāh /*  
*Yat syat dharaṇa samyuktam sa dharma iti nischayah //*  
 (Kāṇvaśāstra Ch.69, verse 58; as quoted in Herur 2001: 242).

(Dharma is so called, as it upholds (dharanat). It upholds people (society). Whatever has this (moral) quality of upholding, may be considered as dharma.)

All people do not consider the contribution of dharma in their daily lives, at the societal level or the world level. Their focus is on ‘what is in it for me?’ Such people tend to become free-riders. They expect everyone else to follow dharma, but are themselves tempted by the short term benefits of cheating and free-riding. There is a story of Akbar and Birbal. Akbar thought everyone is conscious of their moral responsibility and fulfils it without cheating. Birbal said, let us test it. Next day it was announced that in a tank, every citizen should pour a potful of milk in the dark of the night, praying for the king’s welfare. The milk would be an offering to God with that purpose. Both Akbar and Birbal went to see the tank in the following morning, but Akbar was shocked to see that the tank had only water. Birbal explained that everyone thought that his pouring water instead of milk would surely matter little when all others pour milk. This is cheating by free-riding. Such behavior need not be confined to the time of Akbar and Birbal. On July 30, 2012, the northern part of India suffered the worst outage in more than a decade, plunging eight states including Delhi into darkness, with about 500 trains cancelled and hundreds of thousands stranded on platforms. The next day, more states were affected by grid failure, bringing the total number of states affected to 21. The problem is reported to have emerged because several states simply ignored the warnings not to overdraw power. It was a case of rank indiscipline and cheating by free-riding, - this time not on the part of individuals, but on the part of irresponsible State Electricity Boards! (See *The Hindu* 31 July and 1 August, 2012).

That is why it is said: ‘It is only dharma which kills when killed, and protects when protected’ (*Dharma eva hatō hanti dharmō rakshati rakshitah*. Manusmṛti 8.15, quoted in Herur 2001: 241). It is because of the indispensability of ethics or dharma, all religions in India, including Buddhism and Jainism, accepted the concept and authority of dharma. There can be differences in the metaphysics of religions, but there is near unanimity about what constitutes the fundamentals of dharma. It is needed for the stability and progress of both the society and the individual.

Dharma may be unsentimental, but it has to be rational and humane. Basavanna (12th century CE) asked: “Is it Dharma if it is without compassion?” (*Dayavillada dharmavavudayya?*). D V Gundappa (after seven centuries) reversed this question: “Is it compassion if it is without dharma?” (*Dharmavillada daye enthhadayya?*). Even compassion needs to be rational and unsentimental. As Gundappa explains, a mother cannot go on giving whatever her child asks, for, this can only spoil it – both in health and conduct. A wicked person bent upon harming others cannot be let off free, as compassion to him in this way means cruelty to several others who are his actual and potential victims (Gundappa 2001:70). Dharma requires love or compassion to be combined with rationality and morality.

*Dharmashastras* distinguish generally between *Samanya Dharma* on the one hand, and *Varṇa Dharma* and *Ashrama Dharma* on the other. While the first one is common (*Samanya*) to all and is basic or fundamental in importance, the latter two are specific dharmas relative to one’s *Varṇa* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra) and *Ashrama* (*Brahmacharya*, *Grhastha*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*) respectively. It is because of the latter two specific or relative dharmas, Hindu ethics got a bad name as relativist in the hands of some Western scholars. Such critics have conveniently forgotten that there is also basic ethics common to all, which is not relative, and that such relative ethics is accepted even

in the West (for example, a soldier's ethics would be different from that of a doctor after all!). The discussion of dharma above in this section was about this *samanya* or basic ethics which none may flout.

The Varnas and Ashramas are different categories altogether, which meant that a person with an identity in terms of a *varna* is expected to observe the dharma of that *varna*, and in addition observe the discipline and duties of the *ashrama* also which he has adopted.

As will be explained in Chapter 5, *varna* is not the same as *jati* or caste as interpreted in today's parlance. It meant occupation or profession. It makes sense to evolve codes of conduct or ethics specific to different occupations, but not to *jat*is or castes based on birth. We can have, for example, a code of ethics each for lawyers, doctors and bankers. It was in that spirit that *varna-dharmas* were evolved. Brahmins who took to the priestly profession, were expected to be proficient in the Vedas and the recitation or chanting of the Vedas, to know the *Shastras*, the rituals and their significance, and to conduct them. For this purpose they were expected to lead an austere life and not accumulate wealth beyond their immediate needs. They should always be engaged in study and in teaching, and be available for guidance on both religious and ethical issues. They should never have any intellectual or moral arrogance, and conduct themselves with calmness, self-control, cleanliness, forgiveness, compassion and humility (see Gita XVIII.42). Since they were expected to lead an austere life without accumulating wealth, the society at large was expected in turn to support them especially in times of emergency.

The *Kshatriyas*, who took to soldiering and ruling people residing in their respective territories or kingdoms, were expected to be proficient in the art of warfare and handling weapons, as well in the art and ethics of governance. They were expected to cultivate virtues of valour, courage, fortitude, alertness and competence (Gita XVIII.43). *Shastras* like *Arthashastra* of Kautilya gave a lot of attention to *Rajadharma*, the duty of kings, which essentially was to look after the welfare of the people more than their own, protect them from thieves, invaders and other wicked elements, and take care not to exploit people, except taxing them legitimately and moderately without hurting them. *Rajadharma* also involved administration of justice with fairness and without discrimination, providing succour to the needy especially in hard times like famine. *Shastras* emphasised that destitutes like widows and orphans without support merited special attention and care of the kings and administrators.

The *Vaishyas* who took to agriculture, trade, crafts and such other economically paying occupations, were expected to develop the skills of their occupations and conduct their business with honesty without cheating. The *Shudras* were a residual category, consisting of persons who could not fit into any of the above professions, and had to do with serving people in those professions as helpers and assistants. While loyalty and honesty was insisted upon in the case of *Shudras*, it was considered as the sacred duty of other *varnas* to look after the *Shudras* with compassion and care, meeting their needs for food, clothing, and health care, and provide support to them in times of hardship and old age. Such of the children of the *Shudras* who wanted to take to other professions, opportunities were made available to them in the form of acquiring skills of trade and crafts and even of warfare. There were occasional instances of *Shudras* becoming chieftains, kings and even *Rshis* respected by Brahmins and kings alike. The only profession denied to them was that of officiating as a priest in conducting Vedic rituals. There was no bar on their taking up priesthood in the non-Vedic *Tantra* tradition.

Though the general advice as per the Gita was that one should stick to one's own dharma, in practice, the *varṇa-dharma* was not rigid or inflexible, in the sense that one could change occupations especially in *apat-kāla* (emergencies, hard times), apart from following one's aptitude. For example, the Manusmṛiti says clearly that dharma (varṇa-dharma) may be discarded if it were to lead to unhappiness or people's anger (Ch.4, verse 176). In hard times when a Shūdra's patron found it difficult to support him, it was open to him to seek another patron. The loyalty expected of the Shūdra was far from one of 'till death doth us apart'. They were not supposed to be treated as slaves. Even after varṇas deteriorated in to *jātis*, social mobility was not rare. Most often the armies consisted of those born as shūdras, who then became kshatriyas.

Similarly there are *Aśrama-dharmas* specific to the four *Aśramas* mentioned above. The first of them, *Brahmacharya*, is the stage of self-discipline and celibacy, dedicated to the study of Vedas, Upanishads and the Śāstras. In the ancient days, the study used to take place in the *Gurukulas* (Teacher's home) which had the status of schools or educational institutions. Traditionally restricted to boys, there is no reason why girls were barred from this initial phase learning the scriptures. The women who participated in discussions in the Upanishads (like Gargi and Maitreyi) are an evidence that in the ancient phase, girls too took to the study of the Vedas and matters of philosophy and religion. The Brahmacharya phase started with a ritual called the *Upanayana* (leading the child to studentship). Those who underwent this ritual were called *dvijas*, the twice-born. 'Dvija' is not the same as 'Brahmin' as a *jāti* (caste). Any person who undergoes this ritual, irrespective of caste, is a *dvija*, though unfortunately when the *varṇa* system deteriorated into the caste system, *upanayana* became a mere ritual without the earlier significance and was confined to those born in the upper castes other than the *shūdras*. Whosoever undergoes *upanayana* is expected to do '*sandhyā-vandana*', reciting selected portions of Vedas twice a day along with a *japa* of Gayatri mantra and meditation, and also do the studies with commitment and devotion. The Gayatri mantra, which is in the *Rgveda* (III.62.10), is a prayer to the Sun God, taken as standing for the supreme. It may be translated as: 'Om! I meditate upon the glorious and adorable Savitr who pervades the whole universe. May He stimulate our intellect (so that we can realise Him)! The Mantra is believed to be a very powerful stimulant to the intellectual process, and helping concentration and a sense of resolve and purpose. The *sandhyā-vandana* including Gayatri *japa* are supposed to be continued throughout one's life time, though one begins it during this first stage of life.

*Gr̥hasthāśrama* or the stage of householder is the next one and is the most important in one's life. That is when a man begins to make his livelihood, establishes a family, brings up children, gets them educated, looks after the parents, attends to guests, and helps others in need. The Gr̥hīni, the householder's wife, is no less important, because the physical burden of the family falls upon her. To formally recognize her importance, the texts insist that she sit beside her husband, participating in all religious rituals including *homās*, *yajnas* and *pūjās*. Since the householder and his wife live in a society, they incur various debts in one form or another. It is during the householder's stage that all the 'debts' (moral obligations) or *R̥nas* are redeemed. There are at least eight of them, which may, therefore, be called as *Ashta-r̥nas*. They are: *Deva-r̥na* (debt to God), *Pitr̥-r̥na* (debt to parents), *Guru-r̥na* (debt to teacher or Guru), *Dāmpatya-r̥na* (debt to one's spouse), *Atithya-r̥na* (debt of hospitality), *Loka-r̥na* (debt to people or society), *Mahī-r̥na* (debt to the Earth) and *Ātma-r̥na* (debt to the Self).

The *Ashta-rnas* (eight debts) can be redeemed as follows (i) *Deva-rna* through constantly remembering God, devotion, surrendering the fruits of one's action to Him, and trying to understand His qualities and inculcating them into one's own life (like truth, goodness, joy, love as discussed in the preceding chapter); (ii) *Pitr-rna* through taking care of one's parents in their old age and illness and taking care of one's own children as a pleasant responsibility; (iii) *Guru-rna* by taking up one's own students and teaching them and extending the frontiers of knowledge and skills; (iv) *Dāmpatya-rna* through developing love, mutual trust understanding and confidence, loyalty and willingness to help; (v) *Atithya-rna* by heartily extending hospitality to guests just as one may have or would like to have enjoyed from others; (vi) *Loka-rna* is redeemed by following the Gita's advice to treat other people in the same way as one would have liked others to treat one's own self; or, by treating the pleasures and pains everywhere by the same standard as one would apply to oneself (Gita VI. 32); or in other words, simply by being sensitive and considerate to others' rights and helping them whenever possible; (vii) *Mahī-rna* by being considerate to the Earth, the Nature, minimizing exploitation, wastage and pollution or, by being honestly environment-friendly; and (viii) *Ātma-rna* by following the advice of the Gita (in VI. 5) – uplift yourself through your own self and never destroy yourself (by negative thoughts), making the self as own friend and not an enemy. *Ātma-rna* is also redeemed by protecting one's own rights and dignity, not allowing oneself to be depressed or discouraged by anyone or any event.

The Tamil text, *Kural* by Tiruvalluvar, declares that “if a man goes through the householder's life along the way of dharma, nothing is left for him to attain by becoming a recluse or staying in the forest” (tr. by Rajagopalchari 1999). That is, it is enough for a householder to fulfill his moral duties. Yet, the Hindu texts do provide for two more *Ashramas* – the *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*. The householder and his wife can take to *Vanaprastha* in their old age, retiring to the forest, or to a place away from the hustle and bustle of mundane life, shunning all worldly pleasures and temptations and spending the rest of their life amidst nature in contemplation and *sadhana*. This does not amount to *sanyasa*, as the householder does not renounce his family especially his wife. His children and other relatives can visit his cottage in the forest, but the householder is expected to lead a very austere life. This stage is not mandatory, and is very much by voluntary choice.

The next *Ashrama* is not necessarily final chronologically, and does not have to come only after the householder and forester's stage. It can come before, that is, after the first stage of *Brahmacharya*. The *Sanyasi*, one who adopts *sanyasa*, renounces his family and also his *varna*. There can be no *jati* and *varna* among *sanyasis*; *sanyasa* is beyond such categories. A *sanyasi*, however, does not renounce the human society. In fact, the whole world becomes the family of a *sanyasi*, he is not supposed to have an emotional attachment to the immediate family or to the *jati* to which he earlier belonged, nor to anyone or anything specific; nor is he expected to hate any one. He is not supposed to raise his hand against anyone under any circumstances. *Sanyasi* is supposed to observe strict control on his mind and lead a celibate life; he is expected to conquer what the texts refer to as the six enemies of spiritual progress (*shad-vairis*) – *Kāma* (sex, sexual desire), *krōdha* (anger), *māda* (arrogance), *matsara* (jealousy), *mōha* (obsessive attachment to persons or things), and *lobha* (greed, avarice). In fact, all human beings are supposed to conquer these enemies which block spiritual advancement, but *sanyasis* particularly so. *Sanyasa* is not just a stage in life, it is also an institution with an important role to play. *Sanyasis* are

the most suited as spiritual guides. A priest is a professional and not necessarily trained to be a spiritual guide. A *sanyāsi* is well trained under a Guru, developing his personality in such a way as to inculcate all the moral and spiritual values, with a compassionate and kindly disposition to all humankind and even nature. *Sanyāsa* does not seem to have been a very prominent institution during the Vedic and even the Upanishadic phase, but may have become so after Buddhism and Jainism became popular. Both these religions allowed many including women to dedicate themselves as monks to the spiritual path. Though Hinduism also assimilated this institution for the same purpose, sanyasis were far fewer and *sanyāsinis* (women) even more so in Hinduism. This was because Hinduism believed, and still believes, the spiritual realisation and even providing spiritual guidance is quite possible for *Gr̥hasthas* and *Gr̥hinis* too. According to Manu, they do not even violate celibacy if sex is enjoyed hygienically within matrimony (Sri M 2011: 71). They do not necessarily have to become monks.

In spite of many texts and their teaching, there can arise problems of judging what constitutes righteousness or dharma in the context of a particular decision making or an action. The Gandhian approach to this could be said to offer three criteria as useful for this purpose. They are the motive, the means adopted and the consequences. Both the motive and means have to be pure in a righteous act. For example, a teacher may beat his student for indiscipline or lack of concentration, or worse still, for failure in solving a sum correctly. Even if the motive may be good, the means used here are violent and may turn out to be counter-productive. Consequences of an act, both intended and realised, constitute the third criterion. The outcome should be good and beneficial for all. But even after taking into account the three criteria, a moral judgment may not always be an easy task.

Texts may not always provide guidance in every situation though they provide golden rules of universal significance, such as, ‘do not do to others what hurts your own self’<sup>3</sup>, or the verse from the Gita quoted above (VI.32). Even then, texts are many and at times conflict with each other. The *Manusmṛti* itself says, however, in spite of itself being a *Smṛti*, that if there is a conflict between *Shruti* texts (Vedas and Upanishads) and *Smṛtis*, what is said in the *Shrutis* should prevail. But even the *Shruti* literature is vast, and there could be conflicts between what is said in the Vedas and what the Upanishads say. The Gita, which is believed to be the essence of the Upanishads, differs in several ways from the Vedic perspectives. It is a significant fact, therefore, that Hinduism does not treat scriptural support as the only and exclusive ultimate authority. Yudhishtira, in the *Mahābhārata*, makes a crucially important observation:

‘The scriptures are many and are divided. The Dharma-shastras are many and different. Nobody is called a sage until and unless he holds a different view. The truth of dharma is concealed in a dark cave. Therefore, the way to dharma is the one that is taken by *mahajanās* (great persons or a great number of persons)’. (Tr. by Matilal in Ganeri ed. 2002: 41)

Teachings of the texts are important no doubt, but the way great persons known for moral integrity act can also be a very good guide. Ultimately, it is the *swayam-prajñā* (own conscience and moral wisdom) that serves as the deciding factor. It is wisely said, what can the *Shāstras* do to him who has no wisdom of his own? (*Yasya nāsti swayamprajñā śhāstram tasya karoti kim?*). Kṛṣṇa therefore advises Arjuna in the Gita- ‘Critically ponder over what all I have told you, and then exercise your discretion’ (XVIII. 63). And when we are confronted with choice, Gandhi’s advice was to check if we have a hidden selfish motive, or whether we are honestly acting in the interest of people at large.

Moral dilemmas nevertheless defy an easy solution. Examples of these dilemmas occur in the epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and also in the *Puranas*, which have received considerable attention. Instances like the killing of *Vali* and *Shambuka* in the *Ramayana*, and the killing of *Bhishma*, *Drona*, *Karna* and *Duryodhana* in the *Mahabharata* war have raised a big moral controversy, which were even taken to have reflected on the seriousness of ethics in Hinduism.<sup>5</sup> But the problem is not confined to India and Hinduism. The Hindu epics have been frank enough to illustrate ethical dilemmas which one may have to face even in life. The wars fought by the West have seen much bigger infringement of moral codes.<sup>6</sup> This, however, cannot justify the expedience of our epic heroes, nor can their expedience justify it for others. It should be noted that neither the *Ramayana* absolves *Rama* of sin, nor does the *Mahabharata* does it to *Krishna*. The two poet-Rshis speak through the victims and condemn the immorality and injustice in such acts clearly. The epics also sing the praise of virtuous acts, like *Rama*'s respecting the promise made by his father and renouncing the kingdom in favour of his step-brother, *Bharata*, and *Bharata*'s act of renunciation in turn and deciding to rule only on behalf of *Rama* till he returns. The epics provide examples of both types of acts. *Karma* is shown to have pursued both *Rama* and *Krishna*, in spite of their being called as avatars. The sin of the killing of *Vali* from behind unseen by him could be redeemed only during the next avatar of *Rama* as *Krishna*. *Krishna* was killed similarly unseen by a hunter who mistook him for an animal and shot an arrow. Grieving *Gandhari* who lost all her sons, the *Kauravas*, curses *Krishna* for his role that his ethnic group, the *Vrishnis*, would also perish and it comes through. Thus we have to be cautious even in following the example of the Avatars, since even they can slip while in human incarnation.

Nevertheless, the dilemmas remain to tickle our brains. How do you tackle a clever, strong and an unscrupulous evil-doer, to ensure justice in the world? Is it morally permissible to pay him back with the same coin? How does morality work in a situation of conflict between an oppressive and arrogant but a strong party on one side, and a weaker party deprived of its rights by the strong on the other? Whatever the answer may be, the adoration for *Rama* and *Krishna* has only increased over the centuries, not excluding the contemporary times. They are seen as avatars who can give us the strength and wisdom to tide over difficulties created by all evils in life.

#### 4. ETHICAL GRADING – THEORY OF GUṆAS

The Gita goes to great lengths in discussing what is most ethical, what is less so, and what is least ethical or plainly unethical. In the process, it provides two ways of ethical grading. The grading is not so much about persons, as about characteristics or features of conduct and even things like diet in terms of how far they are conducive to ethical behaviour. In Chapter 16, a simple two-way distinction is made between the divine (*daivi*) and demonical (*asuri*) qualities, and it is suggested that human beings should try to cultivate divine qualities or virtues and give up demonical behavior. No human being is regarded as absolutely divine, or as absolutely demonical, but each can have a mix of these. The path of spiritual and moral evolution consists in gradually giving up demonical traits and acquiring divine traits. For example, fearlessness, purity of heart, generosity, self-control, wisdom, non-violence, compassion towards all living beings, gentleness, humility, cleanliness, fortitude or moral integrity, and forgiveness are taken as *daivi* qualities (XVI. 1-3). Ostentation, arrogance, self-conceit, harshness,

rashness, ignorance, lust, greediness, hypocrisy, holding evil desires, quick-temper and the like are treated as *asuri* qualities. The *daivi* qualities lead one to progress and liberation, whereas *asuri* traits lead to degradation and bondage.

The *Gītā*, however, gives much more attention to another way of ethical grading, i.e., through classifying qualities and things in terms of three *guṇas* or natures found in human beings. Much of the last two chapters of the *Gītā* (17th and 18th) are devoted to this purpose. The concept of the three *guṇas* or *Tri-guṇas* is found also in the *Saṅkhya* school of philosophy<sup>7</sup> which is one of the most ancient among the six Darshanās, though texts on the contribution of this school came to be written subsequently. Sage Kapila of a very ancient origin is said to be the founder of this school. The concept of *Tri-guṇas* was used by the school, more as subtle physical realities or substances, an ‘imbalance’ in which was said to have led to the creation of *prakṛti* (Nature, natural condition or state). The three *guṇas* taken by the *Gītā* as indicating psychological nature, are: *Sattva* or *Satvik* (good, gentle, virtuous, truthful, wise, kind, benevolent, – ethically at a high level); *Rajas* or *Rajasik* (emotional, passionate, active, dynamic, energetic, outgoing, – placed ethically at the middle level); and *Tamasik* (or of the quality of *tamas* – darkness, indolent, dull, passive, apathetic, ignorant, and placed ethically at a low level). It was *Gītā*’s contribution to use the concept for ethical grading. Lord Kṛṣṇa may have felt that a human being can neither be totally divine, nor totally devilish; and even if placed in between they should know where they stand in terms of their motives, behaviour and actions. The *Gītā* sees these qualities not only in persons but also in things like devotion to God, charity, food, action, approach to knowledge and so on. Though *Satvik* nature is the most preferred and *Tamasik* is the least preferred, the *Gītā* indicates that no one person is purely of one type. A human being is a combination of all the three. In the same person, one nature may dominate at one time, and another nature may dominate at another time. But it helps if a person is aware of his nature in each context, particularly to control passion and sloth, and strives to use it to maximise his or her material as well as spiritual wellbeing. Significantly, the *guṇa* analysis is not applied to *varṇas*, because each individual is a combination of different *guṇas* from time to time. The analysis of *guṇas* is one of the most fascinating parts of the *Gītā*. A classification of these things, based on chapters 17 and 18 of the *Gītā* is presented below in the form of a table for easy grasp and convenience. The remarks made in the table below about each of the *guṇas* respectively, are based on my interpretation and understanding of the original verses, rather than on their literal translation.

**Table:** *Triguṇas* – *Satvik* (Truthful, Sage-like), *Rajasik* (Emotional), and *Tamasik* (Dismal)

	<b>Satvik</b>	<b>Rajasik</b>	<b>Tamasik</b>
Individuals’ <i>Prakṛti</i> (nature)	Kind, compassionate, generous, friendly, soft spoken, calm and composed, wise	Emotional, energetic, active, easily provoked to anger, harsh and critical, passionate	Dull, sleepy, lazy, ignorant, passive
Bhakti (Devotion to God)	With a pure heart, for the pure joy of loving God and feeling one with Him	Expecting some material reward	Without proper <i>shraddha</i> , half-hearted or reward expected in the form of harming enemy
<i>Shraddha</i> (Commitment and faith)	Essentially in the Divine	Essentially in acquiring wealth and power	Belief in evil spirits or witchcraft to acquire power to harm others; irrational, superstitious

Karma (work)	Done with detachment for the good of all	Done with narrow selfish motive, for the good of only one self	Malicious, ignorant of consequences, harmful to one self and others, done reluctantly
<i>Karta</i> (agent, doer)	Endued with <i>Dhṛti</i> (fortitude), enthusiasm and humility, but without attachment, dispassionate but committed, equanimity in success and failure	Passionately attached to fruits of outcome; affected by elation or dejection with outcome, tendency to be aggressive	Indifferent, uncommitted, unskilled, dishonest, ignorant of consequences, malicious, lazy, very slow
<i>Jñāna</i> (knowledge) <sup>8</sup>	Sees the Unity behind diversity, synthesizes, based on holistic perception	Focuses on diversity or multiplicity, based on analysis	Wrong knowledge that mistakes a part for the whole, indifferent to cause and reasoning, obstinate
<i>Buddhi</i> (intellect, discrimination, understanding, perception)	Knows what is to be done/not to be done, what is good and bad, the distinction between <i>Pravṛtti</i> and <i>Nivṛtti</i> , and what leads to liberation/bondage	Confused, quick to judge	Perverse in attitude, taking right as wrong and wrong as right ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair...' as in the <i>Macbeth</i> )
<i>Yajna</i> and other rituals	Done with faith, devotion and understanding of the significance, without desiring anything for oneself but for the good of humanity and world peace	Done for the benefit of oneself and family only and for power or ostentation	Done improperly and without faith, or for harming others
<i>Dāna</i> (gift, charity, donation)	Given without expecting anything in return, not even gratitude; given to the needy or deserving	Expecting something in return including power or fame, given reluctantly	Given to undeserving or at wrong place and time, given with contempt to the receiver, or for manipulating or harming the receiver
<i>Tapas</i> (penance, austerity)	Performed with faith for the good of others	Performed to acquire yogic powers, fame and honour, or worldly things for oneself	Performed with self-torture, and/or for harming others
<i>Dhṛti</i> (fortitude)	High level of moral courage and resoluteness, self-confident, in full control of the mind	Using resoluteness only for a selfish purpose and ready to compromise for it	Wavering, not resolute, given to grief, diffidence, depression and fear
<i>Sukham</i> (Happiness)	Based on clear understanding and clean/clear conscience; long term	Sensual, short-term	Based on delusion or perversion
<i>Ahara</i> (Food)	Contributes to health, hygienic, adds to life and nourishment, feel-good type	Acidic, hot, pungent; producing discomfort	Stale, tasteless, unclean, makes one sleepy and indolent; harmful to health

**Note:** Based on the interpretation of Chapters 17 and 18 of the Gita; for more detailed discussion, it is advisable to go to these chapters themselves.

The Gita does not intend to make this classification rigid and mechanical. It is possible for a person to be *sātvik* in one respect, *rājasik* in another, and *tāmasik* in yet another. The purpose of the Gita is to provide guidance both in day-to-day living and for sadhana. For example, the advice in respect of

*Karma, Karta, Jnana, Buddhi, Dana, Dhṛti, Sukham* and *Ahara* can all be a source of guidance mainly for day-to-day ethical living; while the advice in respect of *Bhakti, Shraddha, Yajna*, and *Tapas*, can be a guide mainly for *sadhana*. In fact, however, dharma in the sense of ethics cannot be separated from *sadhana*. One cannot be truly religious without being ethical. D V Gundappa (2001) an eminent philosopher writer and poet in Kannada has called the Gita as *Jivana-dharma-yoga* (Yoga of Ethical Living) and he gave the same title to his book on the Gita.

The classification or ethical grading in terms of the three *Guṇas* in the Gita can be seen also as a method which can be applied with due discrimination to other things not mentioned in the Gita. It can for example be applied to an economy, politics or even society.<sup>9</sup> The whole purpose of the Gita is to make human beings and their institutions more virtuous, not just religious.

## 5. HUMAN GOALS IN HINDUISM – *PURUSHARTHAS*

The doctrine of *Purusharthas* was developed to reconcile worldly pursuits with spiritual goals in a framework of Dharma. This was done mainly through the epics, especially the *Mahabharata*, and the *Dharmashastras*. *Purushartha* is a combination of two words, ‘*Purusha*’ (man, heroic) and ‘*Artha*’ (goal or purpose), which together means simply human goals or heroic goals of human beings. Though ‘*purusha*’ means man, *purusharthas* apply both to men and women, as with the English word ‘man’. These goals are said to be four – *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (acquisition of wealth and power), *kama* (sensual pleasures), and *moksha* (liberation from suffering in the form of cycle of births and deaths). When we use the word *purusharthas*, they refer to the group of these four goals.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of *dharma* has already been discussed in detail in the third section above. It is necessary to emphasise here, however, that dharma is not just one of the four human goals, but also an overarching framework in terms of which alone other goals, particularly *artha* and *kama* have to be pursued, and not independently of dharma. Even *moksha* is attained only after living the life of dharma first. The *Mahabharata* makes it clear: ‘He who wishes to achieve *kama* and *artha* must concentrate on dharma, for *kama* and *artha* are never separate from dharma (V. 124.37). It warns: He who wishes to achieve *kama* and *artha* by means which are not really means (*anupaya* i.e., means other than dharma) perishes’ (V.124.36).<sup>11</sup> K J Shah observed, ‘even ‘*moksha* will not be *moksha* without the content of dharma’. Shah feels that the four ‘constitute a single goal, though in the lives of individuals, the elements may get varying emphasis for various reasons’. He stresses the interactive and mutually complementary nature of *purusharthas* rather than any hierarchy among them. Shah’s view of *purusharthas* appears to represent the Hindu tradition more closely than the conflict or hierarchy view. Shah sums up the position neatly: ‘*artha* alone is greed, *kama* alone is lust, *dharma* alone is mechanical ritual, and *moksha* alone is escapism’ (Shah 1982: 59).

Hinduism, from its very beginning, recognized *moksha* as the ultimate goal and emphasised spiritual upliftment, but it made it very clear that there was no need to ignore one’s duties and responsibilities in the mundane world. Even in the pursuit of spiritual progress or in *sadhana*, Hinduism recognised both types of paths – one of *Pravṛtti* and the other of *Nivṛtti*. The former was the path taken by *Grhasthas* (householders) and the latter by *Sanyasis*. *Pravṛtti* is the path of engagement with the world, while (*Nivṛtti*) was the path of withdrawal. *Pravṛtti* needs both *artha* and *kama*, while *Nivṛtti* does not and

actually renounces them. But neither the Gr̥hastha nor the Sanyāsi can renounce their respective moral responsibilities or dharma in the world.

Hinduism not only accepted *artha* as worthy of pursuit, but even formulated a philosophy about it some 4000 years ago in the *R̥gveda*:

*Parichin marto dravinam mamanyad*  
*R̥tasya patha namasa vivaset /*  
*Uta svena kratuna samvadeta*  
*Shreyamsam daksham manasa jagrbhyat //*

(*R̥gveda* 10.31.2)

Let a man (or woman) ponder well on wealth,  
 earn it through the path of moral law and with humility  
 consulting one's own conscience, and (then)  
 heartily gain upright prosperity.

Wealth does not come on its own. One has to consciously ponder (*parichin*) over how it has to be earned through the path of moral law or truth (*r̥tasya patha*) and not by dishonest means. It has to be earned with humility (*namasa*), since success depends on the grace of God and one owes it to the society at large for making it possible. Ethical dilemmas are bound to arise, which have to be resolved through consulting one's own conscience (*kratuna*) or Inner Voice (as Gandhi called it). Once these qualifications are respected, one can heartily (*manasa*) earn wealth and gain upright (*daksham*) prosperity (*shreyamsam*). 'Daksham' can also be interpreted as 'efficiently'.

There is a lot of ethical economics here, combining ethics with economics. Gandhi said, 'I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics' (*Young India* October 3, 1921). He made it clear that if in any context or any issue, economics conflicted with ethics, it is such economics which had to be given up, and not ethics. One does not have to become an ascetic, but one should earn and enjoy what is earned ethically. This means that it involves no violence, or hurting or depriving others. It should *create* wealth, and *add* to the welfare of one self and others too, without making anyone else worse off. Gandhi developed his idea of Trusteeship to reconcile an individual need to excel and achieve with the societal need to take care of the weak. A wealthy man should have a control on his wants and treat his excess of wealth over needs of necessary consumption and investment, as a trust to take care of the weak.

That there need be no conflict between *artha* and *dharma* is clear in Hinduism. *Artha* is viewed as an instrument of *dharma* also, just as *artha* is to be gained through *dharma*. *Dharma* is recognised as very difficult to attain in the midst of poverty, though it does not certainly mean that the poor are considered as morally deprived or incapable of *dharma*. What is pertinent here is that poverty is not glorified, nor earning wealth underrated. On the contrary, the *Mahabharata* says that *dharma* flows out of wealth, like a river springs forth from a mountain (*Dhanaddhi dharmah sravati shailadapi nadi yatha*) (*Shanti Parva* 8. 23). Prosperity enables charity, which is its justification. Pursuit of wealth

finds its purpose when wealth finds its way into charity and promotes the welfare of others. The Gita has a verse which says that one who cooks only for himself eats sin (III. 13).

The goal of *Artha* in the sense of power also has to be pursued ethically, with due awareness of moral responsibilities of holding on to power. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* says clearly:

*Prajasukhe sukham rajnah prajanam cha hite hitam /  
Natmapriyam hitam rajnah prajanam tu priyam hitam //*

(*Arthashastra* 1.19.34)

“In the happiness of his subjects lies the king's happiness; in their welfare his welfare. He shall not consider as good only that which pleases him but treat as beneficial to him whatever pleases his subjects”. (Tr. by Rangarajan 1992: 10).

How much pertinent is this for today's democracy, since kings are replaced now by political 'leaders' elected by people themselves to rule them! Rulers are warned in the *Ramayana* that if any of them indulges in anti-people activities brutally, he will be killed in the same way as a wicked cobra that has entered a house is killed.<sup>12</sup>

Coming to *kama* (sensual desires), the attitude has been neither to renounce them nor to obsessively indulge in them, but seek a moderate golden mean in a morally acceptable way. The principle is not to violate the dignity of others in any way, including one's own wife. As for sex, the ethical code is to confine it within matrimony. Though mainstream Hinduism has regarded any obsession with sex as something to be controlled by will power, the Tantra school has tried to explore the spiritual significance of sex and to see sex as a way of even experiencing the Brahman in its *Ananda* aspect. However, this means legitimate and consensual sex, because a feeling of guilt in illegitimate sex will come in the way of full realisation of *Ananda*. This can be true of even sex within matrimony, if it is forced on the wife. Such a problem cannot arise in the case of a couple in deep love with each other. Sex with love and mutual respect is considered *satvik*, whereas sex without love but not forced as *rajasik*, and forced sex as *tamasik* and heinous.

*Moksha* is the last of the four *purusharthas*, which is the ultimate goal. Every human being is considered as eligible to have this goal, irrespective of *Varnas* and *Ashramas*. Shudras and *Grhasthas* were also considered eligible to seek *Moksha*, and not Brahmins or *Sanyasis* alone. *Moksha*, however, is not the same as going to *Svarga* (heaven). *Svarga* is considered as a temporary reward for *Punya* or meritorious activities such as charity; enjoyment in heaven is supposed to last till the accumulation of *punya* is used up and exhausted, after which the *Jiva* enters this world to have a rebirth. But *Moksha* is permanent; it is a release from all bondage and cycles of births and deaths, and is in the nature of ever-lasting bliss. Corresponding to *svarga*, *naraka* (hell) also is not permanent; the punishment in hell lasts only so long as the accumulation of sin is redeemed, after which the *Jiva* takes rebirth in this world. There is no permanent damnation in Hinduism, at least as per ancient scriptures. So there is no opposite or negative of the *Moksha* concept. It is not clear however how the concept of heaven and hell emerged, since according to the Law of Karma, karma is redeemed either in this life itself or through *punarjanma* (rebirth). A few philosophers like the 12th Century spiritual leader, Basavanna,

make it clear that there is no heaven or hell separate from this world, and that one can experience both in this very world. It is up to us entirely as to which one we choose; morally acceptable conduct is heaven and the opposite is hell, according to him. Moksha is seen as the final union with the Supreme, as a reward for not only our good conduct, but also for selfless devotion, and for unselfish and helpful work. In Advaita philosophy, *moksha* is Self-Realisation, i.e., realisation that the self is the Brahman. It can happen when one is living, in which such a person is called as *Jivan-mukta* (liberated while living). What *sadhana* is needed for *moksha* will be discussed in the next chapter.

## 6. SOCIAL CONCERN IN HINDUISM

It is necessary to stress social concerns of a religion, not only because social problems are too immense to be tackled by the state alone but also because consciousness of the social and humanist core of a religion could check any parochial tendencies and intolerance. Morality has no meaning without compassion and social concern – concern for social problems like poverty, hunger, deprivation, social discrimination and injustice including injustice to women, exploitation, illness and illiteracy. A religion would have no meaning and its ethics would be a farce if it does not acknowledge the dignity of all human beings and also a sense of personal responsibility towards them and their welfare. But how far does Hinduism have this social concern? This is probed here through three criteria: (a) as reflected in the scriptural texts, *shastras* and other tracts on the ethics of Hinduism, (b) as reflected in day-to-day behaviour, and (c) as reflected in the development of institutions for social concern and service. While (a) will be dealt with in this section itself, (b) and (c) would be covered in the section on ‘Ethics in Practice’, which also includes a discussion on gender issues.

Our discussion so far in the preceding chapters shows that there is nothing in the basic nature of Hinduism that shows lack of social concern. On the contrary, it is very positive about it. Social concern can have two ethical values or principles backing it – compassion for the less fortunate and equality and right to dignity of all beings, at least of all human beings. Taking up the first, the law of karma certainly does not mean that we can afford to be indifferent to the suffering of the less fortunate on the assumption that it is their karma. On the contrary, if I see a person in pain and do nothing to alleviate it, even if I can do something about it, then I would be incurring the bad karma (or *papa*) of losing an opportunity of helping and for dereliction of duty. It is my moral duty to help and leave the result to the person’s karma. Hindu scriptures are clear that our good deeds do count as *punya* and bad deeds, including failure to do good even if one can, count as *papa*, for the law of karma.

The very concept of immanence of God implies dignity of all human beings, not merely of their abstract selves or souls, but even for their bodies. The human body is considered as the abode of God, as reflected in the verse – *Deho devalayah proktah dehi devo Niranjana* (the body is a temple and its dweller is no less than God who is free from all blemish). The Gita advocates equality and equal treatment of all on the ground that the same Self is present in all beings (VI.29). The Rgveda (10.13.1) says all that all human beings are the children of the Immortal (*amrtasya putrah*). It means that all have a right not only to life, but also to dignity and dignified treatment. It does not mean serving only one’s own self on this basis, as it would amount to hypocrisy and selfishness. It also means that serving others especially the needy is serving God, since He is *Sarva-antaryami* (who dwells within

us all). God is not only Antaryami, He is also considered as *Patita-pavan* (redeemer of the fallen) and *Dīna-bandhu* (friend of the meek). He seems to prefer acting through humans.

Freedom is valued in a wider sense and is prayed for not merely for one's own self but also for the whole group or community, as reflected in a verse from *Rgveda*.

The prayer is:

*Uru nāstanve tana/ Uru kshayaya naskrdhi/ Uru nō yandhi jīvase //*

(*Rgveda* VIII. 68.12)

(‘Give freedom in our bodies, give freedom in our dwellings, give freedom in our life’, Original and Tr. from Bose 1999: 226).

*Uru* means freedom, freedom from deprivation and constraints to move in life. Prayer for freedom is found again in the tenth *Mandala* of *Rgveda* (128.5). There is an echo of such a prayer again in the *Bhagavata*. It is the freedom from sorrow and suffering – *dukkha*, in others, which is rated as higher than even *moksha*, – liberation from rebirth for oneself. The verse is:

*Nāham kamaye rajyam na svargam na cha apunarbhavam /*

*Prāṇinam dukkha-taptanam kamaye dukkha- nāshanam //*

(I desire no kingdom, no heaven, not even freedom from rebirth (*apunarbhavam*, i.e., moksha) for myself. I desire only that beings afflicted by sorrow be relieved of it.)

The same sentiment comes out strongly in a *subhashita* (a good saying in float):

*Taditah piditah ye syuhu tan mama iti abhyudirayet/*

*Sa sadhu iti mantavyah tatra drshṭavya Ishvarah //*

(The one who declares (or treats) those who are oppressed and harassed as his own (and helps them), he is to be regarded as the real saint; it is here (in him) that God is to be seen.)

Compassion and help to others in need is a highly cherished value in Hinduism right from the Vedic phase. *Dana* (gift, charity) was recognised as the most potent way of earning *punya*. The call to help others and not be selfish comes out clearly and loudly from the following verse in the *Rgveda* (x. 117.6):

*Mogham annam vindate aprachetaḥ satyam bravimi vadha itsa tasya /*

*Naryamanam pushyati yo sakhayam kevalagho bhavati kevaladi //*

(The person who has no concern (for others) earns his food in vain. I tell you the truth – it is as good as his (moral) death. He, who feeds neither the good and the learned nor a friend, and eats all by himself, only sins all by himself.)

We are familiar with the proverb, ‘A friend in need is friend indeed’. We have a similar saying in the *Rgveda* (X.117.4):

*‘Na sakha yo na dadati sakhye sa cha bhuve sachamanaya pitvah’*

(A person is no friend if he does not help, but one who helps is a real friend.)

*Padma-Purana* declares, “Those who always feed the crippled, the blind, children, the old, the ill, and those helpless and pinched by penury, will enjoy bliss in heaven; there is no end to the *punya* accumulated by constructing wells and tanks, where aquatic animals and those moving on land drink water when they desire, for life is centred on water”.<sup>13</sup> The Gita not only values generosity and charity, but also adds that it has to be without any contempt towards the beneficiary. A gift, given with contempt to recipients, is ‘*tamasik*’ according to the Gita. It is much lower in moral status than the selfless gift given with humility which is called ‘*Satvik*’. The poor are to be regarded as *Daridra-narayana*, those among whom God is present, who should be served with respect and love.

The concept of Karma-Yoga as action without selfish attachment and for *loka-sangraha* (maintenance and nourishment of this world) or plainly *loka-hita* (welfare of people) forms a basic teaching of the Gita. The Gita transformed the earlier concept of *yajna* as ritualistic offering of food in sacrificial fire or animal sacrifice, into sharing with others what one has. The philosophy is that we have received from God everything that sustains us, and we repay our debt to God through *yajna*, by sharing with others what we have with us – be it food, wealth, knowledge, or simply labour or work. The word *shram-dan* (gift in the form of work/labour) may have been recently coined, but its basic principle is to be found in the Gita.

The Gita also preached equality and declared that *varna* is not based on *jati* or birth, but one’s own aptitude or calling (*guna* and *karma*) (IV-13). The Gita also declared that those who are engaged in yoga see their own self among all beings everywhere, treating them as equals (*sarvatra samadarshanah* (VI. 29). Kṛṣṇa endorses this further by saying that ‘one who sees God in all, and all in God, is never lost to Me, nor am I lost to him (VI.30). A belief in the presence of God in all the beings implies equal dignity of all the beings, and their equal right to dignified treatment.

The Gita’s emphasis on *bhakti* (devotion) for *sadhang*, laid the basis for further democratisation of Hinduism during the medieval age, – the phase dominated by Bhakti movements in Hinduism. Though the origins of *bhakti* can be traced to the *Rgveda* itself, the Gita formally recognised it as a valid path of God realisation, along with *Jnana* (knowledge) and *Karma* (selfless work). The significance of *bhakti* was that it could be practised by all, including the lowest of the low, meekest of the meek, literate or illiterate, high caste or low caste, the healthy or the ill. At one stroke, *bhakti* took the poor and the deprived within its scope, and was instrumental in broad-basing Hinduism. In *bhakti*, there were no distinctions of caste, gender, wealth and education. Bhakti gave human dignity to all. Devotion to God strengthened it; it included humility also. One of the most inspiring verses in the Gita from the point of boosting one’s self-confidence and emphasising the freedom of will is:

*Uddharet atmanatmanam natmanam avasadayet /*

*Atmaiva hyatmano bandhuh atmaiva ripuratmanah //* (VI.5)

(A man should uplift himself by his own will, and never allow oneself to be corrupted. Self is a friend of one self, but it can also be an enemy).

Like the Gita, the *Kural* by Thiruvalluvar, laid emphasis on compassion to all, helping those in need, being truthful and hospitable and so on. It explicitly deplored caste distinctions. The *Kural* is in Tamil, and is known as the Tamil *Vēda*. Its whole emphasis is on ethical living, rather than on metaphysics. It showed much more social awareness and ethical concern about inequality in society in the form of caste distinctions than the Sanskrit texts did. It was no surprise that the Bhakti Movements started first in Tamil Nadu, and covered the whole of India by the middle of the second millennium. They democratised the Hindu society as never before, and encouraged even the lowest of the low to protest against social evils including the oppression of women and the hegemony of upper caste. As we shall be discussing in the following chapters (especially Ch.5), even the Bhakti movements could not end the caste system, since the economic and social differences between the castes could not be eradicated.

Social concern received a renewed emphasis during the modern age. Right from Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) to Mata Amritanandamayi (1953-), leaders of Hinduism have put social reform and social service as upper most among their priorities. Reflecting this mood, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) asserted, “It is an insult to starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics”.<sup>14</sup> As Jones observed, “The Ramakrishna Math and Mission, with its system of hospitals and dispensaries, and its extensive relief projects, added to Hinduism a dogma of social service and a successful programme based on that dogma” (Jones 1989: 216). The values of modern age since Renaissance in Europe – Humanism, equality, equal regard for women and women’s emancipation, uplift of the hitherto deprived, equality before law, secular education, liberty and human rights – received unanimous acceptance and support of reformers and leaders of modern Hinduism. Interestingly, this meant no rejection of Hinduism but only rediscovery of its human values.

## 7. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN HINDUISM

A lack of ethical sensitivity and concern seems to be a major reason for our massive failures on the environmental front reflected in significant levels of pollution of air, water and soil; deforestation; depletion of natural resources and their increasing scarcity particularly of water and energy resources; increased risks of climate change; loss of bio-diversity, and desertification. The basic nature of ethical concern can be seen as transcending narrow short term self-interest at the centre, rising continuously on to caring for others in wider and wider circles. The least ethical is the most self-centred person. The person at a higher ethical level transcends this narrow interest and extends his perspective to cover his family, community, country, humanity, and then on to a wider circle covering the whole eco-system with its animate and inanimate constituents. This is the teaching of the Gita (VI.29).<sup>15</sup>

There is a strong streak of environmentalism in Hinduism from the beginning, as reflected in the veneration and deification of nature in the *Rgveda*. This has continued and is reflected even in some of the day-to-day prayers. Hindu children were taught to recite a prayer on getting up in the morning, which sought forgiveness from Mother Earth for stepping on her:

*Samudra vasane prthvi parvata stanamandale /*

*Vishnupatni namastubhyam padasparsham kshamasva me//*

(quoted in Pandurangi 1999: 61).

(O Earth, clothed in oceans, with mountains for your breasts, Consort of God, I bow to you, forgive me for stepping on you).

The concept of Gaia is not new to Hinduism, which treats the Earth as *Bhumata* (Mother-Earth). The *Atharva-veda* has a whole prayer in praise of the Earth, called the *Prthivi Sukta*. Verse 11 in the *Sukta* is as follows in translation: “Oh Mother Earth! Sacred are thy hills, snowy mountains and deep forests. Be kind to us and bestow upon us happiness. May you be fertile, arable and nourisher of all! May you continue supporting people of all races and nations! May you protect us from your anger (*i.e.*, natural disasters)! And may no one exploit and subjugate your children”. (Tr. By Dwivedi 2000:10).

There is no notion in Hinduism about God creating this wonderful world solely for the enjoyment of man. On the contrary, it is believed that all, including animals and plants are his creation. Human beings have no exclusive right to lord over nature. Animals and even plants also have a God-given right to live. God is immanent in this world or nature, making it sacred. *Yajurveda*, which is even older than the *Atharva-veda*, commands explicitly, *Prthivim mā himsihi, antarisksham mā himsihi, mapo mā aushadhih mā himsihi*. (Do not injure the Earth, do not injure the space, do not injure water and the plants). (*Yajurveda*, V.42,43; and XIII.18).

Indian religions respected animals and their right to live, and violence on them was looked down upon. Jainism and Buddhism tried to stop the practice of animal sacrifice of the Vedic period. The Gita also changed the concept of *Yajna*, making animal sacrifice unnecessary. The Buddha called for compassion to all living beings and nature. Human beings may be more powerful than animals, but the Buddha argues in *Sutta Nipata* that ‘we have a responsibility to animals precisely because of the asymmetry between us, not because of the symmetry that takes us to the need for co-operation. The Buddha goes on to illustrate the point by an analogy with the responsibility of the mother towards her child’ (Sen 2009: 205). Power gives us responsibility to protect, not to exploit. This is also Gandhi’s idea of Trusteeship extended to Nature. The benign attitude to non-human life and nature in general is evident in Indian culture in many ways. According to the doctrine of rebirth, to which Hinduism as well as Jainism and Buddhism subscribe, a human being could have been an animal in the past birth and could become an animal in the next birth. This brings human and non-human beings much closer in Indian religions, and should induce an attitude of empathy and respect to non-human life forms.

There certainly was an economic basis also for veneration of certain animals at least, which acquired a religious colour. The veneration for cow and bull/ox, for example, was based on their tremendous economic significance in daily diet, in agriculture, and in transport. Even the veneration of snakes, particularly by farmers, may be due to their role in rodent control and consequent protection of crops. The dangerous beauty of the cobra with raised hood also created an awe, which may have led to its worship.

A basic feature of Indian, especially Hindu culture, is its love of diversity, which is manifest in all fields – nature, culture, religion, art, architecture, languages, literature, and racial composition of people.<sup>16</sup> The love of diversity follows basically from conceptualising God in manifold forms of his manifestation including nature. Commitment to biodiversity comes naturally to Indian culture particularly the Hindus. The worshipping devotee is ideally supposed to offer twenty one varieties of flowers and leaves. This induced households to grow varieties of flowering plants and herbs in their garden plots. It is also this love of diversity which made Indian farmers preserve many varieties of cereals, pulses and vegetables. This is a rich heritage, not only to draw upon, but also to conserve.

Self-control or restraint on wants is highly regarded in all Indian religions, without which one cannot qualify for *sādhanā*; it is actually a basic or primary requisite of *sādhanā*. Wants have to be restricted to what is essential and legitimate; spiritual progress cannot go with consumerism. The first verse of the *Ishopanishad*, which was Gandhi's favourite, is pertinent here:

*Ishavasyamidam sarvam yatkincha jagatyam jagat /  
Tena tyaktena bhunjithah mā grdhah kasyachit dhanam //*

(All this is the abode of the Supreme Lord. Everything belongs to him. Enjoy what is left for you as your legitimate share and do not covet what is not yours).

It teaches leading a simple life by avoiding greed and pomp. By emphasising the value of austerity and curtailing consumption, Indian religions could be said to have strongly supported sustainable development. We can seek enjoyment in life in several ways other than wasteful consumption, by enhancing our capabilities, as Amartya Sen advocated, through increased leisure, devoting more time to art, literature, eco-friendly sports, music and dance. This is possible because God has granted us freedom of will, which we have to exercise in a responsible way.

If we exercise restraint on the use of natural resources including fossil fuel, it follows that we have to prefer labour-intensive rather than energy-intensive methods of production. This indeed was Gandhi's economic approach. He did not mind the use of machinery to reduce drudgery and strain, but not when it caused unemployment. His primary concern was to create full employment and to avoid a situation where some are over-occupied and some idle. But this approach was also eco-friendly, minimising the use of non-renewable energy. Gandhi also picked up another value of Indian culture, preference for durability, which reduces entropy or wastage. 'Use once and throw-away' habit is not consistent with Indian tradition and culture, but unfortunately business and economic growth thrive on this habit. Gandhi also made villages as centres of our economy as in the past, emphasising self-reliance and decentralisation. Producing mainly for the local market rather than for distant markets or the world market unduly increased the demand for transport, and with it the demand for nonrenewable energy sources. Apart from depletion, it also meant increased air pollution, leading to climate change. Environmental ethics should thus lead us to have a serious re-look at the style and nature of the present economic growth, and see how it can be made more eco-friendly, sustainable and humane.

In brief, the basic features of traditional Indian culture, particularly those of Hinduism, which support the cause of environment may be listed as follows (Nadkarni 2011: 118):

1. Reverence for nature - principle of nonviolence extended beyond human beings, without excluding them;
2. Respect for diversity;
3. Self-control on desire for more;
4. Free will and acceptance of human responsibility;
5. Gandhian preference for labour-intensive production, not energy-intensive production;
6. Durability as a value – not ‘use once and throw away’ habit;
7. Self-reliance, decentralisation, emphasis on village or local economy, without isolating from the world economy.

## 8. ETHICS IN PRACTICE

There is generally a gap between preaching principles and practicing them all over the world. Gandhi, however, rued that the gap was painfully bigger among Indians, even if their principles were loftier. It is not ethics in principles and ideals, but ethics in practice which can take a nation along the path of progress even in mundane matters like economic, social and political development, let alone spiritual progress. A nation lagging behind in this will be simply treated with contempt by the international community of nations. The ethical level of the Hindu society particularly since the colonial days has been abysmally low, which may well have been a major factor behind the success of foreign powers in establishing their way. Social reformers including Mahatma Gandhi and Dr B R Ambedkar contributed immensely to reform our society and put it on an egalitarian and democratic basis. However, their battle is yet to succeed. The moral integrity of most of our political class (so called ‘leaders’) is so low that they have lost all credibility and they rule by default. But this is a reflection also on the people who elect them. Out of exasperation, Vir Sanghvi, the editor of the *Hindustan Times*, wrote: ‘If a serial killer stood for elections to the US Senate he would lose. If a sex crazed rapist tried to make it to the House of Commons, he would lose his deposit. In most successful democracies voters are discerning enough to not vote for crooks, dacoits and murderers. Our problem is this: we vote for them, time and time again’.<sup>17</sup> Even a decade after Sanghvi wrote this, the situation has not changed, and persons with criminal background are believed to be in state legislatures and even Parliament, as per repeated newspaper reports. The Law has not yet been amended to effectively bar the entry of politicians from contesting elections to public bodies. It is not appreciated that India can never dream of being a regional, economic or political power with this kind of a background of massive poverty, intolerable inequality and heinous levels of corruption and pilferage. In spite of centuries of effort, we have not been able to do away with the evils of caste oppression or exploitation of women.

Paradoxically, there is no dearth of religiosity in contemporary India, particularly among the Hindus. Varma quotes some interesting statistics: “... according to the latest survey by the Census of India, there are 2.4 million places of worship in the country, as against 1.5 million schools and half that number of hospitals” (Varma 2004: 96). Much of the religiosity that we witness today especially in the urban public space is pompous, ostentations, noisy and even hostile to environment – as in polluting water bodies with chemicals released from the Ganesha and Durga idols immersed in them.

Its purpose is cheap entertainment and sometimes exhibition of communal and economic power, and not spiritual progress. Such religiosity is not elevating, either morally or spiritually. It goes hardly a step towards Self-realisation or God-realisation.

We cannot, however, paint all Indians, or all Hindus, with the same broad brush in dark colour. Most of the Indians, including Hindus, who are settled abroad, have shown exemplary civic sense and have enriched the political, economic, social and academic life of their host countries with honour and distinction. Hindu temples abroad are models of cleanliness, quietude and solemnity, free from any vulgarity and garishness. Within India also, we cannot use the same broad brush for all. It is not as if it is a totally hopeless and dismal situation. It is not also as if ethics in practice in the historical past was either more glorious or more dismal than now. One of the major achievements of the contemporary Hindu society is the significant rise in the awareness of injustice and inequality, and widespread protest against social evils, particularly among what were called the lower castes. As a result, the Hindu society has become much more broad-based than ever before, though we have much to achieve yet in this regard.

We may first have glimpses of ethics in practice in the distant past. The lofty principles of scriptures were tried to be implemented through 'do's and don'ts in the *Shastras*. They had the status of law books. Despite commitment to the caste system and hierarchy, the *Shastras* were not totally devoid of social concern and a sense of justice and fairness. Actually they were supposed to ensure them. The *Arthashastra* warned the king to guard against officers exploiting or harassing people, and asked him to confiscate their property and even banish those who illegally take money and property of people (1.111- 2). *Arthashastra* envisaged a pre-modern welfare state where public services and infrastructure were to be provided by the king, and the rights of women, consumers, borrowers, wage earners and even prisoners were tried to be safeguarded. While business and industry were encouraged, earning wealth had to be subject to *dharma* and unfair dealings were banned.

Shastras, including the *Arthashastra*, tried on the whole to safeguard the interests of women. The wife had an absolute right to maintenance to be provided by the husband. "The husband could not proceed on a journey without making proper provision for her maintenance and household expenditure. If he married a second wife, the first wife had to be properly provided for" (Altekar 1999: 215). The 12th Century jurist, Vijnaneshvara, maintained that if a husband abandoned a virtuous wife or willfully misappropriated her property, she could move to a court of law to get her grievances redressed (*ibid* 215-6). A person casting aspersions on a woman was to be fined heavily. *Arthashastra* grants wife's right even to refuse sexual intercourse with her husband if she has already borne him sons or wants to lead a pious life (3.3.45). The wife had also the right to abandon her husband if his character was bad, or if he was away from her for a long time, or threatened her life, or was impotent (3.2.48). Women were allowed to remarry under certain conditions, including continued absence of the husband particularly during the fertile periods, or neglect of her and children's maintenance (3.4.24-25).

The wife had no property right in immovable property, partly because property rights, particularly of land, were not clearly defined even in general. To compensate for this, the institution of *Stri-dhana*

(woman's wealth) was evolved, which gave absolute right to women on movable property like gold. The scope of *Stri-dhana* was widened subsequently and strengthened, not shrunk. It included gifts from woman's father at the time of marriage, gifts from husband and relatives, and her own earnings. The widowed women too enjoyed the right to *Stri-dhana*, through it was considered as the sacred duty of the family to take care of them irrespective of whether they had any *Stri-dhana* or not.

Re-marriage of widowed women was permitted, even encouraged during the Vedic period. There was no practice of Sati during the Vedic and Upanishadic era. In the *Ramayana*, none of the three wives of king Dasharatha became a sati, but the *Mahabharata* does mention such cases. According to Altekar, the practice became more prevalent later when invasions from the North-East became frequent and the risk of humiliation and dishonour increased. But the practice of Sati remained voluntary, and confined to certain parts of India. It was almost unknown in the south. Altekar observes, however, that the practice degenerated in areas where it was prevalent, since women were subtly encouraged to commit *sati* with the motive of cornering their *Stri-dhana*.

Despite constraints imposed on women, the society still respected them. An eloquent example of this is reflected in the time-honoured practice whereby the father of a *sanyasi* is expected to bow down before his ascetic son, but the mother is not; instead the ascetic son is expected to bow down to her! Respect for the dignity of women and concern about avoiding any sexual offence or misbehaviour was built in to certain customs. For example, a woman tied *rakhi* to the wrist of a man if they liked each other and *rakhi* is a symbol of brotherhood. Mutual attraction and liking is thereby transformed into sibling relations between the two, and the man is duty bound to protect her and desist from offending her in any way. Mixing between men and women then takes place with ease and without guilt. In the Indian custom, 'To every woman, every man, except her husband, is either father, brother or son according to age. And to every man, all women, except his wife, are his mother, sisters or daughters'.<sup>18</sup>

However, there were provisions in the Shastras which were not consistent with the concept of human rights and equality particularly in the case of the treatment of untouchables and *shudras*. There was no equality of law between castes. But thanks to social reforms and social protests particularly since the time of Raja Ramamohan Roy, the importance of the *shastras* as law books declined drastically. The British established the equality of all before the law as a basic principle of governance. Not only was *sati* banned, but also many other reform measures found their way into legislation. After Independence, Indians including Hindus willingly preferred to go in for a modern legislation in the form of the secular Hindu Law and a new Constitution of India, instead of adhering to the Shastras. Hinduism did not come in the way. Untouchability and any discrimination based on caste were made illegal and women's status improved. Women were given the right to immovable property along with the right to inherit, right to divorce and alimony, and the right to franchise. Taking dowry now is a criminal offence, and the law has come to the protection of women against domestic violence. The so-called Hindu Law has hardly anything to do with the *shastras*, and owes inspiration entirely to modern values of justice, fairness and human right to dignity.

What has been discussed above is with regard to the provisions in the law books. What about the actual practice particularly in the distant past? Travel accounts of those who visited India in the past may give some glimpses into the actual situation. There were several travellers, but I have taken up

three of them. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang who came to India during the Seventh Century CE visited almost every part of India except the extreme south. He was particularly appreciative of the qualities of honesty, love of learning and courage on the part of people in the Ganga and Brahmaputra basins, and has noted with admiration the quality of the country's people as a whole in respect of generosity and charitable disposition, reflected in the distribution of food and medicine to the needy (as cited in Majumdar ed. Volume III 1997: 575). Al-Biruni's (Alberuni) account of Hindus around 1030 CE generally confirms the above observations, though he was also more critical (Sachau ed 1996). He was impressed by their piety and alms giving seen across all castes (*ibid* Vol.II: 136-7). He notes that incomes were generally divided into four portions, the first for common expenses, the second for 'liberal works of a noble mind', the third for alms, and the fourth kept as a reserve not exceeding what is kept for common expenses for three years (*ibid* Vol.II 149-150). The liberal works of a noble mind may be for construction of tanks and ponds and other public works. Alberuni was particularly impressed by temple ponds and the beauty of their construction (*ibid* Vol.II: 144).

The chronicle of Abbe J.A. Dubois (1770-1848) regarding social conditions in India from 1792 to 1823 when he was here, is much less complimentary (Dubois 1992). Coming from France and imbued with modern humanist values of Renaissance in Europe, Dubois was simply shocked by the lack of ethics in day-to-day behaviour, wile and narrow mindedness particularly among Brahmins. There was hardly anything that impressed him as good and praiseworthy. The stupidity and inhumanity of caste rigidity, oppression of women and the practice of *Suttee* (*Sati*) in Bengal left him horrified, but not speechless, as he has given detailed accounts of the dismal conditions of the Hindu society of the time. He saw hardly any evidence of social concern.

Fortunately for the Hindu society, its modern leaders like Raja Ramamohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda were also equally horrified at what they saw in their own society and strove hard to reform it. Swami Vivekananda, when he visited Kerala, called the Hindu society there a 'mad-house of casteism'. He found there not only 'untouchability' but also 'unseeability'! The untouchables were not allowed to be in the eye-range of the upper castes. Their very sight was considered polluting. Though common masses and heads of traditional Mathas were found wanting in social concern particularly about caste matters, many Hindu leaders had it in ample measure. The story of social reform movements is well recorded and known widely. Panikkar has insightfully remarked, "India's independence and emergence into the modern world would hardly have been possible without slow but radical adjustments that had taken place within the fold of Hinduism for a period of over 100 years" (1953:319). We will be discussing more of this in Chapter 9.

It is pertinent to note here however, that even in the dark and dismal phase of oppression of the lower castes during the British period, the values of charity and helping the poor particularly in times of crises were not absent on the part of private individuals and institutions. The rich landlords and merchants may definitely have been exploiting the poor tenants and agricultural labour, but there was also evidence of charity on their part. For example, they took upon the task of feeding the hungry through free kitchens during famines, which is recorded in the Famine Reports. People subscribed generously to Famine Relief Funds raised by the British government in affected districts.<sup>19</sup> Such charity, inadequate as it was compared to the severity of the crisis, could not alleviate the suffering

of the people enough. Nevertheless, there was evidence of people rising to the occasion to help the needy even during normal times. *Chatrams* and *Dharmashalas* were started by private philanthropists, meant for free boarding and lodging for travellers and the poor. Even the poor contributed. Almost single handed, Sant *Gadagebaba* (1876-1956), coming from a humble social background, fought social evils like dowry, drinking, casteism and illiteracy among the poor, moving from village to village in Maharashtra. He also started several *dharmashalas* particularly for the deprived castes, where they could stay temporarily during travel.

In urban areas, students coming from villages and studying in towns were assigned houses where they could have a meal once a week by turn, each student thus having two meals a day round the week from different houses. This system was called '*varanna*' in Karnataka with the students and hosts generally belonging to the same caste<sup>20</sup>. The system helped the spread of education particularly during the first half of the 20th century. Initially it was started among Brahmins; but other castes soon followed by opening free or concessional hostels for students of respective castes. In quite a few cases, such hostels were thrown open to students of other castes also. This in turn stimulated proper educational institutions to start hostels for rural students. By early 20th century itself several rural areas began to have their own schools, started not only by the government but also by private institutions such as Hindu *Mathas* and Christian Missionaries. Though the *varanna* system was mostly confined to boys, some of the hostels that were started later, facilitated the entry of girls also into college education in towns. However, on the whole, facilities for education were much less favourable for girls than boys, many schools in rural areas not even having toilets for girls.

As the process of economic development got a push after independence, it gave a push in turn to private philanthropy. Philanthropy was no longer confined to the top wealthy, and became more broad-based. While earlier, people donated mainly to temples, the new middle classes gave more and more for social causes. Social concern shown by Hindus did not take long to be transformed into institutional efforts. Right from the 19th century, reform movements as well as social work got organised under the banner of Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Ramakrishna Math and Mission, and many others. The trend has not abated and gained momentum as more institutions like the ISKCON, the Brahmakumaris, and the Art of Living are also in the field and have been doing wonderful work. Apart from social service, these organisations and their workers strive to raise the moral and spiritual level of people, dissuading them from drugs, alcoholism and smoking, and making them derive greater happiness and joy by simply being better human beings at peace with others and also their own selves. Traditional *Mathas* and temples started paying more and more attention to social service such that practically every *Matha* is now engaged in social service. The famous temple of Tirupati has been in the field of social service right since the 16th century by developing irrigation tanks in drought-prone regions (Rao 2004:81). The temple has, in the modern age, branched out in the field of education (from primary to university) and in health care. The modern age Gurus like Shri Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi and Sri Sri Ravishankar have been known for their social work in several countries of the world in almost all the continents. Their organisations are catering to the spiritual as well as the mundane needs of Hindus and non-Hindus alike, and spreading the message of peace and love. New caste associations of the so-called hither-to unorganised 'lower castes' have sprung up to take care of the social, economic and spiritual needs of their fellow caste brethren.

The discussion above should not lead us to conclude that the Hindu society, even if it encouraged charity, did not give scope for empowering the weak and the poor through encouraging them also to protest. On the contrary, there has been abundant evidence of protest movements against injustice. The Bhakti movements were not purely spiritual, but involved a lot of protest and can be said to have empowered the lower castes by raising their status. Gandhi who declared himself a Hindu is an unparalleled example of an attempt to empower the deprived and the depressed, though of course he did not do it under the banner of Hinduism. He declared that resistance to evil and injustice was a part of the moral responsibility of all; otherwise, it amounted to acquiescing with evil. There are other notable examples from the modern phase of Hinduism apart from Gandhiji's, - that of Swami Vidyananda during 1919 and 1920, and Swami Sahajananda Saraswati during the 1930s and 1940s. Both of them mobilized peasants against their landlords. The two Swamis made the peasants seek nothing less than a complete abolition of Zamindari, and demand minimum wages for agricultural workers. Though adversarial, their movements were nevertheless non-violent at least from the side of peasants, notwithstanding the fact that the landlords used violence to repress the peasants. The movements were not led under the banner of Hinduism, but were nevertheless inspired by the values of Hinduism, especially the values as in the Gita. Both the Swamis were steeped in the traditional discourse and also sensitive to social issues (Agrawal 2006). Swami Sahajananda asserted that "there is no contradiction between the moral stance (dharma) of the Gita and that of Marxists", in his *Gita-hriday*, a Marxist reading of the Gita published in 1948 in Hindi (referred in *ibid*:29). The Swami was foremost in starting the Bihar Province Kisan sabha and later All-India Kisan Sabha in 1936 along with N G Ranga. He saw no contradiction between his being a monk and also a peasant leader to secure justice for the poor peasantry. When landlords asked him how he, as a *sanyasi*, could get involved in such temporal issues as peasant problems, he quoted a Sanskrit verse to the effect that it is the selfish that seek their own individual liberation to the neglect of others, but that he could not do so and had to identify himself with the lives and interests of the poor (Das 1982:84). For him the essence of religion was helping the poor to lead a life of dignity and liberate themselves from poverty.

There have been a lot of new initiatives on the environment front also to address abysmal indifference to environmental issues. There are thousands of NGOs engaged in environmental activism to protest against instances of unsustainable development projects including displacement of settled people, and also to take up conservation works, promotion of organic farming, collection of urban solid waste and its processing, and so on. Bindeshwar Pathak almost single handedly launched a nation-wide movement for sanitation and operation of a chain of public toilets both in urban and rural areas, which received a good response. For a person born in a Brahmin family, it meant breaking caste barriers in a truly revolutionary way<sup>21</sup>.

In spite of all such efforts, problems still remain. Atrocities on Dalits, dowry related deaths of women, poverty, increasing inequality, illiteracy (which, however, has come down significantly now), and lack of civic sense particularly in urban areas continue to be major challenges. Access of the poor to quality education and quality health care, food security for all, malnutrition of children, and high levels of infant and maternal mortality rates, need urgent attention. The Hindu religious leaders cannot pretend any longer that this is all *mayā*, not deserving their serious attention.



To a question posed by Zamindars as to why Swami Sahajananab Saraswati, a Sanyasi, got involved in such temporal issues as fighting for peasant's cause, he replied quoting a verse to say that it is the selfish who seek only their own liberation but he could not do so.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. The teaching, '*Ahimsa paramo dharmah*' occurs in several places of Mahabharata, especially in the *Anushāsana Parva*. Some of the verses where it occurs are quoted by Badrinath (2007: 115-6) along with their translation into English. An example:

*Ahimsa paramo dharmah tathahimsa paro damah /  
Ahimsa paramam dānam ahimsa paramam tapah //*

(*Anushāsana Parva* 116.28)

'*Ahimsa* is the highest dharma; *ahimsa* is the highest form of self-control; *ahimsa* is the highest offering; *ahimsa* is the highest austerity'. (Badrinath 2007: 115).

2. Regarding what constitutes a holistic approach see Chapter 7 in Nadkarni (2011: 169-95).
3. The original is '*Atmanah pratikulāni paresham na samacharet*' from *Panchatantra*, *Kakolukiya* – 102, quoted in Herur 2001: 259. There is a very similar saying in the *Tirukkural* (the Kural) of Thiruvalluvar, 'Do not do to others what you know has hurt yourself' (tr. by Sundaram 1990: 50).
4. See for example, Ganeri 2002, Matilal (1989), and Das (2009).
5. For a discussion and ethical explanation of these incidents, see (Nadkarni 2011: 229-32).
6. Gurucharan Das draws a parallel between the World War II and the Mahabharata War. The World War II was regarded as a 'just war' by the Allies. 'A world dominated by a victorious Nazi Germany would have been even more intolerable than the one ruled by Duryodhana. In that war the victorious Allies did some nasty things. In the five months of the World War II in the Pacific theatre, American 'fire bombing' raids killed more than 90,000 Japanese civilians – and this happened before they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the European theatre, the British killed more civilians with their bombings of German cities than were killed by Germany's blitz on Britain. The Pandavas' acts seem like indiscretions by comparison.' (Das 2009: 203-4).
7. We will have more to say about this school of philosophy later in Ch.6.
8. See 'Holistic Approach to knowledge (Ch.7) in Nadkarni (2011: 169-95).
9. A *satvik* economy can be said to be the one which is organised and functions ethically, with no poverty, no conspicuous inequality, with safety-nets to all especially the weak to meet emergencies, and adequate social security for all. It provides for equitable access to education, health care and all amenities and infrastructure. It allows only moderate inflation, and only sustainable use of natural resources and without pollution and wastage. It ensures employment for all. Even its private business is focussed not on maximisation of profits or shareholder wealth alone, but also takes into account the interests of all stakeholders. A *rajasik* economy is focussed mainly on maximization of growth rate with less attention to other concerns mentioned above. A *tamasik* economy has neither social justice nor economic growth but is full of corruption and illegalities in running both the public and private sectors, with very ineffective or little intervention to improve matters. Probably the Indian economy would come in between *rajasik* and *tamasik* with features of both. I will be happy if readers convey to me their ideas about how they would characterise the economy, politics and society in terms of the three *gunas* (e-mail ID given in the preface above).
10. 'Artha' is thus used here with two different meanings in two different contexts. It has also a third meaning – it is 'meaning' (for example, *Shabda-artha-kosha*, a dictionary), but the third meaning is not relevant here.
11. As translated and quoted by Malamoud (1982:42) in Madan (ed) (1982), p.42.

12. The original verse is from the *Ramayana*, *Aranyakanda* 29.4:  
*Karma loka-viruddham tu kurvanam kshanada<sub>u</sub>ch<sub>u</sub>ra /*  
*Tikshnam sarvajano hanti sarpam dushtamivagatam //*  
 (quoted in Henur 2001: 208)
13. As quoted (in English) by Kane 1990, Vol.V, Part II, pp.934-5.
14. In his address at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, September 20, 1893 (Vivekananda 2000: Vol.I- 20).
15. This section significantly draws from Chapter 4 on 'Ethics, Environment and Culture' in Nadkarni 2011: 100-24). Readers may see this chapter for more details. But this section here is neither a reproduction nor a summary of the chapter and includes a few additional points too.
16. This love for diversity in practice is celebrated by B P Singh in the form of a whole book for it (Singh 2011).
17. Vir Sanghvi: 'The Politicians We Deserve', Sunday Hindustan Times, July 21, 2002. Quoted in Varma (2004: 53-54).
18. As told by Raihana Tyabji to Fred J. Blum in Thakkar and Mehta (2011: 240). Though she said this with reference to mixing of men and women in the Freedom struggle led by Gandhi, the practice was not an innovation of Gandhi. It has been there much before. In the ashrams of Gandhi or even outside, men and women freely interacted with each other, and there was not a single incidence of sexual assault or misbehaviour. Raihana attributes this to the yogic power of Gandhi, who could induce morally upright conduct even among his followers, apart from observing it himself.
19. See for example, the Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Board of Revenue (Revenue Sett., Land Records and Agriculture), No.503, November 3, 1900 for Kurnool district; paras 14(c) and (f), page 15. Prof. D. Rajasekhar of ISEC drew my attention to it.
20. Thanks are due to G.K. Karanth for drawing my attention to this system.
21. For a story of how he did this and achieved monumental success, see Bansal (2011: 1-31). Bansal in her book also presents several other stories of success of social entrepreneurs who made significant difference to the lives of people.



# Sadhana in Hinduism

*“Salvation and knowledge of the ultimate truth were open to all [in Indian religions] to the member of every caste, high or low. This salvation or enlightenment could not be a group affair, it was highly individualistic. In the search for this salvation also there were no inflexible dogmas and all doors were supposed to lead to it.”*

— Jawaharlal Nehru (1994: 252)

## 1. SADHANA AND ITS PURPOSE

The literal meaning of *sādhana* is achieving, or striving to achieve. Achieving anything requires dedication and commitment, which are also implied by the term. The one who is on this path of achieving is called *sādhaka* or the seeker. Often the travel is more meaningful than the destination, and so it is with sadhana. What is sought to be achieved is secondary to the adventure of achieving. The very task of spiritual sadhana, when sincerely practised, purifies and ennobles us, imparts more confidence in us, strengthens our moral fibre, gives us peace of mind, and lifts us above the ordinary, gross and mundane. And that is an achievement by itself. Take the prayer below.

*Mā gatchha tvam itahstathatō Girīsha bhō mayyeva vāsam kuru  
Swaminnādikirāta māmakamanahkantāra simāntare /  
Vartante bahushō mrga madajushō matsaryamohadayah  
Tan hatva mrgaya vinodaruchita labham cha samprasasyasi //*

(*Shivānanda-Lahari* by Shri Shankaracharya, as quoted in Herur 2001: 356)

(My Lord, the Lord of Mountains, the Primeval Hunter!

Do not go here and there, but reside in me!

Within the wilderness of my mind, there are many animals –

Arrogance, jealousy, infatuation and the like!

Have the pleasure of a hunt by hunting them down!)

The spiritual seeker fervently appeals to Lord Shiva to reside in him and hunt down the wild animals in his mind. Controlling one's mind, and getting it rid of narrow selfishness, lust, hatred, arrogance, and jealousy are an indispensable part of *sādhana*, and if it is done there is little left to achieve further.

What is the ultimate goal of *sādhana*? One does not undertake a journey unless one has a destination in mind. It is the destination which inspires you and makes you to undertake the necessary trouble and toil. It is the destination which makes you choose the path. What then is the destination of *sādhana*? The answer to this question is not unanimous, even if we grant that the destination is spiritual and not just material or mundane.

Most of us may not have high spiritual ambitions. We are so embroiled in our day-to-day life's struggles we are satisfied if we return home in one piece at the end of day after going through maddening traffic jams in our (especially Indian) metropolitan cities. We invoke the Grace of God to merely keep us alive, active and healthy, give us success in keeping our respective families in good comfort and bestow on us peace of mind in a world which disturbs it every moment. With so much uncertainty facing us – the extent of which seems to increase with every generation, we feel that faith in God can give us much solace. It does not mean that this faith is enough to solve our problems and that self-effort is not necessary. But we believe in invoking God's Grace even to make our efforts effective and successful and to give us the necessary good wisdom (*Sadbuddhi*) to make ourselves successful and happy. The Gita assures that even a little of piety and leading a virtuous life can protect us from great fear and stress (II.40).

Quite a few, however, would set the bar higher and apart from success here in this world, would also prefer to reserve a nice room in heaven after death, as their spiritual destination. They believe that there is a heaven and a hell somewhere outside this world. The god of justice, Yama, through his officers, is supposed to maintain an account of each person, and after death, according to the *punya* (merit earned through good deeds) and *papa* (sin earned through bad deeds), sends the *jīva* (or soul) of each to heaven or hell respectively for finite terms till their *punya* or *papa* are exhausted or redeemed. The message, therefore, is to do good deeds and avoid bad deeds. Such a belief is certainly constructive in so far as it induces people to be moral and to act in a way that benefits the society. Whether there is a Yama or not, whether there is a heaven or not, an act of *punya* is something which is socially beneficial, and an act of *papa* is socially harmful. Any *sādhana* requires the performance of good deeds and avoidance of bad deeds, irrespective of belief in heaven and hell. *Sādhana* thus, apart from individual benefits, has also beneficial side effects on the society at large. Vedantins, observe – without questioning the reality of heaven and hell – that even as pleasures and pains of this world are temporary, the pleasures and pains of heaven and hell are also temporary. There can neither be a permanent luxury apartment in heaven nor any permanent damnation in a cellar of hell. The abode there is temporary, and the *jīvas* come back to this world, take another birth, and then the cycle repeats. They point out to a more meaningful destination which is even higher than a stay in the heaven, - *moksha* or a release from rebirth (to be discussed further below). There are also spiritual savants like Basavanna who assert that there is no separate heaven or hell apart from this world, and that both are experienced in this very world according to one's moral conduct.

The law of karma requires no heaven or hell for its operation. One reaps according to what one sows in this very world. If the 'harvesting' is not completed in the present birth, the *jīva* takes another birth to complete it. Each *jīva* is bound by this law. The true destination for *sādhana* then is one of seeking liberation from the operation of this law, which is called *Moksha* or *Mukti*. Once this state is attained, then there is no rebirth, and one is freed from the cycle of births and deaths, and there is then no question of the fatigue of respective experience of sorrows, anxieties and tensions of this world. It is said to be a state of blissful peace from which there is no return, having once attained it. It is Union with the Brahman, the absolute, no less. Compared to the joy of experiencing this union, all mundane pleasures are said to be mere trifles. Implicit in accepting this as the ultimate destination, is an attitude which looks down upon life in this world as full of sorrow and tension, and the urge is to escape from it. *Moksha*, in such a conceptualisation, comes only after death. However, if life in this world is such an undesirable thing and is best to be avoided, why in the first instance did God create it?

Vedanta says, however, that death is not *moksha*, also *moksha* does not require death. If we read the Gita carefully, it speaks almost throughout of such a state being attained in this very life. The emphasis of Hinduism is on Self-Realisation as the ultimate destination of *sādhana*, which is identical with *moksha*-while-living, also called *Jīvan-Mukti*. And the interesting thing about this is that the destination and the path to it become one and the same. As observed in the beginning of this section, the very travel spiritually ennoble us and lifts us above the ordinary as the divine spirit stimulates and enlightens our consciousness. Though there are said to be cases of sudden enlightenment or Self-Realisation, it seems to me to be a gradual process, speeding up at times, slowing down at others, but on the whole progressing to perfection. Self-Realisation may or may not come on its own. But to receive it when it comes we have to keep our doors and windows open, as has been observed by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sri M and others. "If the window is open the breeze will certainly come; there is no doubt about it." (Sri M 2011: 95). They also caution us that though we have to keep our mind pure and prepared for it, we should start on the path right now. "If you wait to become morally perfect before you begin your spiritual practices, that day will never come. Start today and, as the divine bliss enters your heart, you will get purified inside and outside. You will get the strength and inspiration to mould your life as you wish" (ibid: 111). Each step taken counts and contributes to progress. As the Gita assures, '*Svalpamapyasya dharmasya trayate mahato bhayaṭ*' (even a little of dharma protects us from great fear or anxiety. Ch.II.40).

When the destination of spiritual journey is *moksha*-while-living, then *moksha* acquires a much wider meaning than a mere release from the cycle of births and deaths. It means freedom from not only the *Shad-vairis* (the six enemies - anger, greed etc) but also from fear, anxieties, tensions and sorrows of the world which come through deep attachment. But this freedom does not come from renunciation of action, because as the Gita says that such a renunciation while living is not possible (III.5) It need not even involve renunciation of family ties and obligations to make a living. One can also try to realise the full potential of one's personality in this world. As Vedantins say, a *sādhaka* can be *in* the world but not *of* the world. What it means is that one can play one's role in the world like an actor in a drama, but at the same time should keep the consciousness alive in the mind about what one really is, and not completely identify with the character of the play. If this basic detachment

is not there and if there is a complete identification with the character, it can lead to disasters. For example, in a murder scene, the actor may really kill someone! Vedantins say that if one acts one's role as an actor, one can detach oneself from the temptations, tensions and sorrows of the world and face life more calmly and effectively. Such an attitude can even help you avoid health problems caused by stress, while at the same time progressing towards Self-Realisation. Sri M quotes a teaching by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa in which he compared a yogi to a housemaid. "The housemaid treats the house she works in as if it were her own. She keeps everything clean and in order. She refers to the children of the household as her own, calling them 'My Radha', 'My Babu' and so on. But in her heart of heart, she knows that nothing [in the household] belongs to her" (as quoted in Sri M, 2011: 101). The housemaid is in the household, but not of the household.

A question may arise here whether one can be genuine, if one is only an actor. For example, between a husband and wife, should love be only a matter of acting? If so, does it not amount to hypocrisy? Does it not mean that the couple would then miss the pleasure of genuine love, its intensity, passion, companionship, and spontaneous sacrifices for each other? How can there be deep love if there is no attachment? When I eat a delicious ice-cream, is it unspiritual to enjoy it, or should I only act as if I enjoy it? Is life worth living, if it consists only of acting and being deliberately aware all the while that one is only acting? These are certainly genuine questions. Life consists of trade-offs and choices. Many may choose to love life with all its tensions and sorrows, because they rate the pleasures of life higher than its sorrows. Such people may not bother about *moksha* either while-living or after-death in the sense of a release from rebirth. They may actually prefer to be reborn to have a chance of going through the pleasures of life once again. On the other hand, there may be others who would rate life's sorrows and tensions as outweighing its little temporary pleasures, particularly if obsession with such pleasures is an obstacle in the spiritual journey. It is a question of choice. *Moksha* is not a mandatory goal for all, but only for those who seek it. Moreover, one may not be born with this goal. One can seek it after undergoing the pleasures and sorrows of a life of *Grhastha* or *Grhini* and becoming more mature in the process for a spiritual journey.

Nevertheless, *sadhana* does not mean absolutely eschewing all enjoyments and pleasures of life. What it insists upon is avoiding obsessions and cravings, being in full control of one self, not straying away from the moral path, but being in equipoise without losing balance of mind. The Gita is clear here. Yoga is not for those who either overeat or starve; nor for those who sleep all the while or those who hardly sleep. Moderation and balance are the key to yoga. (VI.16). Loving one's wife with intensity is okay, but pandering to her wishes to the point of ill-treating or neglecting one's parents is not. Similarly, respecting and loving one's parents is okay, but not to the point of ill-treating one's own wife in order to please one's parent. An ideal husband in this context exercises love, wisdom and moral influence in such a way that he can make both his parents and his wife love each other. It is the failure to do so which has resulted in several cases of suicides of young married women in India. Greedy parents use their spineless sons to squeeze daughters-in-law and their families to bring in more and more wealth. There is happiness to none in such families. The example of a son caught between his mother and wife illustrates how one can get bogged down in conflicting and entangled relationships in life, unless one can keep one's head above them with a certain degree of detachment and poise. Such a person

can tame conflicting relationships into harmonious and enjoyable ones. Let alone spiritual pursuit, the principle of detachment and balance brings its benefits even in worldly pursuits. *Sadhana* aims merely at making happiness more meaningful, truly satisfying and lasting. Its aim is not to deprive one of happiness. A successful *sadhaka* is joyful, open, compassionate, social, obliging and free of complexes. *Sadhana* does not prevent one from enjoying the ice-cream, provided overindulgence in it is avoided and there is no craving for it. The relevant point here is who the master is. Is the *sadhaka* the master over the ice-cream? Or, is ice-cream the master over the *sadhaka*?

Swami Chinmayanada used to say that happiness is a quotient, *i.e.*, a ratio of desires satisfied over the total desires felt (quoted in Patchen 2003:154-5). In the majority of cases, the quotient is less than one. As desires are satisfied, more desires emerge, and hence there is no break-even. According to Swamiji, *Sadhana* simply requires that we increase happiness by restraining the desires felt and the quotient increases thereby (subject of course to basic needs being satisfied). In the case of an accomplished *sadhaka*, the quotient can be one or even more than one, since here the wants are more than satisfied, and contentment is reached easily. Whatever comes is gracefully enjoyed as a blessing. Such an attitude is beneficial not only to the individual, but also to the world since the pressure on the use of environment is thereby reduced. It is the pursuit of satisfying unlimited wants that lies at the root of depletion of natural resources and even global warming. What is good for spiritual pursuit seem thus to be beneficial even in worldly pursuits for sustainable happiness and welfare for all.

Ultimately, for a genuine *sadhaka*, nothing else counts except getting or realising the Divine. Seeking the Divine to get something out of It, particularly material gains, is not the purpose of ideal *sadhana*. As a medieval saint-poet put it – I seek not wealth, nor knowledge, nor powers, but only Kṛṣṇa. Sri Aurobindo has expressed it in a modern way:

“The object of the yoga is to enter into and be possessed by the Divine Presence and Consciousness, to love the Divine for the Divine’s sake alone, to be tuned in our nature into the nature of the Divine, and in our will and works and life to be the instrument of the Divine. Its object is not to be a great yogi or a superman (although that may come) or to grab at the Divine for the sake of ego’s power, pride or pleasure. It is not for moksha though liberation comes by it and all else may come, but these must not be our objects. The Divine alone is our object.”

(Aurobindo 2010: 10) (parentheses as in the original)

## 2. SELF-REALISATION THROUGH JNANAMARGA AND RAJAYOGA

*Sadhana* can be pursued in different ways, depending on one’s concept of the ultimate goal. Though all goals of *sadhana* lead to meaningful and lasting happiness, they may be perceived differently and hence pursued differently, or even in combination, as may be preferred by the *sadhaka*. When self-realisation is perceived as the ultimate goal of *sadhana*, the paths followed are *Jnana-marga* and *Rajayoga*, which go together. When the goal is one of personal fulfillment through union with the personal God, then *Bhakti-marga* (-yoga) – the path of love and worship is followed. If, on the other hand, the goal is one of personal fulfillment through unselfish service to humanity or to God Himself through such

work, the path chosen then is *Karma-marga*. The emphasis of *Jnana marga* (-yoga) is using *Buddhi*, the capacity to discriminate between the real and unreal, momentary and everlasting. The emphasis of *karma-yoga* is on using the will power, the capacity to detach oneself from desiring the fruits of action, while the emphasis of *bhakti-yoga* is on using the capacity to love and to feel. When all the Yogas are followed in an integral and holistic manner, the whole personality and the mind of the person is involved in the pursuit of the Divine. The pursuit itself purifies the instruments making them fit for use in *sādhana*. These goals as well as their instruments may be seemingly different and distinct but are consistent with and gel with each other. They may not even be perceived as alternatives, since they are not exclusive to each other. An advanced *sādhaka* sees the unity behind these goals and instruments respectively and can follow all these paths simultaneously in an integrated and harmonious way. When done so, they may have a synergetic effect, since they mutually help each other. A *sadhaka* does not have to make neat distinctions between Jnana, Bhakti and Karma following only one exclusively. For example, strictly according to Shankara's advaita philosophy, *jñāna-mārga* may appear to be the only logical way. But Shankara himself composed many hymns of fervent Bhakti addressed to personal gods, including the one quoted at the outset of this chapter. He did not see any contradiction between the two. He felt on the contrary that Bhakti is the surest stepping stone to *Jnana*. Similarly, Bhakti is a necessary ingredient of Karma-yoga too, because any work done without dedication is meaningless for this yoga. The *Adhyatma-Rāmāyana* (VI. 7.66) says explicitly: *Bhakti-hiṇeṇa yat kinchit kṛtam sarvam asat-samam* (any work done without bhakti is as good as not done). Similarly, Bhakti without Jñāna would be raw emotion without sanctity, and Bhakti without Karma (even when capable of work) would be pure idleness and a burden on society.

A brief and simple statement about Self-Realisation is that it is a process by which one discovers God and the ultimate truth within one's own self. Jnana-marga or Jnana-yoga appears as the logical choice for this purpose, since it leads to the knowledge of the Self. Raja-yoga (literally, the king of Yogas) is a path complementary to it which includes a set of spiritual practices leading to Self-realisation. Since meditation (*Dhyan*) is an important spiritual practice used for the purpose, Raja-yoga is sometimes referred to as Dhyana-yoga also. Control of the wavering mind through meditation is crucial to Rajayoga, which is mentioned right at the outset in Patanjali's *Yogasūtras* (*Yogah chittavṛtti nirodhah*; Sūtra 2). Since self-realisation is not a matter of mere book knowledge or learning, but also of experiencing and feeling it, even Jñāna-mārga needs to fulfill some moral requirements and a mental disposition for receiving the realisation, which may be strengthened by spiritual practices of Rajayoga. There is thus a lot of overlap and commonality between Jñāna-yoga and Rajayoga, which is why they are taken together in this section.

The Gita teaches us repeatedly that God is within us and in every one of us (III.40, 42; VI. 30, 31; XV. 11, 15; XVIII.61). It is from this teaching that the belief about our body being a temple of God took root (*Deho devālayah proktah dehī devo Niranjanah*; i.e., the body is a temple of God and its dweller is the blemish-free God Himself). Where there is a temple, there is worship and worship means Bhakti, which provides a meeting point between Jnana and Bhakti. This idea of the body being a temple finds a beautiful expression in one of the *vachanas* (sayings) of Basavanna (12th Century AD) in Kannada:

*Ullavaru Shivalaya maduvaru*  
*Nanenu madali badavanayya*  
*Nanna kale kambha*  
*Dehave degula*  
*Shirave honna kalasavayya*  
*Kudalasangama deva kelayya*  
*Sthavarakkalivuntu Jangamakkalivilla.*

It means (as in A K Ramanujan's translation 1973: 19):

The rich will make temples for Shiva,  
 What shall I a poor man do?  
 My legs are pillars,  
 My body the shrine,  
 The head a cupola of gold.  
 Listen, O Lord of meeting rivers,  
 Things standing shall fall,  
 But the moving ever shall stay.

The Gita gives a spiritual anatomy of the self, in a verse (*Indriyani paranyahuh...*, III. 42). We are first conscious of the body, identifying the self with the body. This is a perception of the gross, and the spiritual quest takes us to the more and more subtle.<sup>1</sup> The verse says that superior to the body are the senses, the *Indriyas*,<sup>2</sup> because they give meaning to the body. Transcending the *Indriyas* and superior to them is the mind (*manas*). It is in the *manas* that sense perceptions are processed, and emotions and thoughts arise and stored as memory. What lies beyond and even superior to *manas* is intellect (*buddhi*) which discriminates between good and bad, right and wrong, real and unreal. *Buddhi* is the seat of reasoning, intellection and wisdom. It can also control and direct the mind. Even beyond and superior to *Buddhi* is He, the God-in-body, who is the real self, the Atman, or the ultimate Truth behind one's existence.

The Gita makes it very clear that Atman is different from mere body. The body may perish, but Atman is eternal. The body undergoes stages of growth like childhood, youth and old age, but not the self or the Atman (II.13). But is Atman the God himself? The attributes of Atman as per the Gita are the same as attributes of all pervading eternal God, who stands as a witness to all that happens. The same force which energises the whole universe also energises the body. God is the soul of the Universe, and Atman is the individual soul. But the Gita does not make a distinction between the two since both are the same. But this fact is not normally perceived or experienced, because of *Ahamkara*, a process of individuation or 'I'-making, stands in the way acting as a veil of ignorance hiding the Atman. *Ahamkara* is loosely translated as ego, and is formed at the level of the *indriyas*, *manas* and *buddhi* in combination. The sense of 'Aham' ('I') is created by the amalgam of the body, the senses,

the mind and the Buddhi, resulting in a delusion (*moha*) that the ego is different and independent (the Gita III.40). The process of self-realisation consists in removing this delusion and perceiving or experiencing the unity or the identity of the real self with Atman, and also perceiving this Atman in everyone else. It is not a question of learning from books, but very much one of experiencing it with deep conviction. And that is what makes self-realisation difficult.

The Gita also tells us how self-realisation is achieved and how a person striving genuinely towards this can be recognised (or what her/his attributes are). This discussion comes in the second chapter itself (verses 38 to 72) and again in the sixth chapter (verses 10 to 32). A perusal of these verses would show that Sadhana for self-realisation needs cultivating a moral and mental disposition on the one hand and doing spiritual or yogic practices –especially meditation – on the other, both complementing and contributing to each other, and leading to self-realisation. While the second chapter of the Gita deals mainly with the former of the two, the sixth chapter deals with the latter. The former requires equipoise between pleasure and pain, success and failure, infatuation and hatred, without losing balance by any one of the opposites in life (II.39, 56, 57). One should not be undecided and wavering, but determined in the quest (II.41). This means control over the mind and its gross or natural instincts, awareness of what one is doing, and being unyielding to temptations of petty pleasures that may lead one away from the moral path (II.42-45). Detachment from desiring the fruits of one's actions is equally important, but it does not mean renouncing one's work and duties. Such renunciation is neither possible nor desirable. Moreover the work has to be done with skill and commitment, enjoying the work itself as Yoga (II.47, 48, 50; III.4, 5). A yogi or sadhaka has to be compassionate and friendly to all, not given to either fear or wrath (II.56, 57). Obsessive attachment to desires of sense objects leads one away from the pursuit of the subtle and ties down to the gross. This can also mean loss of one's mental balance, and thus frustration and even self-destruction in the sense of moral collapse (II.62, 63). On the other hand, by avoiding such pitfalls, all sorrow is destroyed, leading one to poise and peace required for self-realisation (II.64, 65). A *sadhaka* with such a mental disposition can be recognised by her/his poise, calmness, full control on oneself, humility, compassion, unselfish activity and blissfulness (II. 55-57, 61, 65, 71 and 72)<sup>3</sup>.

Alongside cultivating the mental and moral disposition as explained above, the *sadhaka* has also to do some spiritual exercises which consist of breath control (*Pranayama*) and meditation (*dhyana*) to realise the Self. This yoga has also been given a separate name as Dhyana Yoga. Strictly speaking, *dhyana* is a part of Rajayoga. Swami Vivekananda has given an excellent and detailed exposition of this *Yoga* (CWSV, Volume 1, 2000, pp.110-313, which also includes a translation of Patanjali's *Yogasutras* with the original and translation). The Gita's exposition in the sixth chapter is succinct focussed mainly on *dhyana*. What follows is a paraphrase from these sources, adding a bit from own experience, however inadequate though it may be.

As Swami Vivekanda explains on the basis of *Yogasutras*, Rajayoga is divided into eight steps; the first two dealing with moral preparedness. The first step is *yama* – non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence and non-possessiveness (*Ahimsa satyam asteya brahmacharya aparigraha yamah*. *Yogasutra* 30). The second step is one of *Niyama* – cleanliness, (both internal and external),

contentment, austerity, study and self-surrender to God (*Yogasutra* 32). To the extent that these moral obligations are common to all, all those practising them are to that extent *sadhakas*, even if they do not aim at self-realisation consciously. The next steps are, however, particularly essential for yogis.

The best time to sit for meditation is blissful early hours before sunrise when it is quiet and peaceful. It is good to have some tea before we begin, to ensure we are free from being drowsy. Meditation should be seen as something we look forward to and not as a mere duty. The next step is practising a comfortable posture for sitting (*asana*) for spiritual practices. The posture should not be so comfortable as to induce sleep, nor so uncomfortable as to divert the mind to the discomfort. The seat has to be firm and stable. The Gita recommends holding the head, the neck and the back erect in one straight line (roughly at right angle to the seat), with the chest out. Such a posture is conducive to alertness and constant awareness, which are basic to the spiritual practices that follow. Then follows *pranayama*, which is controlled, deep and conscious breathing. It helps in concentration, and also has health benefits like strengthening and purifying lungs. Though new techniques of breath control have been developed by some Gurus recently, claiming enhanced benefits like relaxation and freedom from stress, the age old practice passed on from generation to generation, is one of holding by turn one nostril pressed while inhaling from other nostril, holding the breath for at least a few seconds, and then exhaling from the other nostril that was held pressed. The special techniques may have to be learnt personally from respective Gurus or designated teachers, as they are guarded as secrets to protect their sanctity and seriousness. But even the age old practices, which are not held in secrecy, are good enough and do produce the expected benefits.

The next step (the fifth) is *pratyahara* which consists in withdrawing the sense organs from their objects, like a tortoise withdraws its limbs from outside to inside, as the Gita illustrates, since perceptions are formed in mind. That is we can hear only if what is heard by the ears is processed in the mind and comprehended. *Pratyahara* consists of being so focused that external ‘noises’ are shut out from the mind and no attention is paid to them. Since this is very difficult, it is recommended that one chooses to do these practices in solitude in a quiet environment. The idea is more than one of preventing disturbances. The real aim is to have a control over the body and its organs, and remain focussed during the practice of yoga. Swami Vivekananda describes this step (*pratyahara*) as follows:

‘...When the organs are controlled, the yogi can control all feeling and doing; the whole of the body comes under his control. Then one begins to feel joy in being born; then one can truthfully say, “Blessed am I that I was born.” When that control of the organs is obtained, we feel how wonderful this body really is’. (CWSV Vol. I. 2000: 269).

The next, the sixth step is *dharana*, that is, holding the mind on to some particular object, either on one’s own body, such as tip of the nose, or the mid-point between eye-brows, or on a favourite form of God, such as Kṛṣṇa playing on flute or giving his teaching to Arjuna, or simply on Om, either as a figure or its sound. It is helpful to spend some time in Japa of a favourite mantra, such as the Gayatri or *Shadakshari* (*Om Namah Shivaya*). This is a preparatory to the pre-final step of *Dhyana* or meditation. Swami Vivekananda explains that ‘meditation must begin with gross objects and slowly rise to finer and finer until it becomes objectless (Vidyatmananda Ed. 2008: 179). Meditation consists first of observing the mind itself, being aware of what all goes on in the mind, as a *Sakshi* or witness.

The *sādhaka* becomes her or his own psycho-analyst here. It is a deep state of introspection. This is what the Gita considers as meditation, the essence of which is: *Ātma-samsastham manah kṛtvā na kinchidapi chintayet* (VI25), that is, 'Fix the mind on the Self and think of nothing else'. The mind then becomes purified, tamed and calm in the process; it gets de-stressed. Once this stage is reached, the mind becomes objectless, there is nothing (*śhunya*) left in the mind now, except a state of super-consciousness. This is the stage when the self is realized, leaving the *sādhaka* in peace and with a sense of ineffable joy. When this state is maintained effortlessly, it can be stated to be *Samādhi*, which is the final step. This is not a state of deep sleep. Deep sleep is when the concerned person is 'beneath consciousness', and there is no enlightenment when one wakes up (ibid: 173). In deep mediation and *Samādhi* on the other hand, one is all the while awake, aware and conscious. In initial stages, this state may be experienced for only a fraction of a minute to a few minutes, but the duration can significantly improve with persistent practice and *shraddha*. Accomplished and experienced *sādhakas* can remain in this state for an hour or two. In the case of Masters like Ramana Maharshi, the state of bliss of self realisation is stated to have been everlasting. Such Yogis are stated to have double or simultaneous consciousness, with one fixed in *Samādhi* and the other functioning in this world. Such Masters are *Jeevan-muktas*, enjoying *moksha* while living and actively working in this very world. Those who have reservations about meditating on the Self itself as the Divine, may invoke the Divinity within whatever form or name they like and contemplate on Her or Him. This can be equally effective and may even be easier. Ultimately, both these ways converge.

It is beneficial to combine these spiritual practices with physical exercises before or after. If they are strenuous, it is better to do them after the spiritual exercises. The aim of physical exercises is to keep the body supple, flexible and healthy. Yoga does not undermine health. It says the body is the first means of *sādhana* (*Sharīram ādyam khalu dharma-sāadhanam*). But the exercises have to be done with awareness, and not absent-mindedly. This helps improve concentration. Both the spiritual practices and physical exercises, irrespective of whether self-realisation is achieved or not, give many material benefits too. They induce a happy, joyful state of mind, compassionate and considerate to others, and willing to help and share. The gain in the ability to concentrate and to sustain such concentration makes us more efficient at work even in mundane life, and helps in absorbing more knowledge. Without concentration, there can be no knowledge. It is very helpful to students in their studies.

The path of Jñānayoga along with Rajayoga is, however, considered not only difficult but also less preferable than Karma yoga. Especially so if it is felt that the time taken for spiritual practices is so much that more satisfying paths may look both attractive and feasible. Moreover, if the world is crying for help in solving its problems, can we stand as mute spectators and worry only about our own *Moksha*?

But is there really a conflict between self-realisation and selfless service? If we understand the Gita correctly, there is none. Self-realisation does not require sitting in meditation all day and night. On the contrary, as Aurobindo warns, such excesses may be self-defeating and unharmonious (Aurobindo 2010: 145). A self-realised person sees herself in everyone, and knows that when she serves others selflessly, her own self-realisation is further enriched. Such a person has no desires for herself, and all her actions become spiritual. None can remain action-free, and the Gita warns that avoiding work

is not spirituality. If it is within one's power or energy to act and yet one does not act, it amounts to cheating oneself. *Karma-marga* (or *Karma-yoga*) on the other hand leads to self-realisation, and a really self-realised person automatically becomes a Karmayogi in turn.

### 3. KARMA-MARGA : THE PATH OF SELFLESS WORK

Karma-marga (-yoga) as a path of to self-realisation is one of the chief contributions of the Gita. The Vedas mainly expressed their sense of awe at the beauty and power of nature, and were concerned with the maintenance of the natural or physical order in the world and of the moral order in the society. They expressed their gratitude to gods through evolving various ceremonies and rituals, besides composing and singing hymns. The Upanishads focussed on probing into the mystery behind the universe and the man – the Brahman and the Atman. It was mainly the Gita which taught pathways to the realisation of the Brahman and the Atman in terms of different Yogas – *Jnana*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*. The Karma-marga of the Gita has little to do with the *Karmangas* or Vedic rituals, but mainly with how we live and act in our life. The work done under Karma-yoga does not mean religious work, but day-to-day work in our lives. The attitude to work is more important than the work itself. With modern interpreters of Hinduism like Swami Vivekananda, Lokamanya Balagangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi, the karma-yoga as taught by the Gita, got not only a new fillip but also an additional social dimension inspired by the Gita itself. The way the philosophy of karma-yoga evolved and developed, responding to rising social awareness of new situations and problems, is an example of the dynamic nature of Hinduism.

Let us first see the philosophy behind the karma-marga and its original justification before going into the later development of its social dimension. The essence of karma-yoga is presented in an oft-quoted verse of the Gita (II.47) which says: “You have a right only to do your work, but the outcome is not under your control. Do not make the fruits of action your motive for work. Nor should you be attached to inaction”. The next verse explains that it is necessary to develop equanimity between success and failure in the outcome of our work, which is what makes it Yoga. This is because the outcome is not in our hands; so many factors influence it and there is uncertainty in the nature of the outcome. It is best left to the will of God. An attachment to success may lead to frustration if things turn out to be adverse, and frustration can in turn lead to a passive attitude, which the Gita deplors. Karma-yoga is intended to ensure that worldly life goes on smoothly on a *dharmaic* path.

Simultaneously, karma-yoga ensures liberation from bondage to the law of karma, giving a sense of spiritual freedom to the individual. Since desire induces attachment and attachment leads to the operation of the law of karma, the advice is simply to snap the link between desire and action. It is the motive, the desire which binds and not the action or work itself. Gandhi called it the *anasakti-yoga* – the yoga of detachment or disinterestedness. Un-interestedness in work is certainly not yoga, but amounts to dereliction of duty. No work is possible without taking interest in it. While disinterestedness is absence of interest for personal benefit from the work, un-interestedness is lack of interest in the work itself. The Gita asks us to do our work with dedication (*yogasthah kuru karmāni*) but by renouncing attachment (*sangam tyaktvā*) (II.48). The Gita also calls upon us to do our work with dexterity (*Yogah karmasu koushalam*) (II.50). Dedication and efficiency are not possible without interest. But interest is not possible unless the work is expected to yield some favourable result or effect or outcome. The

Lord could not have expected any work to be done mindlessly, without the knowledge of the expected effect of work. He denounces work done without heeding the consequences (*anapekshya*) as tamasik (XVIII.25), but praises work done with neither personal bias nor hatred but done with fortitude and enthusiasm (*dhr̥tyutsaha samanvitah*) as s̥atvik (XVIII.23 and 26). In other words, whatever we do, the Gita expects us to get absorbed in it, love it, take pride in it, and enjoy it. Mere duty without these ingredients is not likely to be sincere and effective. A mother looks after her baby, more out of love than duty. A teacher teaches her students more out of love than as a mere duty. And that is what makes their work enjoyable and effective. *Chandogya Upanishad* (1.1.10) gives us the secret of what makes one's work effective and powerful: Whatever one does with knowledge and skill, and with *shraddha* (passionate or loving commitment) and thoughtfully, that work alone becomes powerful (*yadeva vidyaya karoti shraddhaya upanishada tadeva viryavattaram bhavati*). This is the secret of success in work. At the same time, one should neither hate disagreeable work nor get attached to only agreeable one (Gita XVIII.10), and be unbiased between the two. A karma-yogi loves what she does, rather than doing only what she loves. The ego is kept aside and whatever work to which one is committed has to be done with pleasure and devotion. While efficiency is not possible without dedication and awareness of the expected outcome of work, it is still necessary for efficiency to have detachment from personal gain and from emotional involvement, be it in management, governance, or any other work. The meaning of 'detachment' preached by the Gita becomes clear when applied to the case of surgery. Why does a surgeon normally refuse to operate on his or her near and dear one in whom there is emotional involvement? A surgeon definitely has to work for success, but cannot afford to have an emotional involvement in her patient. Disinterestedness promotes detachment and detachment eliminates tension at work and can promote efficiency, even if one is not concerned with the high goal of liberation from the law of karma. Liberation comes automatically with detachment.

Selfless service for the society, for the poor and the weak is espoused highly under the concept of *Karma yoga*, if done without any ulterior motive. It was Gandhiji's mission in life. He said that the reason behind it was his desire for self-realisation. He felt that God could be realised only through selfless service (Gandhi 1927: 132). It followed from the fact that essence of spirituality was transcending egoism. The Gita advises work on *Loka-sangraha*, i.e., maintenance and welfare of people (III. 20-26). Karma-yoga is interpreted too often, exclusively in terms of detachment alone, that is, in terms of how it is to be done. The Lord also explains what work has to be done by a real Yogi. It is one which promotes the welfare of the world, and this has to be done with love and enthusiasm and – what is more – with detachment, with no desire for personal gain. The Lord assures in a key verse:

*Yogayukto vishuddhatma vijitatma jitendriyah /*  
*Sarvabhūtatma bhūtatma kurvannapi na lipyate //* (Gita V.7)

(Dedicated, with a pure heart and self-control, with the senses (sensual desires) subdued, one who sees the All-Pervading One in all beings, such a person is not tainted (by the Law of Karma) even if engaged in action.)

What can work with pure heart, seeing the Supreme Self in all beings, mean except the work that promotes the welfare of the world or society at large? The Gita again calls upon us to have empathy

with all beings (VI.32). The *Gita* also asks us to put this empathy into action, as evidenced from excerpts quoted above. *Ishopanishad* (2nd verse) gives a full-throated call live for hundred years doing work actively, for there is no other way. But it also assures in the same verse that Karma will not adhere to us (if work is done unselfishly). *Gita* declares again that it is those who are engaged in the good of all beings (*Sarvabhūtahiterataḥ*) who will attain liberation in Brahman (*Labhante Brahmanirvanam*) (V. 25). Madhvacharya in his classic work on the essence of the *Gita* (*Gītā Tatparya*) says that according to the *Gita*, serving different people, taking care of them is itself a tribute to God (“*Nāna janasya shushruṣha karavatmata*”).

It is thus entirely consistent with the teaching of *Gita* and Upanishads that Swami Vivekananda started a monastic order of monks (*Sanyasis*) for being devoted to social service. Karmayoga, thus means selfless service to others. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the indomitable freedom fighter, was also a great Sanskrit scholar, well versed in the sacred texts. He gave a very activist interpretation of the *Gita* in his classic work *Gita Rahasya* (Secret of the *Gita*) written in Marathi. According to him, *Karmayoga* was the essence of the *Gita*. He interpreted Karmayoga as selfless service to the cause of freeing the Motherland. Aurobindo also gave the same call, drawing inspiration from the *Gita*. *Karmayoga*, thus, is not just an instrument of liberating ourselves from the taint of karma. It has an importance of its own, even independently of individual desire for liberation. *Karmayoga* is needed for *Lokasangraha*, which Radhakrishnan translates as world solidarity, and others as welfare or maintenance of the world.

The Shivasharanas (Devotees of Shiva) of Karnataka, led by Basaveshwara (Basavanna) made a significant contribution in the 12th Century by imparting dignity to manual labour. A famous vachana by Basavanna declares that work itself is heaven (*Kayakave Kailasa*). These progressive and socially conscious philosophers were also ordinary workers or artisans actively engaged in their respective occupations for their livelihood. They came from all castes including the so-called untouchable communities. Shivasharanas gave a spiritual content to work to such an extent that one of them, Aydakki Marayya by name, declared that if a devotee, absorbed in work, forgets to do daily worship of Linga (symbol of Shiva), one need not have any feeling of guilt. A devotee of Shiva should earn his own livelihood by honest work according to them; if any of them earns a surplus over needs, he should spend it in helping others or in charity (*dasoha*) with total humility and without ego. Their approach is the same as the Karma Yoga of the *Gita*, but what is special about them is that they actually transformed ordinary poor artisans into articulate spiritual gurus, self-confident and dignified, even when having a culture of utmost humility as devotees of Shiva. Their example illustrates the potential of the philosophy of Karma Yoga for social as well as spiritual emancipation of even the poor.

The respect shown for manual work by Shivasharanas referred to above is not a mere flash in the pan in Indian tradition, though the common presumption is that Indian tradition respected only intellectual work and regarded other work particularly manual work as inferior. There is a story in one of the *Puranas* which is frequently told by Pouraniks and Kirtankars all over the country, which shows that the above presumption is not correct. The Celestial Saint Narada once accosted Lord Vishnu asking why the Lord praised the devotion of a mere farmer on the Earth as even more valuable than that of Narada himself though Narada sang in praise of the Lord everywhere he went and all the time. The Lord asked Narada to take a test to know the answer to his question. Narada should go around the Earth holding a bowl filled with oil to the brim, but taking care to see that he does not spill even

a drop of it. Nārada readily obeyed and reported to the Lord on coming back from his round that he ensured that not even a drop fell off. The Lord asked him how many times Nārada remembered the Lord while doing so. Nārada asked in return how he could remember Him when he was so much absorbed in taking care that not a drop of oil was spilled. The Lord replied that this was why he regarded the farmer's devotion to Him as more valuable and meritorious. Though absorbed all the while in his harder work of eking out a livelihood and taking care of his family, the farmer still remembered and prayed to the Lord regularly at least once every day, while Nārada could not remember Him even once while going round the Earth with his bowl of oil.

The bulk of economic activity in the world is assumed to be motivated by desire for a personal gain, or profit. As per Adam Smith, called the father of Economics, self-interest is not necessarily bad for the world.<sup>5</sup> When each person acts according to self-interest, there is a mutual balance and natural order as in a market, and the common good is promoted. It promotes economic development too. Without any incentive for individuals or business enterprises, their participation in economic activity to produce wealth would not be possible. This is true even in a socialist economy, let alone in capitalist economies. Now, if the *Gita* advises doing work without any motive for personal gain, how is it possible to reconcile it with the modern economy? Even traditional economy could not have run without assuring some personal gain, at least broadly commensurate with the effort put in. Smith's view has not gone unchallenged. A natural order produced exclusively by narrow self-interest can be very unfair with a lot of exploitation of the weak by the strong, and can also be environmentally unsustainable. What is needed is to rein in selfishness, if not to prevent it, so that it is within socially acceptable bounds. This can be done either by the Government through regulation and control, i.e., externally; or by self-restraint, or through both. What the *Gita* does is to emphasise voluntary self-restraint. This aspect of the *Gita* was later developed by Gandhiji who asked for treating property as a trust on behalf of the society and using it for the society, though there was no bar on accumulation or acquiring property by an individual. As per this approach, exploitation of humans by humans is avoided – not through state control, not through communism, but through individuals' own voluntary self-control. Narrow self-interest is transcended into enlightened self-interest. If I act to promote world solidarity, I can also enjoy by sharing in it. Economic rationality seen narrowly in terms of selfishness would be a case of 'Rational Fools' and not sensible and wise human behaviour (Sen 1982). One can earn more according to one's competence, but the surplus above one's legitimate needs may well be used for the benefit of the society, for *lokaśaṅgraha*. One is free to earn enough to prove one's self-worth, but it is not necessary that all the earning should be spent only on oneself and family. The way it is earned also is important. A teacher accepting a legitimate salary for work is not wrong; but if she grades students on the basis of amount paid to her by examinees, it would be unethical. A doctor cannot adopt a principle of whosoever pays more gets more attention and who pay less would get less attention. Her work would be in the spirit of Karmayoga, if she pays needed attention to all patients without extraneous or selfish considerations, even if she makes a living out of her job. The *Gita* urges moderation, but not either narrow self-interest or self-destruction in the name of liberation. The *Manusmṛiti* also makes the point clear by saying that no work, no action, is possible without a desire on the part of the doer (II. 4), but what is important is that the action or work is done in a morally



Narada vis-à-vis a farmer - who is a great devotee? (One part of the picture shows Narada going round the earth with a bowl filled with oil to the brim with his thoughts only on the bowl. Another part of the picture shows a farmer toiling in his field in the hot sun, but still remembering God). The idea behind the legend is that Bhakti need not exclude work.

right way (II. 5). The morally right way, however, consists in going beyond being merely honest. According to the *Gita* at least, it is being proactive in contributing to the welfare of the world. Otherwise, it would amount to diluting the spirit of *Karmayoga*.<sup>6</sup> Ramana Maharshi, who taught the path of self-knowledge or self-enquiry for realising Brahman, saw no conflict between this path and working in the world, which is consistent with the *Gita*'s teaching. He even showed disapproval when any of his devotees expressed desire to give up their mundane activities in favour of a meditative life (Godman 1992: 54).

A few critical observations on the Law of Karma in the context of *Gita*'s teachings have to be met. One such observation considers the Law of Karma as having 'radically individualistic implications ... that no one could be held responsible for what happened to one and that in turn, no one could be held responsible for what happened to anyone else; determined as each was by his and her own Karma.' (Krishna 1997: 246). If, for example, poverty, illiteracy and disease are attributed to only the past Karma of the suffering of individuals, there would be no case for social action and responsibility. Daya Krishna who referred to this criticism, however, observes that parallel to it, there was also the theory of "kings' sharing in the merits and demerits earned by his subjects through the performance of good and bad deeds. ... They thus developed a theory of the collective community of moral agents, in which there was joint sharing in the fruits of action" (Ibid: 246). Since everyone has freedom of will, it results in Karma not only of the acting individual but also has an impact on others. This is inevitable in a society of interacting individuals. Action of one may create poverty for another, or may relieve it in others. As such there is moral responsibility for each one, as well as community responsibility to relieve poverty, hunger, disease and unhappiness. The *Gita* teaches that each should perform his/her own duty/work selflessly with *loka-sangraha* in mind, which has a liberating impact. Failure to do so binds us to the law of Karma, earning negative Karma or demerit. As Arvind Sharma puts it:

"If we see someone suffering and do nothing to help the person by adopting the view 'that is his karma', expressing in Hindu jargon the Western attitude that 'that is his problem', then one has to remember that when it is our turn to suffer, we too will receive no succour on the same argument that it is our Karma. But if we help others when they suffer we too will be helped when we suffer" (Sharma 1996: 30-31).

Thus, if each follows *Karmayoga*, it has an alleviating effect not only on one's own negative Karma but also on that of others, and social good is promoted automatically.

#### 4. BHAKTI-MARGA: THE PATH OF LOVE AND DEVOTION

The *Gita* offers one more path of *sādhanā*, viz. *Bhaktimarga*, the path of love and devotion. The discussion on this path in the *Gita* starts from a question posed by Arjuna to *Kṛṣṇa* (XII.1). The question is who is better versed in Yoga – your devotees who worship You [as a person] being ever steadfast, or those who strive to realise the Imperishable and Un-manifested [Reality behind everything]. *Kṛṣṇa* replies that the latter certainly reach Him, particularly if they fulfill the necessary requirements

like self-control, interest in contributing to the welfare of all (*sarva-bhūṭa-hite ratāḥ*), and constant awareness of his omnipresence; but that this path is difficult for ordinary people, particularly the task of realising or experiencing the Un-manifested force behind everything (XII.3-5). He continues and says that the more desirable path is Karma-yoga whereby all actions along with their fruits are surrendered to Him without ceasing to be active. Kṛṣṇa finally assures that those who follow the path of Bhakti with their mind constantly fixed on Him with *shraddhā*, also ultimately reach Him (XII.8). The subsequent discussion in the same chapter (XII) shows that even the path of Bhakti requires certain moral qualifications, which are common to all the paths of *sādhana* such as compassion towards all, equanimity in pleasure and pain, forgiveness, selflessness and renunciation of fruits of action. A *bhakta* is not a renunciate. Like a karma-yogi, a *bhakta* is also in the world, but not of the world and is not attached to the gross pleasures of the world, though engaged in it for the good of all. Kṛṣṇa does not hide who among the different types of Yogis or sadhakas is his favourite. It is the *bhakta* who is dear to Him (*Yo madbhaktah sa me priyah*. XII.16), though he also assures that all sincere Yogis realise their respective goals. Kṛṣṇa reveals his soft corner for his devotees again in the last chapter (XVIII.65). This verse is considered as the essence of Bhakti-yoga. Its English translation by Swami Swarupananda (1982: 397) is as follows:

“Occupy thy mind with Me, be devoted to Me,  
Sacrifice to Me, bow down to Me.  
Thou shalt reach Myself; truly do I promise unto thee, (for),  
Thou art dear to Me.”

Kṛṣṇa’s love for his devotees is reiterated again in verse 69 of the same chapter. The most interesting feature of Bhakti-yoga thus, is that not only does the devotee love God, but God also loves the devotees with equal fervour. This is not surprising because as Kṛṣṇa himself clarified, in whatever form a person approaches Him, He responds in the same form (IV.11).

Apart from the Gita, the next most important text on bhakti in ancient Sanskrit literature is *Narada-Bhakti-Sutrāṇi* (Narada’s Aphorisms on Bhakti). It consists of only 84 Sutras in crisp and clear language (edited with translation and Notes in English by Swami Tyagishanada, 2000). The second Sutra itself declares that Bhakti is of the nature of supreme love (*parama prema rūpa*). A person gaining this state is said to have realised perfection and acquired divinity and contentment (Sutra 4). There is nothing else left to be accomplished. The Sutras further explain the moral requirements to follow this path, but clarify that a *bhakta* (devotee) does not have to abstain from the affairs of the world (*loka-vyavahāra*), provided that the engagement with the affairs of the world is without attachment and worry about the outcome (Sutras 61,62), and without vanity (Sutra 63). The Sutras even declare that it is such *bhaktas* who impart sanctity to places of pilgrimage and spiritual authority to scriptures (Sutra 69). There is no distinction among *bhaktas* on the basis of *jāti* (caste), levels of learning or wealth, profession, and family of birth, because they are *all* His own and there can be no place for such differences in His domain (Sutras 72-74). The liberalism and catholicity of Bhakti-marga becomes further clear in Sutra 75, which declares that there is plenty of room for diversity in the forms of bhakti, so long as (as

Sutra 78 qualifies) bhaktas follow the principles of non-violence, truth, purity, compassion and moral integrity. Sutra 82 illustrates the diversity in the forms of bhakti:

‘(a) love of the glorification of the Lord’s blessed qualities (*gunāsakti*); (b) love of His enchanting beauty (*rupāsakti*); (c) love of worship (*pujāsakti*); (d) love of constant remembrance (*smaranāsakti*); (e) love of service (*sevāsakti*); (f) love of Him as friend (*sakhyāsakti*); (g) love of Him [as one’s] son (*vatsalyāsakti*); (h) love for Him as... husband (*kantāsakti*); (i) love of self-surrender to him (*atma-nivedanāsakti*); (j) love of complete absorption in Him (*tanmayāsakti*); (k) love of pain of separation from Him (*parama-virahāsakti*)’ (Tyagishananda 2000:23).

This makes it clear that Bhakti normally presumes a personal God whom the devotee can love. That is how idol worship became so common in Hinduism (after the Upanishadic phase), as it was most amenable to bhakti, and easy to conceptualise and practice. That is how temples became popular, where bhaktas could meet and sing the praise of the Lord or of Devi, the Mother together. Narada, surprisingly, did not include love of the Divine in the form of Mother, but this was also a significant form of bhakti, and there have been temples dedicated to Devi too. Temple worship any way meant that bhakti was not a private and personal affair only, and assumed collective forms. Temples and Mathas occupied public space, where *pujas* (worship) could be performed and kirtans (devotional singing and story-telling) could be heard, and even social services could be organized jointly and collectively by the bhaktas, which they could not do alone. Bhakti also inspired an awesome lot of devotional poetry both in Sanskrit and in regional languages, and several art forms apart from singing and dancing –sculpture, architecture, painting and others. The main credit for making Hinduism culturally very rich goes to the popularity of the *Bhakti-marga*.

Bhakti-marga also stimulated rituals of worship, as a token of seriousness and to create and maintain a feeling of sanctity of the relation between the bhaktas and the worshipped Divinity. Bhakti, without rituals performed with *shraddha*, stood the risk of becoming trivial and perfunctory, though often rituals also had the risk of being so elaborate that their meaning and significance could be lost and bhakti itself sidetracked. Elaborate rituals also meant making bhakti inaccessible to the less wealthy. Though temple worship had the potential to take care of this problem, the practice of barring the entry of lower castes and particularly the untouchables to temples, amounted to violating a basic tenet of Narada Bhakti Sutras (72 to 74 referred to above). Such exclusion flouted the basic values of Hinduism and tarnished its image.

When Bhakti gets organised, it runs the risk of erosion. Bhakti in its essence is intensely personal and mutual between God and His/ Her devotee, and at its highest level, is for its own sake. When the relation is so enriched between the two, it is no longer a case of a helpless devotee persuading a hard-to-please God to grant favours. Such a relation may hold in the initial stages in bhakti till the devotee is absolutely sincere, but it grows itself to a higher stage where God Himself is devoted to the devotee in all compassion, love and benignity. It is actually such a relationship which could be said to have prevailed during the Bhakti Movements between some of the leading Sants and their God. The example

of the Sants shows that bhakti could become an intensely personal experience, where the bhakta actually feels the love of God. God is also the personification of bhaktas' love for all beings in the world created by Him. Caste, class, gender, religion, language, level of learning and such other differences are no barrier between bhaktas and God and between bhaktas themselves. No rituals were necessary for the Sants, except remembering and reciting God's name even while engaged in the world. Most of the Sants were not learned persons in a formal sense and came from all classes and castes including the so-called untouchables. Even Jnaneshwara who pioneered the bhakti movement in Maharashtra was a Brahmin outcaste, his entire family being excommunicated, because his father who was a sanyasi gave up his sanyasa publicly on the order of his Guru, and married. The bhakti movements brought to the fore several prominent women Sants like Andal in Tamil Nadu, Akkamahadevi in Karnataka, Janabai in Maharashtra, Mirabai in Rajasthan, and Lalla and Rupa Bhawani in Kashmir. It was no coincidence that the songs composed by the Sants were in regional languages like Tamil, Kannada, Marathi and Hindi, rather than in Sanskrit. It is quite significant that the pain and suffering of most of these saint-poets in the material world, transformed them – not into angry persons but into persons who had nothing but love for God and humanity. Some of their compositions do express their anguish and pain of social evils, and even question God about his unjust world order, but their love never waned. Nor did their faith in God as personification of kindness, compassion and love. They showed that the relationship between them and their God was one of absolute freedom of relaxed informal love. In this mutual freedom, each may tease the other, wait patiently for the other, but it is all a part of the game of love between two intensely loving persons. In the Bhakti Movements in Hinduism, the relation between the devotee and God transcended the formal relation between a servant and his/her master. The relation could be one of beloved and lover, child and mother, disciple and Guru, and one of equal friends. In the highest stage of bhakti, all differences between the devotee and God vanished, each merging into the other. One may interpret it as escapism, as opium; but we may also 'see it as the capacity of the soul to imagine the good and the beautiful'<sup>7</sup> even when surrounded by evil and ugliness.

A few illustrations of this from the songs of the saint poets would bring out the flavour of their bhakti and their sheer poetry, more than any abstract description in prose.

Nammalwar, one of the most reputed Tamil Saint-poets, who was born in a peasant caste (*Vellala*) and lived from approximately 880 to 930 CE, describes in his song how his Lord's love for him took possession of him (rather than his love for his Lord). Here is A K Ramanujan's translation of his poem (Ramanujan 1993: 80):

*“Promising me heaven  
making pact with me,  
today he entered this nest,  
this thing of flesh,  
himself cleared away  
all obstacles  
to himself,  
all contrary acts ...”* (Nammalvar 10.8.5.)

Basaveshwara, also called Basavanna, of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, known as *Bhakti-bhāṇḍārī* (treasure of bhakti), describes his ardour in the following vachana (as translated by Ramanujan from Kannada 1973: 83):

*“Make of my body the beam of lute  
of my head the sounding gourd  
of my nerves the strings  
of my fingers the plucking rods.  
clutch me close,  
and play your thirty-two songs  
O Lord of the meeting rivers.”*

Akkamahadevi was a prominent woman member of Basavanna’s bhakti movement in the 12th Century. There is a close similarity between her and Mīrabai. She took Chenna (handsome, good) Mallikarjuna (Shiva) to be her husband, and renounced her parents’ home as well as the offer of a king’s hand in marriage and set out for her spiritual quest when she was only a teenager. When asked by parents what she would do for a living, she replied in terms of the following vachana and actually lived that kind of life on her way to Kalyāṇa, more than a hundred miles away, which was the centre for Basavanna’s movement. She describes how she surrendered herself to her Lord, her Lover, caring little for comforts so long as her Lord was with her.

When hungry,  
alms take my care.  
When thirsty,  
there are ponds, streams and wells.  
When I need repose,  
there are decrepit temples.  
And to provide company to me  
You are there, O my Handsome Mallikarjuna!<sup>8</sup>

The crowning glory of bhakti movement is the soulful poetry of Chokhamela (14th Century CE). Born in Mahar caste treated as untouchable, he could have *darshan* (sacred glimpse) of his adored deity, Viṭṭhal at Pandharpur, only from the threshold of the temple. His poems reflect his protest against social injustice and his downtrodden status, at the same time expressing his limitless love for his Lord, *Māuli* or Mother. Saint poets of Maharashtra adored Viṭṭhal (Kṛṣṇa) as *Māuli*, as he was looked upon as personification of motherly love. Chokhamela’s poems reflect it in abundance. He reverses the usually assumed relationship between the devotee and God. In his poems “God himself surrenders to the devotee. Girdled by devotion, he (God) is imprisoned in all four directions, says Chokha, God is

a slave of love” (Mokashi-Punekar 2002: 55). In another poem, Chokhamela describes how his God participates in the daily chores of his devotees, particularly with reference to his contemporary saint-poet Janabai, also an untouchable, and relieves her of her burden of work:

*“He scours the floor and pounds the grain,  
sweeps rubbish from her yard.  
hastens to fetch water,  
the Lord of the wheel,  
and plaits hair with his own hands,  
sitting at peace, peering down,  
he quickly kills lice.  
Chokha says loves’ labour this.  
He cares little for greatness.” (Ibid: 65).*

Chokhamela’s relationship with his Vitthal is so free that he does not hesitate to question him about lack of justice and equity in the world created by him.

*“You know Keshiraj [Kr̥shna], on the other hand,  
I am filled with surprise.  
A throne for one,  
A hovel for another,  
Yet one other wanders bare.  
One half-fed, another feasting,  
For some not a scrap for the asking;  
High glory for one,  
Good posts for few,  
Others beg from village to village.  
Such, it seems, is the law of your world.  
Says Chokha,  
Hari, my fate lies in this” (Ibid: 21).*

Ultimately, bhakti boils down to Kr̥shna’s call in the final chapter of the Gita (XVIII.66):

*Sarva-dharman parityajya mamēkam sharanam vraja /  
Aham tvam sarva-papebhyah mokshayishyami ma shuchah //*

(Leave aside all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone. I will release you from all sins; do not worry.)

This verse has been hailed by many as the quintessence of the Gita and Bhakti-yoga. But it has also led to some misinterpretation and confusion because of the word ‘dharma’. Kṛṣṇa could not have meant relinquishing all codes of ethics when using this term, nor our duties in this world, particularly after emphasising their importance repeatedly in the Gita. Even a bhakta cannot be above morality and duty, though she or he could rest assured that an inadvertent or helpless transgression would be graciously pardoned by the Lord. The interpretation of ‘dharma’ in the verse by Swami Prabhupada seems to be relevant here. He takes ‘dharma’ in the verse to mean all formal forms, paths, processes and rituals of religion, which for a mature devotee do not matter (Prabhupada 1985:850-1). A complete surrender to God, leaving everything in His hands or to His will, can not only free the devotee from all the past Karma, but also from the possibility of being bound by Karma in future. Even in this surrender to Him, a devotee wins freedom. Such a devotee will certainly be active in the affairs of the world, but that will be according to the Divine Will to which the devotee has surrendered. But any trace of willful hypocrisy, expedience and selfishness on the part of the devotee would mean that the surrender is not complete, or may even be null and void.

In their essence, all the paths of *sādhana* converge. When a sadhaka sees One God in everyone, he is a Jnanayogi. This realisation inevitably inspires devotion. Devotion to this God as *bhakti* logically has to express itself as love for and selfless service to humanity and to all beings, which is Karmayoga. A real sadhaka is an integrated Yogi, combining in himself or herself all these paths of *sādhana*. The paths even if they seem separate are in their essence one and the same.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. Jayant Kalawar defines *sadhana* as a process of striving for the subtle (*sukshma*). The real Self, *Atman*, is the subtlest in us. This is true not only in spiritual quest, but also in the mundane life and relationships. One who misses the subtle for the gross has missed the essence (Kalawar 2012:107).
2. The *Indriyas*, according to Patanjali's *Yogasutras*, are of two types: *Jnanendriyas* (the five cognitive functions of seeing, touching, hearing, smelling and tasting), and *Karmendriyas* (the five body functions of grasping, moving, speaking, eliminating waste and reproducing) (Kalawar 2012:32).
3. Eknath Easwaran, a reputed spiritual teacher and an authority on Hindu scriptures, was once asked in the US during a lecture, whether self-realisation which is the goal of *sadhana* means becoming an unresponsive zombie. It should be evident from what is discussed above that this is far from the case. Easwaran had to explain that the kind of life most of us live is superficial, shallow, mechanical and almost without any meaning. On the other hand, the self-realised persons like the Buddha, Guru Nanak, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, far from being zombies, were deeply responsive to what went on around them and strove hard to improve the human condition (Easwaran 2012:59).
4. This follows Kalawar's translation of *shraddha* as passionate commitment, since *shraddha* is more than mere 'faith' as usually translated (Kalawar 2012:72).
5. Adam Smith developed this theory mainly in his *Wealth of Nations*, 1826. His earlier book, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1808, had a lot more emphasis on ethics including the capacity of man for altruism.
6. For an account of Tilak's and Aurobindo's contributions to an activist interpretation of the Gita, see Agarwal (1993), Ch 4 on Tilak (pp.89-136) and Ch 5 on Aurobindo (pp.136-86).
7. Observed by Suguna Ramanathan in the Foreword to Mokashi-Punekar (2002: ix).
8. As translated by the author. The original in Kannada is: '*Hasivadode bhikshannagaluntu; trsheyadode kere halla bavigaluntu, Chenna Mallikarjunayya, atma-sangatakke ninanaguntu.*'

## APPENDIX I TO CHAPTER 4

### A Few Popular Daily Prayers in Sanskrit having Universal Appeal

#### For Solidarity:

*Om sahanavavatu sahanou bhunaktu sahaviryam karavavahai /  
Tejasvinavadhītamastu mā vidvishavahai Om! Shantih! Shantih! Shantihi! //*

‘Om! May He protect us both; may He be pleased with both of us; may we work together with vigour; may our study make us illumined; may there be no dislike between us. Om, Peace, Peace, Peace!’

(Originally recited in the context of Guru and disciple, the prayer is now used more generally. This verse is from the Invocation in the *Kātha Upanishad*. Tr. by Radhakrishnan, 1994:593)

#### For General Welfare:

*Swastih prajābhyah paripalayantam,  
Nyayena margena mahim mahishah /  
Stri- balikebhyah shubhamastu nityam,  
Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu //  
Kale varshatu parjanya Prthivi sasyashalini  
Deshoyam kshobha rahito sajjanah santu nirbhayah /  
Sarvescha sukhinah santu sarvessantu niramayah  
Sarve bhadraṇi pashyantu makashchit dukhamapnuyat //  
Om! Shantih! Shantih! Shantihi!*

May people have prosperity and well-being!

May the rulers of the world rule with justice and fair play!

May women and girl-children always face good things happening to them!

May all people be happy!

May it rain on time, and may this good Earth be clad with greenery!

May this country be free from violence, and may good people live without fear!

May all find happiness and live without illness.

May all find security and safety, and may no one face sorrow.

Om! May peace be upon us! May Peace be upon us! May Peace be upon us!

### To Personal God

*Tvameva mātā cha pitā tvameva,  
Tvameva bandhushcha sakha tvameva /  
Tvameva vidyā dravinam tvameva,  
Tvameva sarvam mama deva deva //*

You are Mother and Father too  
You are Brother and Friend too  
You are Knowledge and Wealth too  
You are everything to me, Oh God!

### To the Formless One as Guru

*Brahmanandam paramasukhadam, Kevalam Jnanamurtim  
Dwandwatitam gagana-sadrsham, Tatvamasyadi lakshyam /  
Ekam nityam vimalamachalam, sarvadhī sakshi bhutam  
Bhavaṭitam trigunarahitam, Sadgurum tam namami //*

Absolute Bliss, bestowing ultimate happiness,  
Knowledge – merely your manifestation,  
Beyond dualities like the sky,  
‘That Thou art’\*, the Primal Goal!  
The One Eternal, Pure, Immutable,  
Present as witness in every one,  
Beyond Becoming\*\* and the three Gunas,  
I bow down to Thee, True Guru!

\* ‘Tatvamasi’ (Tat + tvam + asi ) means ‘That Thou art’, which is a great saying (*Mahāvākya*) from the Upanishads. Tat can be taken to refer to the Supreme and tvam to Self (*Atman*). Though the phrase is taken as supporting the Advaita view, it need not necessarily or exclusively be so interpreted at least in this verse, when taken together with *Adi Lakshyam*. ‘That’ refers to qualities described above making Him the primal goal and ‘Thou’ to the Supreme addressed in the verse; or, simply, ‘You are the Essence (*Tatvam*), the Primal Goal!’

\*\*Alternatively, ‘Thought’; ‘*Bhava*’ means both ‘Becoming’ and ‘Thought’.

**Note:** Interestingly, none of these prayers is addressed to any particular personal deity of Hinduism like Rama, Krishna or Devi, but to the universal God acceptable to all religions. The prayers represent diversity in the religiosity of Hindus, which is essentially humane.

## APPENDIX II TO CHAPTER 4

### Hindu Festivals

One of the charms of Hinduism is its numerous festivals (called *parvan* in Sanskrit, though *parvan* has more than one meaning). Many festivals are common to all Hindus, but a few differ from region to region. Even common festivals sometimes have some regional variations in their observance. Festivals draw in the children, the young and old alike. Women take over most of the work of turning out sumptuous dishes and make the festivals colourful and lively in many other ways too. In many instances, men do not even remember the dates on which the festivals occur according to the Hindu calendar; women not only remember them in advance, but also plan for them in meticulous detail. Men and children of course contribute by making the festivals boisterous and noisy. Relatives and friends meet during festivals and exchange greetings either at homes or temples, where also the festivals are celebrated collectively. Festivals like *Ganesh Chaturthi* and *Durga Puja* are celebrated not only at homes, but also in public halls and open grounds by local associations, where people come together irrespective of caste and other differences, and participate in cultural programmes and *pujas*, and have their *prasād* (food offerings made to God and then partaken by devotees and participants). During special local festivals like *Rathotsavas* ('car' festivals) under the auspices of temples and Mathas, many people both local and from outside participate in larger numbers irrespective of caste and even religious differences.

Festivals are essentially community-based functions and people like to meet each other and renew friendships and reiterate mutual affection with the near and dear ones and elders, sharing pleasantries, food and fun. It is a way of keeping alive and nourishing valuable relationships in a selfless way. But it is also worth remembering that the original and basic purpose of festivals is to remember our ties with God, and celebrate the glory of both God and Nature. The festivals, particularly the *Vratas* (religious vows and austerities) like *Ekadashi* and *Shivaratri*, are a part of *sadhana*, with moral and social dimensions. Some of them like *Shivaratri* involve fasting and keeping awake at night in penance and meditation. Festivals, as distinct from *Vratas*, are literally *celebrated* with festive joy, and are therefore, also called as *Utsavas*, which lift our spirits. But even *Utsavas* have had some original spiritual significance, which we tend to forget. Every festival has significant elements of cherishing ethical values which we ought to remember. This Appendix is a modest attempt to recall what at least some of the important Hindu festivals mean and signify and how they are celebrated. In writing this, apart from the hereditary knowledge passed on by elders, and my own personal participation and observation of the festivals since my childhood, Swami Harshananda (1994) and Sri Sri Rangapriya's monumental book in Kannada – *Bharatiyara Habba Haridinagalu* (Festivals and Sacred Days of Indians) (Bangalore: Bharatiya Sanskriti Prakashana, 2011, pages 624) have been helpful. Though the author of the later book has discussed more than 23 festivals, my account here relates to only a selected few and is much more concise, without missing their essential significance.

## Yugadi

Yugadi is a major festival, as it heralds the Hindu New Year. But there are at least two traditions of counting the day from which the New Year starts. One is based on the solar year, when the Sun enters the Zodiac sign Aries, which happens usually on April 14, and is regarded as *punya-kāla* (sacred time fit for piety). It is also called as *Soura Yugadi* (Solar New Year), or *Chaitra-Vishu*, or as also *Meṣha Sankramana* (Solar transition to Aries). The Solar Yugadi is observed mainly in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, the Punjab, Bengal and Nepal. The other tradition of Yugadi is based on the lunar year and is therefore called as *Chandramana Yugadi* (Lunar Yugadi), and occurs on *Chaitra Shukla Pratipada* (the first day of the bright half of the lunar month of Chaitra). Being based on the lunar year, it does not occur on a fixed date of the Common Calendar, but usually comes in the month of March. Both Yugadis come during the Spring, which adds significance to them as celebrating the Spring too. The Lunar Yugadi is observed mainly in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra and other regions where the Solar Yugadi is not popular.

Homes are decorated with fresh mango— or other natural leaves at the main entrance, usually with a beautiful *Rangoli* (a colourful or white artistic design) on the floor before entrance, drawn by using rice flour, turmeric, *kumkum* and other organic, non-toxic natural colours. Since the purpose of the festival is to welcome an auspicious New Year, toxic colours are never to be used for such decorations. Nor can natural leaves be replaced by synthetic and non-bio-degradable leaves and decorations, as Yugadi is in celebration of a natural event too - the Spring. Oil massage both of the head and body, preferably with *til* (sesame seed) oil is also done by some, as during the *Dīpavali* (discussed below). After the bath, the whole family gets together for a *pūja* or prayer before the family shrine, invoking the grace of God throughout the New Year and praying for resoluteness in leading a virtuous life and for success in all morally legitimate efforts and enterprises. At the time of the prayer, a special *naivedya* (offering) is placed before the shrine, which consists of tender fresh leaves and flowers of the neem tree (which are bitter) mixed with jaggery (gur or raw sugar). This is eaten after the prayers with a resolve that we shall face both the pains and pleasures, bitterness and sweetness of life with equanimity. The day ends with a visit to the temple to listen to a reading of the *Panchāṅga* (what is predicted for the year in the region/country including its agriculture and economy), and participate in devotional singing, pujas and prayers there, and donate for charity. As *prasād*, temples usually offer a mixture of fresh cut seasonal fruit to people gathered, along with some *pachadi* (made with split green gram, uncooked but soaked in clean water for an hour or two, added with finely cut green mango, fresh coconut scrapings, cucumber and salt) and *panaka* (lemonade with ginger juice, cardamom and gur or raw sugar). They are all served on natural leaf-plates.

## Shri Rama Navami

This festival takes place on the *navami* (ninth day) after Yugadi in the same month of Chaitra, during its brighter half. Sri Sri Rangapriya quotes some texts to show that it was the day when Shri Rama took birth as Avatar of God in human form (esp. *Valmiki Rāmāyana*, *Balakāṇḍa*, 18.8-10). He also quotes *Agastya Samhita* (28.1): ‘*Chaitre shukle navamyantu jāto Rāmah swayam Harihi*’ (Hari Himself took birth as Rama on the ninth day of the bright half of Chaitra). The devout start the celebration of Rama’s

birth from Yugadi itself, usually in the form of music festivals singing His praise, reciting excerpts from the *Ramayana*, staging devotional plays etc. in temples or other public places. A special feature of these music festivals is collective singing of classical ragas of Karnatak (Carnatic) music by hundreds of men and women together. The word 'Rama' is derived from the Sanskrit verb 'rama', which means to console, to delight, enjoy and entertain. Rama is one who gives divine enjoyment, consolation and comfort. Rama-navami is thus celebrated to justify this significance of Rama. Simultaneously it is a celebration of the Spring too, since a variety of delicious fruit which are available in the season are offered as *naivedya* to Rama, along with *pachadi* and *panaka* (as done during Yugadi), of which the devotees later partake. Rama-navami is also considered to be suitable day to give charities in honour of the celebrity known for compassion. Some devotees believe in honouring women, particularly mothers, with gifts in the name of Kousalya, who gave birth to Rama.

### Shri Kṛṣṇa Janmashtami

Lord Kṛṣṇa, who preached the Gita, is believed to have taken birth in human form as avatar on the eighth day (*ashtami*) of the dark fortnight (Kṛṣṇa-paksha, waning moon) of the lunar month of *Shravana* on a rainy night. He was named Kṛṣṇa as he had a black complexion. He is also called as *Shyama-sundara* – Black and Beautiful (ironically, despite one of the most popular gods of Hinduism being dark, there is so much colour prejudice against a black complexion in India!) He was born in the dungeon of a prison where his parents (Vasudeva and Devaki) were incarcerated by his own maternal uncle, Kamsa, for no fault of theirs. Since the baby Kṛṣṇa was in the instant danger of being killed by Kamsa, father Vasudeva took the baby away from the prison (- according to the legend, prison gates opened by themselves and the guards were deeply asleep), crossed the river Yamuna in torrential rain and left the baby with Yashoda, the wife of the chieftain of cowherds there, outside Kamsa's kingdom. It is not necessary to go further into the well known story. The circumstances of his birth and subsequent life are deeply metaphorical, apart from their factual occurrence in which Hindus believe. Here is an avatar in human form, born in the most adverse situation imaginable, and yet who removed all the obstacles in his and others' way, overcame several attempts to kill him to the joy of his companions, gave power and blissful happiness to all those who lived with him, and ended up being regarded as Jagadguru (world teacher) since his message in the Gita is taken as universal. Kṛṣṇa is supposed, therefore, to help us in tiding over all difficulties of life, and He is thus the most beloved of all personal gods in Hinduism. His birthday is naturally observed among Hindus both in homes privately and in public space like temples and even open grounds, with love and enthusiasm.

The actual *pujas* and celebration of Janmashtami takes place at night, because Kṛṣṇa was born at night. But during the day preceding the celebration, one is supposed to recite at least a few verses of the Gita, and also fast, as a token of austerity and dedication to Kṛṣṇa. Those who find it difficult to fast, have a light diet, consisting of fruit and milk or boiled sweet potato. The actual *puja* at night is preceded by singing *bhajans* (devotional songs), usually in a family- or community celebration when relatives, friends and neighbours meet. On such occasions, people of all age groups sing and dance. One has to only personally witness such celebrations to feel the excitement and even the frenzy of devotees, and experience the electrifying atmosphere of the occasion. On open grounds,

youngsters also enact Kṛṣṇa the young lad and his childhood friends. A pot full of curds is hung at a height of some 50 feet or more, and youngsters form a human pyramid, standing on shoulders, reach the pot by hand; that the curds in the pot mostly fall on almost everyone in the process of distributing and eating is another story. Kṛṣṇa is loved and adored for his naughty antics by almost every Hindu mother. It is a way of celebrating childhood in general. Ironically, India is also a country which is notorious for high levels of malnutrition among children, high infant mortality rates and abuse of children particularly through child labour. It seems that in our day-to-day life, we do not connect our religious symbols meaningfully to our actual behaviour. We worship Kṛṣṇa the symbol, but may overlook Kṛṣṇa present in every child – girl or boy, poor or rich. However, an important part of the celebration after the Puja is the joyous worship of kids – both boys and girls, waving *arati* to them, and giving them delicacies and gifts. I wish the practice is extended from homes and temples to cover orphanages and slum children too.

The celebration concludes as usual with *prasād* distribution, or dinner, a ‘must’ item in which is beaten rice (*avalakki* or *poha*) soaked in thick curds with a bit of salt and seasoning, rolled in the form of round laddus. Kṛṣṇa had very simple food habits, it appears.

## Gouri-Ganesha Festival

An important feature of Hinduism is that the Supreme is worshipped both in female and male forms, and any debate about which is superior is discouraged. The female aspect is believed to be the factor behind the creation of the universe, its laws of operation, its energy and life in it. The impersonal female force behind everything (*parāshakti*) is transformed into personal forms of the Devi or goddesses who respond to devotees’ prayers, each form emphasising an aspect of devotee’s focus. The nine forms of Devi are worshipped during Navarātri or Dasarā festival, one form daily by turn. But devotees are not content with it, and other separate festivals are organised for some of the popular forms. Thus the goddess of wealth – Lakshmi or Mahalakshmi has a festival in her honour during the month of Shrāvan on a Friday closest to the Full Moon Day. The festival of Devi in the form of Gouri is celebrated in the month of Bhādrapada on the third day (Tṛtiya) of the bright fortnight (*Shukla paksha*) which falls usually in September. Though Gouri is a more popular name, she is known by other names too – Swarnā-Gouri, Parvati, Kālī, Durgā, Umā, Lalitā, Rājaraṇī, Tripura-Sundari and many more. Though Gouri is the wife of Shiva, she has importance and a large following in her own right. Interestingly, both *Vara-Mahalakshmi-Vrata* in honour of Lakshmi in Shrāvan and *Gouri Vrata* in the following month of Bhādrapada are predominantly women’s festivals. Though men participate in them, the leading role is played by women along with young girls in both festivals. Actually, these two days are treated more as *Vratas* rather than festivals. *Vrata* is an act of austere worship or devotion, the emphasis being more on piety rather than on celebration and feasting.

The attitude during the Gouri Vrata is to regard Gouri as the sovereign of the universe who has come to devotee’s home to bless her with a long and happy married life and also the family as a whole with happiness and prosperity. She is also at the same time the Mother who has come with all affection and blessings. It is not necessary to have a statue of Gouri for her worship; a coconut with its tuft of fibre projecting outward near the three eyes of the nut kept intact, and placed upon a *kalasha* (pot made of silver or copper) with some mango or other similar longish leaves on top of the pot, itself is

taken to represent Gouri. The coconut is nicely decorated with chalk and symbols of auspiciousness (like turmeric powder and kumkum) are applied to it. After the ritual worship followed by reciting thousand names of Gouri, a sacred thread (*vayana* thread) soaked in turmeric powder and kumkum, is offered to Gouri and the same is worn on the right hand wrist by women. The food offering to Gouri is very simple (compared to what is offered to Ganesha her son). A dish made of five varieties of greens is a must. Usually, there is also a sweet dish made of coconut scrapings, *til*, roasted gram, gur and cardamom, all rolled up in turmeric leaves and steam-boiled.

The Gouri *vrata* is followed immediately on the next day, that is, the fourth day (*Chaturthi*) of the bright half of Bhadrapada by a festival in honour of Gouri's son, Ganesha. He also known as Ganapati, Gajanana (elephant-faced), Vinayaka (Peerless) and by many other names. Though it is also supposed to be a *vrata*, over the years it has transformed into a major festival, together with Gouri vrata. Though in popular religion, Ganesha is worshipped as a son of Shiva and Parvati (Gouri), according to the *Ganapati Atharvashirsha Mantra*, which is solemnly and sonorously recited during the *puja*, Ganesha is viewed as the One Supreme who is everything and everyone – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (the Creator, the Sustainer and the Dissolver of the universe). With this Mantra, the devotees meditate upon Him and invoke His blessings for protection and pray to ward off all obstacles in their morally acceptable endeavours in life. This Mantra, like many others, when collectively chanted creates benign and spiritual vibrations, purifying our minds and showering us with His blessings. Listening to its chanting is itself a unique spiritual experience. Thus both the female and male aspects of the One Supreme are worshipped during the two-day festival, the female as the Mother and the male as the Son. (Lord Shiva does not seem to mind being ignored!) The popular form given to the Son as elephant-headed and pot-bellied, with a snake as His belt around His huge belly, and a mouse as His vehicle, may appear as ridiculous to a rationalist, but not so to a devotee. Ganesha represents the Supreme in whom all contradictions are resolved and reconciled, with the elephant, the human, the snake and the mouse all co-existing together in harmonious ecological balance. The form of Ganesha is a metaphor for ecological balance. It is in this form that Ganesha is conceptualised, revered, loved and worshipped. He is called also as Vighneshwara, because of his power of destroying *vighnas* (obstacles). The figure of Ganesha is a delight for artists who draw Him in a great variety of ways. The ritual of puja of Ganesha is similar to that of Gouri, except that food offerings to the pot-bellied God are so many and so rich that we risk being pot-bellied ourselves, consuming them as prasada. Perhaps therefore, the festival feast in the afternoon is followed by fasting in the evening or night according to tradition.

The way the Ganesha festival is publicly celebrated now is, however, a very recent development, not even a century old. It was initiated by Lokamanya Balagangadhar Tilak at Pune in Maharashtra, who used it as a forum to spread the nationalist freedom struggle, and brought out Ganesha from private homes and temples to public space including streets and street corners. Festivals began to be held with huge painted idols of clay installed in public spaces, with lectures and cultural events organised as a part of the celebrations. After celebrating the festival, the idols are immersed in water bodies, and that is where the problem starts. Earlier, during Tilak's days in the first half of the 20th century, organic non-toxic colours were used to paint the idols. Not anymore. The toxic chemicals now leach into water bodies and into the drinking water. Along with idols, the waste materials in immense quantities –used

flowers and decorations are also dumped into the water bodies, creating massive pollution and ugly sights. This is how we worship Ganesha now, a rich metaphor for ecological balance and harmony. A festival which is supposed to be pious, invoking happiness for all, creates this ghastly violence to our environment. This is hardly consistent with Hinduism and its principled respect for Nature. Though efforts are made now to shift to the use of non-toxic colours and paints and to induce the devotees not to drop wastes callously into water bodies, there has so far been little impact on the behaviour of the so-called devotees. The state and its functionaries have been ineffective, as usual, in tackling the problem. Tilak, now in heaven, must be busy beating his forehead, wondering why in the first instance he started this!

## Dasara

This is a festival of ten days, the first nine days called as *Navaratri* and the tenth day as *Vijaya-dashami*. The festival starts from the first day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of *Ashvija*, occurring usually in the month of October. In many temples and public spaces, all the ten days are celebrated in the evenings and early nights. The presiding deity of the festival is Durga, Devi or Shakti, and her important forms are beautifully displayed by turn daily. Durga is venerated as all-powerful, who can vanquish evils, and as one who is fierce to evil-doers, but compassionate to her devotees like a loving mother. She is also Durgati-nashini, that is, one who can avert bad ends, outcomes or destinies not only in this life but also beyond.

Durga is worshipped by people in varieties of ways – ranging from very pious ways of meditation and recitation of *stotras* and excerpts from scriptures, to organising secular cultural events including music, dance, drama, debates, discourses and sports, and further onto *tamasik* ways of sacrificing animals and then feasting on meat and alcoholic drinks. The last way is followed only by a few, particularly *Tantriks*, and not by a majority. An interesting part of the festival is the worship of girls who have not yet reached puberty, giving them food and gifts. The cultural programmes of the festival are eagerly looked forward to, which help in discovering local talents and encouraging them. The worship of Saraswati, patron of arts, culture and literature, is formally done on the tenth day, but actually her worship starts right from the first day in the form of these cultural programmes. *Durga-puja* is perhaps the biggest and longest cultural event in West Bengal and for Bengalis everywhere, and is not restricted to Hindus alone, drawing all communities together. It is celebrated with gusto in Karnataka also, especially in Mysore. Its Dasara procession of colourfully dressed courtiers of the palace of the former Maharaja of Mysore involving royal elephants, with the idol of Devi Chamundeshwari on top of one, is a major tourist attraction. Some families in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, celebrate Dasara through holding exhibitions of the indigenous dolls (*gombe*) collected by them, at their respective homes and invite relatives, friends and neighbours to view them and enjoy.

Unfortunately, the festival has run into similar problems as in the case of Ganesha festival, namely, those related to environmental pollution. Durga idols also, which are painted in toxic colours, are immersed in water bodies at the end, along with a tremendous lot of decorative waste material. Leaders organising these festivals and the state governments cannot any longer ignore these problems, but must ensure that celebrations follow environment-friendly ways in both these and other festivals.

## Dipavali

Dipavali is considered as *Maha-parva* – the Great Festival. It is a festival of lights, as suggested by its very name, which means ‘line of lights’ or rows of lights. Normally, in all festivals, rows of lights are placed in temples when pujas take place. But during Dipavali, every house is lit up by indigenous earthen lamps with oil and wick to mark this festival, switching off electric lights so as to bring out the soothing beauty and subtlety of these lights. The metaphor of lights as is well known, is to remove the darkness (*tamas*) of evil, ignorance, insensitivity, indifference and narrow selfishness. The light is shed by burning a wick which represents the ego, the oil represents our shraddha or commitment, and the clay lamp represents our body. It is not enough to have one such light, but rows and rows of lights are needed to remove the *tamas* in both individuals and the collective humanity. This is the spiritual significance of the festival of lights. Dipavali is observed not only by the Hindus but also by followers of other Indian religions – Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs.

Dipavali is celebrated for nearly five days, with *Ashvija Amavasya* (New Moon Day) as its centre. It takes place usually in November. The starting point is the evening of Trayodashi (thirteenth day) of the dark fortnight of *Asvija*, when in a cleaned bathroom lit by *dipas* or *diyas* (earthen lamps), the well decorated pots (earlier they used to be huge and round copper vessels called *bhan* or *hande*) are filled with water for the next morning bath. Now electric heaters and taps or faucets have taken the place of the old copper vessels. Prayers are then offered before the family shrine. The next day, called as *Naraka Chaturdashi*, is to celebrate the slaying of a wicked demon named Naraka by Lord Vishnu, which metaphorically marks the triumph of the good over the evil which otherwise would lead us to hell (*Naraka*). The tendencies in us which can lead to hell have to be fought and eliminated with divine help. To mark such a resolve, we begin with a ritual bath, which consists first of a good oil massage for the whole family and then bath in warm or hot water, followed by application of sandal paste or perfumes. Adults do the oils massage for kids and bathe them. The entire family is supposed to finish the baths before the sun rise, when it meets together before the family shrine, lights incense sticks and recites stotras and prayers together. A delicious breakfast follows, when the whole family sits together, enjoying a variety of sweets. Then they visit temples or relatives and friends, or invite them home. The lighting with *diyas* is done every evening for all the five days.

A recent trend is bursting crackers also, which both children and adults enjoy. Usually neighbours join together in bursting crackers or fireworks. In the cities where open grounds are very few, this is done unfortunately on roads themselves, which can be very risky for passers-by. There is too much noise and smoke, which have no open space to escape. Crackers have now become an indispensable part of Dipavali celebrations for all the five days and are difficult to control and monitor. Every year in all the major cities of India, accidents resulting in injury to eyes and hands are common, but this has not reduced the enthusiasm of people. Since there is nothing religious about these fireworks, Muslim and Christian neighbours also participate in them. Dipavali has become a secular festival meant mainly for socialising and fun.

The Amavasya is celebrated as the day of worship of Lakshmi, especially by traders and businessmen. They invite their clients and customers to the puja and give gifts. Many business concerns mark the

occasion by sending gift boxes (of sweets or dry fruit and nuts usually) to all employees. Traditionally, the day also marks the closing and opening of accounts, but now almost all follow a uniform financial year from April 1 to March 31, and to that extent the significance of Dipavali is lost to them.

The next day, which is the first day of the bright fortnight of Kārtika, is called *Bali-padyami*. It is in honour of the legendary king Bali Chakravarti, known for his devotion to the welfare of his subjects and reputed to have established an egalitarian kingdom with no disparity in incomes and status, and without hunger and poverty in his domain. He is worshipped as a big hero in Kerala, for he was supposed to have ruled in this part of the country. Gifts to the poor also mark the day, though not in all places. It is also celebrated as Animals' Day, when domestic animals are bathed, fed well and rested. No work is taken from them on this day. But unfortunate perversions have taken place in this in a few cases, as a few villagers get the cattle and buffaloes drunk and make them run a race by twisting their tails – a sadistic pleasure at the cost of animals, which is against Hinduism. Some innocuous sports also take place on this day, like the tug-of-war and other Indian games, including indoor games.

*Kārtika Shukla Dvitiya*, that is, the second day of the bright fortnight of the month of Kārtika, is the final day of the five-day Dipavali festival. It is a day when sisters wave *arati* to their brothers, and brothers give them gifts – usually sari or other dress. It is, therefore, called *Bhratr-dvitiya* or *Bhagini-dvitiya*. It is usually the brothers who visit their sisters' homes with gifts and eat from the loving hands of their sisters. There is a tradition in India where a man regards a woman for whom he has a soft corner as his real sister and treats her like that, and vice versa. So even the deemed brothers and sisters can celebrate their fraternity along with respective families like blood brothers and sisters.

Together, it is more a festival of mutual love, affection, brotherhood and friendship, than a festival of piety. But this is also combined with a resolve to be virtuous and affectionate, and to fight evil (non-violently and ethically of course). It is, as in most festivals, an occasion to rejoice in life, and also to join in the Upanishadic prayer – *tamaso mā jyotirgamaya* (lead us from darkness to light).

## **Makara-Sankramana / Sankranti**

*Makara-sankramana*, briefly called as *Sankranti* or Pongal (in Tamil Nadu), marks the winter solstice, and the entry of the sun into Capricorn (Makara). It is when the sun begins to move northward from the equator, and takes place on January 14th or 15th. It is considered as a sacred day, meant for piety and charity. It is also customary to meet friends and relatives on this day with sesame seeds and gur (together called as *til-gul* in Marathi and Konkani and *Ellu-bella* in Kannada) and greet them expressing the wish that their relationship also be sweet and pleasant. The sesame seeds and gur are often turned into round laddus, instead of giving them raw. The importance of the day for renewal of relationships is so much that it is considered an appropriate day for persons, not on speaking terms with each other due to some misunderstanding, to begin a new chapter and become friends again, without any of them feeling embarrassed. The message of the festival is not merely to be pious and virtuous, but also become affable, friendly and accessible.

## Personal Birthdays

Apart from common festivals, personal festivals like birthdays and wedding anniversaries are also enthusiastically celebrated, with prayers and feasting. In celebrating birthdays, however, Hindus have given up their traditional meaningful customs and have been blindly aping the Western ways, even when they are considered as inauspicious by Hindu tradition, particularly, blowing off candles placed on birthday cakes. The traditional Hindu way of celebrating a birthday is to first collectively pray before the family shrine for a long and happy life for the birthday celebrity, and then waving *arati* (with lighted wicks placed in oil on a decorated metal plate) to him or her, putting sweets in to her or his mouth, and then eat together. The *arati* puts a glow over the face of the birthday celebrity and indicates a wish that her or his life may brighten up and bring happiness. The ‘ritual’ actually followed now is the exact opposite – to blow off lights, as if so many lights have gone out of her or his life as the number of years gone by, and the future is dark! Ironically, the emphasis on a birthday is on the past when celebrated in Western ways!



# Caste System is not Hinduism

*‘Caste has nothing to do with religion’.*

— M. K. Gandhi

(*Harijan* 18-7-1936; reprinted in Gandhi 1987:12)

## 1. HINDUISM IS NOT BRAHMINISM

It is necessary to demolish the myth that the notorious caste system is an intrinsic part of Hinduism. This myth has not only been propagated by the critics of Hinduism, but was also unfortunately subscribed to by orthodox elements within Hinduism till recently. The myth emerged partly from another mischievous myth that Hinduism is simply Brahminism – that Hinduism is a creation of Brahmins who invented or devised the caste system, so that they could dominate the Hindu society as its top echelon. To consolidate the caste system, religion was alleged to be seen by Brahmins in terms of codes of purity and pollution to segregate castes, observing caste hierarchy along with restrictions on occupational mobility, access to learning, inter-dining and inter-caste marriages, and in terms of an obsessive emphasis on rituals as the means of invoking divine blessings for material gains. All this was interpreted as the strategy of Brahmins to ensure and consolidate their hold on the society. This is how Brahminism was seen as the essence of Hinduism in practice. It should be clear from the preceding chapters that this is not Hinduism, at least in terms of its principles and philosophy or even *sādhana* – its practice.

The belief that only the Brahmins created Hinduism and the caste system is sociologically naïve, historically incorrect, and factually wrong. Though this myth was created mainly by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western scholars, some of the Indian intellectuals also equated Hinduism with Brahminism without critically debating the Western schools of thought.

During the Vedic and Upanishadic phase, Brahmins as a caste determined by birth, had not yet been established. The *R̥shis* who composed the Vedas and Upanishads, came from diverse social and occupational backgrounds, and the authors of the two great epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – were not Brahmins by birth. *Vālmiki* who composed the former has certainly been known to have been a *Shūdra*, while *Vyāsa* who composed the latter was of a mixed origin. In view of the fact that

Hinduism is not confined to the Vedas and the Upanishads, and covers the Bhakti movements too, the diverse social background of Bhakti Sants makes it conspicuously clear that Brahmins were hardly the only ones to create, shape and develop Hinduism. Bhakti Movements characterised Hinduism at a time when the caste system determined by birth was firmly established. Most of the Sants came from lower castes, and Bhakti Movements stood up firmly against the caste system and its inequalities. There were so many *Sharanas* (male sants) and *Sharanes* (women sants) from lower castes in Basavanna's Bhakti Movement in Karnataka in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that Javaraiah (1997) has written a whole book of over 300 pages on them. During the modern phase of Hinduism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several stalwarts who revived Hinduism and tried to reform it were not Brahmins at all, the most popular among them being Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi and Shri Narayana Guru. Among more recent saints also, Swami Chinmayananda was not a Brahmin by birth, and Mata Amritanandamayi is not only a woman but also comes from what is considered as a low caste. We can thus see that many personalities who shaped the Hindu society since the formative stages of Hinduism and the establishment of the caste system up to the present times, were not Brahmins. They worked within the philosophical and social framework of Hinduism, even if they challenged orthodoxy within it and tried to reform and rejuvenate it from time to time.

Regarding the belief that Brahmins created the caste system, let us first see what the system is and how it emerged, in the sections below, and the question then would be automatically answered.

## 2. THE CASTE SYSTEM – *JATI* VIS-À-VIS *VARNA*

In understanding any religion, one must distinguish between what is intrinsic and what is redundant. The preceding chapters tried to expound the intrinsic features of Hinduism. But a religion lives and thrives in a society. Both religion and society need a structure and organisation to face the vicissitudes of political, economic and technological change. Though such a structure may have a religious colouring and idiom, it is only an operational and institutional part of the society. The institutional features can undergo a lot of change, but the basic values of the religion would have to be rediscovered from time to time and reinterpreted whenever necessary. The caste system is a discardable feature of the society. It may have served some purpose in the historic past, but is now redundant and has outlived whatever utility it had. I do not intend to simply brush aside the *existence* of the caste system with this remark, but will examine here what purpose it served, if at all; why it is not intrinsic to Hinduism, and why it should and will disappear. The caste system is not necessary for the survival of Hinduism. It emerged more by default than by anybody's or any particular community's plan or design.

The nearest Indian term for caste is *Jati*, which should not be confused with the earlier and traditional idea of *Varna*. Though *varna* means colour literally, it refers basically to a *model* of division of labour in the society in terms of four classes –the Brahmins (priestly class), the Kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaishyas (merchants and those engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry), and the Shudras (workers, artisans and helpers). As Kṛṣṇa clarifies in the Gita (IV.13), the original model of the four *Varnas* was according to one's aptitude, *guna*, (i.e. by choice) and work or occupation, Karma, and not on the basis of birth. There was no rigid hierarchy or a linear and unidirectional scale of status as commonly believed, and the system permitted inter-varna mobility. The so-called untouchables were

outside the *varṇa* system and came later. In course of time, the untouchables apart, several reformist panths also considered themselves to be outside the *Varṇa* system, though they became *jātis* within the broad fold of Hinduism. We cannot therefore say that the whole of the Hindu society came under the *Varṇa* system. It would be naïve to regard a *Varna* simply as a set of *jātis* under it, and all *varṇas* as accounting for all the *jātis* of Hindus.

The *Varṇa* model did not last long but deteriorated into the caste or *jāti* system in practice. Though *jātis* were supposed to be classified into four *varṇa* categories, it was not always clear which *jāti* fitted into which *Varṇa*, and if a *jāti* came under the *Varṇa* system at all. It appeared that the primary unit was not *varṇa* but *jāti*; it was not as if a *varṇa* simply split into so many *jātis*. On the other hand, it was some (but not all) *jātis* which were sought to be categorized in terms of *Varṇas*. But there never appeared to be much clarity about the categorisation. There always used to be disputes and claims, and upward mobility of *jātis* into the hierarchy of *Varṇas* was hardly rare (as we see below). Though again, *varṇa* was supposed to be hierarchical in terms of *ritual status* with the Brahmins at the top, *political power* was with the Kshatriyas and *money power* with the Vaishyas. The social hierarchy was therefore never quite clear at least among the upper three *Varṇas*. Not only the Shūdras, but the Brahmins also were not supposed to accumulate wealth, and were to be supported by the other two *varṇas*. Brahmins under financial stress or emergency had to go with a begging bowl to Kshatriyas or Vaishyas humbly.<sup>1</sup> Though the priestly class is believed or assumed to be enjoying higher ritual status than others, actually it had and still has a lower social status to such an extent that a young Brahmin priest finds it difficult to get a bride! Yet, ironically, it is the Brahmins who are alleged to have created the caste system for their benefit.

It is important to distinguish the *jātis* or the caste system from the *varṇas* to properly understand the features of the caste system. (i) First, *Varṇa* is based on division of labour; *jāti* is division by birth—it is, as Dr B R Ambedkar stressed, a division of labourers; a caste is not a class; a class system has open doors, but not castes, at least in custom.<sup>2</sup> (ii) Ritually, the Brahmins may be considered as at the top in *Varṇa*, but the dominant caste (as per M N Srinivas) is at the top of the *jāti* system;<sup>3</sup> while stratification in *varṇa* is supposed to be based on character, austerity and learning, the hierarchy in *jāti* is based on political and economic power. (iii) The *Varṇa* system permitted inter-*varṇa* upward mobility, but the *jāti* system was more rigid and inter-caste mobility was difficult; the caste system did not allow inter-caste marriages and inter-dining. (iv) It is the *varṇa* system which finds a mention and some support in the texts, but not *jāti*. The scriptures supported equality of all human beings based on birth, but admitted differentiation based on character (*Vṛttameva viśiṣhyate*). (v) The *Varṇa* system does not recognize untouchability, but the *jāti* system does.

These features of the caste system, however, were not totally rigid. The rules and customs of the system were flouted across the board, though the environment for the untouchables was particularly suffocating and inhuman. It is ironical that among the untouchables, there was - and still is- a hierarchical stratification into *jātis*, some claiming to be superior to others, and with usual restrictions on inter-marriage and inter-dining. The whole system acquiesced into the closed door hierarchical stratification. Yet, there were a significant number of cases of not only individuals but even communities attempting and also often achieving upward mobility from time to time.

Restrictions on such mobility making for a birth-based occupational system meant that the economy was essentially feudal, locally and subsistence based, incapable of orienting to a wider market and promoting technological change and productivity growth. Such a system has been taken by historians and social scientists as not geared to the generation of economic surplus and its appropriation for productive investment necessary for economic growth. Yet, paradoxically, in economic terms at least, India was not behind the world till about the 18<sup>th</sup> century as seen from the monumental and yet meticulous research by Angus Maddison (2003, 2007). In 1700 AD, India accounted for 24 per cent - nearly a quarter - of the World GDP, which, however, started declining rapidly thereafter. In the same year, all Europe together accounted for only 20 per cent of the world GDP (there was no USA then). The problem with European countries then, including Britain, was how and what to give in exchange for the goods they wanted from India (Kurien 2012: 184). India was highly reputed for its wealth. Now, how could this be so, when the oppressive caste system that discouraged incentives for growth prevailed as the singular most important feature of India? I am not defending the caste system here, but only suggesting that its rigours, rigidities and restrictions could well have been a bit exaggerated and the actual system in operation till the British rule may have allowed some flexibility and breathing space even for the lower castes.

Nevertheless, the system certainly was iniquitous and even inhuman, and was thus bitterly criticised and challenged by many within Hinduism. The Bhakti movements offered the first challenge, but they failed to break the system. It faced much more serious challenges during the modern period one after another from stalwarts like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-90), Periyar E V Ramaswamy (1879-1973), and Dr B R Ambedkar (1891-1956). They challenged not only the caste system but also Hinduism itself, taking it to be the same as Brahminism seen in terms of codes of purity and pollution. Phule, however, preferred to use the word 'Brahminism' in his attack, instead of 'Hinduism' (Deshpande 2011:30, fn), though he may not have bothered to draw a fine distinction between the two. There were others like Shri Narayana Guru (1854-1928), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) who were equally opposed to the caste system and to a concept of religion seen in terms of codes of purity and pollution and elaborate rituals, but their approach was to reform Hinduism and help it to cut off such excrescences. They believed that Hinduism will not only survive without the caste system, but also that eliminating the caste system and untouchability was necessary if Hinduism had to survive and thrive. They did not think that the caste system was intrinsic to and necessary for Hinduism. This chapter follows this approach shown by Shri Narayana Guru, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi and many others like them.

### 3. THERE WAS HINDUISM BEFORE THE CASTE SYSTEM

The first reference to the four *varṇas* comes in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mandala of the *R̥gveda*, in two verses of *Purusha Sūkta* (quoted in another section below). According to several scholars who have researched on the theme, the 10<sup>th</sup> *Mandala* was chronologically the last one to be composed. There is a good consensus on the point that previous to this, there was no *varṇa* system in the Vedic society. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavata Purāṇa* also mention that in *Kṛta Yuga*, there was no *varṇa* or *jati*, but only one *varṇa* of human beings – that of the children of Vivaswata Manu (Sharma 2000: 136).

Hence, the word *manava*, that signifies a human being, is popular in all Indian languages. *Puranas* and other Hindu scriptures have preserved the racial memory of an ideal or golden age in the past when there was no caste.

According to Dr Ambedkar, there were only three *varnas* in the Vedic society, and no fourth *varna* of Shudras. He says, the economy had advanced enough to give rise to a division of labour but there was no hierarchy. He refers to other cosmologies in Hindu texts, but they are all secular, without hint of either a hierarchy or of a divine origin. He feels, therefore, that the two verses in the *Purusha Sukta* are an interpolation, added much later after the caste system was established. R S Sharma, an eminent historian, supports this view: “It is evident then that the Shudras appear as a social class only towards the end of the period of *Atharva Veda* [chronologically the last of the Vedas], when the *Purusha Sukta* version of their origin may have been inserted in to the tenth book of the *Rigveda*”.<sup>4</sup> According to Dr Ambedkar, Shudras as an ethnic group were a part of Kshatriyas, and a part of Aryan society itself. He does not accept the theory of western scholars according to which Shudras and untouchables were originally non-Aryans who were defeated by Aryans, and taken into the Vedic society giving them a lower status. On the other hand, Shudras were very much a part of the ruling society, several of them being kings. As per Dr Ambedkar, they fell from grace and became the fourth *varna* when Brahmins stopped performing the rite of *upanayana* for them as a revenge against harassment and insults suffered by them at the hands of some Shudra kings. He also says that untouchability is a post-Buddhist phenomenon, which emerged as a result of Hindus giving up sacrifice of animals and beef-eating under the influence of Buddhism, but they went to such an extreme that those who continued to eat beef were regarded as untouchables.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not one accepts Dr Ambedkar’s theory on the origin of Shudras and untouchables, scholars agree that *varna*-system based on birth is very much a post-Vedic feature, and untouchability is a post-Buddhist phenomenon. Dipankar Gupta, for example says:

“It was well after the Vedic period, after even the period of Mauryan empire, that the notion of untouchability came into being, In *Satapatha Brahmana* the chief or the noble is advised to eat from the same vessel as *Vis*, and commoner. ... It was only around second century AD that the stratum of untouchables and the notion of untouchability became evident for instance in *Apastambha Dharmasutra*” (Gupta 2000: 190).

This means that the caste system did not exist during the first half of the long history of Hinduism since 3000 BCE, while Hinduism did. Even Dr Ambedkar believed so. And, as we shall see in the concluding part of this paper, Hinduism can survive the collapse of the caste system. There will be Hinduism after the caste system also, just as it was there before it.

#### 4. SOCIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY NOT INSIGNIFICANT

Though the caste system supposedly opposed occupational mobility, there have always been significant exceptions. Actual occupations have since centuries deviated from the theoretical *varna* model. The *Dharmashastras* themselves allowed exceptions under *apaddharma*, whereby persons who could not

make their livelihood under the occupations of their own *varṇa*, could take to other occupations. Brahmins by birth have taken not only to priesthood, which is their *varṇa* based occupation, but also to several others, including manual labour. It is not unusual to find Brahmin cooks in the service of Scheduled Caste (formerly ‘untouchables’) and Scheduled Tribe ministers and officials. *Havyaka* Brahmins in Karnataka have not only owned garden lands but have also been doing manual labour in them. *Shūdras*, apart from doing manual labour and artisan jobs, which is their *varṇa* based occupation, have traditionally served as soldiers too, making the distinction between *Kshatriyas* and *Shūdras* quite blurred. Priesthood also is no longer confined to the Brahmins.

Dr Ambedkar himself has given several examples of social and occupational mobility during the Vedic and Upanishadic period. Raikva, Janashruti and Kavasa Ailusha were admitted to Ashrams for Vedic learning even after revealing their low caste status. The *Chhāndogya Upanishad* has a significant story of *Satyakama Jabāla*. He sought admission to the Ashram (hermitage) of Gautama *Rshi* (not Gautam Buddha) for Vedic learning. On being asked from what family he comes, *Jabāla* frankly tells the *Rshi*: “I do not know this, Sir, of what family I am. I asked my mother. She answered me, ‘In my youth, when I went about a great deal as a maid servant, I got you. So I do not know of what family you are. I am *Jabāla* by name and you are *Satyakama* by name’. So I am *Satyakama Jabāla*, Sir”. The *Rshi* was so pleased with his truthfulness, that he promptly initiated him as his pupil (Radhakrishnan 1994: 406-7). So many *Rshis* came from obscure origin themselves, that there is a proverb which says that one should not ask about ‘*Rshi-mūla*’ (origin or birth of a *Rshi*). Sage *Parasara* was born of a *Shvapaka* woman, *Kapinjala* of a *Chandāla* woman, and *Madanapala* of a boat woman. <sup>6</sup> *Rshis* had a much higher ritual status than the Brahmins who were mere priests. *Valmiki* (author of the *Ramayana*) and *Vyasa* (author of the *Mahabharata*, and editor and compiler of the *Vedas*) and even the great *Vashisṭha* belonged to the class of the so-called low birth. *Kalidasa*, the greatest of the great poets in Sanskrit also came from a very humble and obscure origin.

Even as late as 12<sup>th</sup> Century, *Vijñaneshwara* in his commentary (*Mitākshara*) on the *Yajnyavalkya Smṛti* said ‘*nṛṇ paṭi iti nṛpāḥ, na tu kshatriyah iti nemah*’ (whosoever protects people is fit to be a king; he need not as a rule be a *Kshatriya*). Thus, quite a few lower castes considered themselves to be *Kshatriyas*, though sometimes upper castes continued to consider them to be *Shūdras*. To gain a higher rank in the caste system, they practised what the upper castes practised, like *Upanayana* (Sacred Thread Ceremony), and even certain *Homas* and *Pujas*. They competed with each other in the observance of purity rules to show that they belonged to superior castes. Such attempts are called as *Sanskritisation* by *Srinivas*, through which eventually several castes gained in caste status (1977: 1-45). *Sanskritisation* as a process through which whole castes gained in caste status could not have been a purely the 20<sup>th</sup> Century phenomenon, though scholarly attention to the subject has been mostly confined to the modern period.

Even marriages between different *varṇas* were not rare in the ancient and the classical periods. It must have been because of their significant occurrence, that there is a mention of different types of marriages in Hindu texts based on which *jatis* were evolved. When the husband was from a higher caste than the wife, the marriage was called as *Anuloma*; when reverse was the case, it was called as *Pratiloma*. While the former type was tolerated, the latter was despised. There was another type of

classification also; according to it, a love marriage was called as *gandharva*, and a marriage where the woman was forced into marriage was called as *rakshasa*. The former was tolerated (and even adored in Sanskrit creative literature), but the latter was despised. It is evident from literature that not all marriages were arranged by parents, and mixed marriages were not rare. It is thus not a surprise that caste distinctions are not based on racial or colour distinction, though '*varna*' meant colour. Race and colour very much cut across castes since ancient days in India so that a person's caste could not be determined on the basis of his/her colour or racial or genetic peculiarities. This is evident from a dialogue in the *Mahabharata* (*Shanti Parva*, Ch.188, verses 5 to 7) cited by K M Sen. When the sage Bhṛgu naively observed that Brahmins were fair, Kshatriyas reddish, Vaishyas yellowish and Shudras black, sage Bharadvaja retorted: "If different colours indicate different castes, then all castes are mixed castes. We all seem to be affected by desire, anger, fear, sorrow, worry, hunger, and labour; how do we have caste differences then?" (Sen 2005: 18).

The occupational and social mobility as well as the inter-mixture of castes cannot be regarded as infringements of the sacred Shruti literature (referred to below as canon) or as rare exceptions. Even canon itself did not respect the custom of determining status and character on the basis of birth.

## 5. CANON AND CASTE

In a scholarly paper, Seth (1999: 2502-3) has shown that when the Portuguese first 'discovered' caste, they went beyond giving a name to it. Duarte Barbosa, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese scholar, learnt the local language, talked to people of various strata, and identified the main features of caste (hierarchy, untouchability linked with 'pollution', plurality of endogamous castes, application of sanctions by castes to maintain own customs, and relationship of caste with political organisation). Seth observes that Barbosa did not include legitimization of caste by religion or scriptures as a source of information on caste, and finds this omission as significant. Seth points out that it was when the British came into the picture that this legitimization by scriptures was presumed to be an essential feature of castes. The British also started caste-based census, which was instrumental in promoting caste consciousness and in politicising caste. It was taken for granted that the Hindu scriptures were the basis of the caste system, giving it a strong authentication. This view needs to be challenged.

We first take up such parts of the canon or scriptures that are (wrongly) interpreted to be supportive of the caste system, and then take up such parts as are directly and definitively *against* caste system based on birth.

It is only in the *Dharmashastras* (*Dharma Sutras* and *Smritis*) and not in other scriptures that we find support to the caste system. However, *Dharmashastras* never had the same status as *Shruti* (the Vedas and the Upanishads) and it is laid down that whenever there is a conflict between the Shruti and Smṛti literature, it is the former that prevails. It is *Manusmṛiti*, which is particularly supportive of the caste system, but where it conflicts with the Vedas and Upanishads, the latter would prevail. Though the Gita is not regarded as a part of Shruti, it is regarded highly as sacred, being the essence of the Upanishads. As we shall just see even the Gita is against caste system based on birth, and not supportive of it. Thus, wherever Dharma Shastras conflict with Shruti and the Gita, the latter prevail. The *Apastambha Dharmasutra* which supports untouchability, is popular amongst the critics of Hinduism but not among the Hindus who hardly regard it as canon.

Though *Dharmashastras* are supposed to support the caste system, there is hardly unanimity about it among them. For example, as Dr Ambedkar pointed out, though according to *Dharmasutras*, a Shudra is not entitled to *Upanayana*, the *Samskara Ganapati* explicitly declares the Shudras to be eligible for it. He also shows that according to Jaimini, the author of *Purva Mimamsa*, the Shudras could perform Vedic rites. Dr Ambedkar refers also to *Bhagavadgja Srauta Sutra* (V.28) and *Katyayana Srauta Sutra* which concede eligibility to the Shudras to perform Vedic rites (Moon 1990: VII: 198-9). Kane points out that in spite of some other *Dharmashastras* saying to the contrary, “Badari espoused the cause of the Shudras and propounded the view that all (including the Shudras) were entitled to perform Vedic sacrifices” (Kane 1990: II-I: 36).

Interestingly, the *Manusmṛiti* itself shows the way to demolish its own support to the caste system based on birth. In Chapter 4, verse 176 clearly states: Discard wealth and desire if they are contrary to Dharma, and even dharma itself if it leads to unhappiness or arouses peoples’ indignation. Dharma here does not mean religion in the Western sense, but principles and rules of conduct. If *varna* dharma, or rules of conduct governing *varnas*, and caste for that matter, lead to unhappiness or to people’s indignation, as they certainly do, *Manusmṛiti* itself says that such a dharma can be discarded. What then is dharma, according to *Manusmṛiti*? The first verse in Chapter 2 of *Manusmṛiti* is a reply to this question. It says:

*Vidvadbhiḥ sevitaḥ sadbhirnityam advesharagibhiḥ /*  
*Hṛdayenabhyanuñjato yo dharmstvam nibodhata //* (II.1)

(‘Know that to be true dharma, which the wise and the good and those who are free from passion and hatred follow and which appeals to the heart.’)

Mahatma Gandhi was fond of quoting this verse in his lectures. Thus, if the wise and the good do not accept the caste system based on birth as it does not appeal to the heart, the system can be discarded according to the *Manusmṛiti* itself. So much to the support of *Manusmṛiti* for the caste system.

*Purusha Sukta* in the *Rgveda* (X.90) has often been cited, more than *Manusmṛiti*, as authenticating, sanctifying and glorifying the caste system. The pertinent verses are as follows:

*Yatpurusham vyadadhu kṛtidhā vyakalpayan /*  
*Mukham kimasya kow bahu ka uru pada uchyete //* (11<sup>th</sup> verse)

[‘When (gods) divided Purusha, into how many parts did they cut him up? What was his mouth? What arms (had he)? What (two objects) are said (to have been) his thighs and feet?’ ]

*Brahmanasya mukhamasit bahu rajanyah kṛtah /*  
*uru tadasya yadvaisyah padbhyam shudro ajayata //* (12<sup>th</sup> verse)

[‘The Brahmin was his mouth, the Rajanya (King or Kshatriya) was made his arms; the being called the Vaishya, was his thighs; the Shudra sprang from his feet.’ ] <sup>7</sup>

As is noted above, Dr Ambedkar considers these verses to be an interpolation on several grounds, including the fact that while the style or format of the two verses is of a question-and-answer type, the other verses in the *Purusha Sukta* are narrative in style. Even if it is taken as a genuine part of the original *Purusha Sukta*, and not an interpolation, it cannot be interpreted as being supportive of the caste system based on birth and hierarchy. It is essentially a metaphor taking the society to be an organic whole, of which the four *varnas* based on division of labour are intrinsic parts. There is nothing to indicate that they ought to be castes or jatis as presently understood. The reference is evidently to occupations or work of respective *varnas*, which need not necessarily be based on birth. There is also *nothing prescriptive* or recommendatory about the two verses. It is only indicative of the *existence* of division of labour, with each *varna* corresponding to that part of the body of the Primeval Purusha with which the work or occupation of the respective *varna* is associated. Since Vaishyas and Shudras support the society through their economic or productive work, they were taken respectively as coming out of the thighs and feet of the Purusha, without necessarily hinting at any lowly status of their work. Similarly, since Kshatriyas' work in warfare involved mainly the use of their arms, they were taken as coming out of the arms of the Purusha. Since Brahmins' work consisted of reciting mantras and preserving Vedas through oral transmission, they were taken as coming out the Purusha's mouth. *In a lighter vein*, it could be said that this was also because Brahmins were traditionally described as '*Bhojanapriyah*' (lovers of food)! If the intention behind the two controversial verses was to sanctify a hierarchical order, they could as well have described Brahmins as coming out of the head of the Purusha. It was perhaps seen by the Vedic sage who composed the *Purusha Sukta* that Brahmin priests mostly used their mouth rather than their head while reciting the mantras! There is thus no need for hard feelings due to the two verses in *Purusha Sukta*.

The *Gita* is alleged to support the caste system on the basis of mainly three verses. The key quotation in this context is from the 13<sup>th</sup> verse in Ch.4 where the Lord tells Arjuna –

*Chaturvarnyam maya srshtam gunakarma vibhagashah*

(‘The four *varnas* were created by me on the basis of aptitude and occupation’)

In verse 31 of Ch.2, Arjuna is cajoled into fighting on the ground that he is a Kshatriya for whom there is nothing more glorious than a righteous war. Again in verse 47 of Ch.18, the Lord states that one should perform one's own dharma even if devoid of merit and not follow another's even if well performed.<sup>8</sup> Verses 41 to 46 in Ch.18 also are supportive of or leading to verse 47 in the same chapter. Verses 41 to 43 in Ch.1 also appear to be supportive to *Varna-dharma*, but these verses are a part of the misgivings of Arjuna, which Krishna removes later.

Verse 13 in ch.4 quoted above holds the key to the understanding of the other verses on *varna-dharma*. Krishna refers to the four *varnas*, saying explicitly that they were created on the basis of *guna* (nature, aptitude, character) and *karma* (work, action occupation). He does not at all refer to birth as the basis for the four-fold division. *Varna* thus is only a division of labour where each one follows an occupation based on aptitude or natural inclination. Far from support to the caste system, K M Panikkar considers it as constituting a devastating attack on caste based on birth.<sup>9</sup> Kane says that if Krishna wanted to make birth as the basis of his division of labour, He could easily have said '*jati-*

*karma-vibhagashah*’ or ‘*janma-karma-vibhagashah*’, instead of ‘*guṇa-karma-vibhagashah*’ as actually stated (Kane 1990: V-II: 1635-6). He pointed out clearly to ‘*guṇa*’. This is also consistent with Kṛṣṇa’s reply to Arjuna’s specific question in the *Uttara-gītā* quoted below.

Once this is clear, it follows that the dharma referred to in the other verses on *Varṇa* (II.31, and XVIII.41-47) also is based on *guṇa* and not birth. In the Mahabharata war, persons not born as Kshatriyas also participated in the war as per their inclination, *Svabhāva* or *guṇa*. So there was nothing casteist in Krishna’s asking Arjuna to fight like a Kshatriya – a warrior. Similarly, the advice to follow one’s own *svadharma* only means that one has to follow one’s aptitude and qualities, and see where one’s comparative advantage lies. A talented person may be able to perform many tasks better than others, but she cannot afford to do so, and she would achieve more by concentrating on where her comparative advantage lies. The principle of comparative advantage, instead of absolute advantage, is supposed to be followed in international trade between countries. What Kṛṣṇa advocated was to ask us to follow the more scientific and practical principle of comparative advantage as that would maximise social as well as individual welfare. Comparative advantage here can be taken in the dynamic sense of potential that can be realized, and not in terms of present or actual *guṇa* in a static sense.

The wisdom of the Gita’s advice to follow ‘*Svadharma*’ and shun ‘*Paradharma*’ is hilariously clear from a cartoon by R K Laxman. The cartoon shows a minister telling his peon who is shown sitting comfortably and reading the files: ‘You may be a graduate, but bring the papers and files to my desk first!’ Nothing can prevent a peon from becoming a minister, but as long as he is a peon, he should do peon’s duty and not start reading the files and passing orders in them even if he be more educated than his minister. Matters can hardly be so hilarious if, for example, a Chief of Army Staff tries to take over the duties of the President or Prime-Minister. *Svadharma* means ‘own sphere of duty’ and nothing more.

The four-fold social structure based on *varṇa* interpreted in the sense of *svabhāva* or *guṇa*, can be taken to be characterising any society of the past, both in the East and West, including even the modern society before the Information Age. Radhakrishnan (1998: 367) quotes Gerald Heard from the latter’s book on *Man the Master* (1942): “the Aryan-Sanskrit sociological thought, which first defined and named this fourfold structure of society, is as much ours as India’s”.

Even if *Varṇa* is not based on birth but on *svabhāva*, it can still be objectionable to modern mind if it does not allow access to learning and opportunities to improve one’s livelihood level by changing one’s occupation. As stated above, one’s comparative advantage has to be interpreted not in a rigid, unchangeable sense, but in a dynamic sense, allowing a change in one’s *svabhāva-guṇa* or inclination. This is still consistent with the Gita’s advice to follow one’s *svabhāva-guṇa*, because it has to be interpreted in a dynamic context.

The story of Shambuka in the *Ramayana* is often cited as supporting the caste system to an extreme extent. It is the story of a Shudra who was killed on the advice of ministers by Rama as a punishment for doing penance and neglecting his caste duties. The story appears in the Uttara Kāṇḍa, - not a part of Vālmiki’s *Ramayana* which ends with Rama’s return to Ayodhya in Yuddha Kāṇḍa. P V Kane, an eminent Sanskrit scholar, is of the view that the Uttara Kāṇḍa was clearly a ‘work of later interpolators’ (Kane 1990: I-I: 389). The interpolation was done at a time when *varṇa* system deteriorated and got

established on the basis of birth in a rigid form. Shambuka's story is not consistent with many examples of persons of so-called low birth being initiated into Ashrams as pupils by Rshis, and becoming Rshis themselves. Matanga Rshi is mentioned in the Valmiki *Ramayana* with high regard. He came from a caste that may be regarded as untouchable in today's parlance. Rama met him to pay his respects during his forest sojourn.

Now we may take note of those parts of classical Hindu scriptures which are against caste system and have condemned the practice of determining one's character and status on the basis of birth or *kula* (family).

Much is made of some of the *Smrtis* barring the Shudras from hearing words of the Vedas. But here is what a Veda itself has to say:

*Yathemam vacham kalyanim avadani janebhyah /*

*Brahma-rajanyabhyam shudraya charyaya cha svaya charanaya/ ...*

(Yajurveda, XXVI.2)

(I impart these words to all – the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, Shudras , Vaishyas, to my own people as also to strangers.)

The verse is attributed to the eminent philosopher and sage (Rshi) Yajnyavalkya. Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati interprets '*svaya*' in the verse to mean 'women' instead of 'own people', and '*aranaya*' to mean 'antyajas' or the untouchables. If the latter interpretation is accepted, it means that nobody was barred from hearing the Vedas, not even the Shudras, women and the untouchables (Dayananda p. 631).

The *Vedanta* philosophy declares that there is divinity in every creature. Lord Kṛṣṇa says in verse 30 of ch.6 of the *Gita*: He who sees Me in all things and sees all things in Me, never becomes departed from Me, nor am I lost to him. The preceding and succeeding verses in the *Gita* also convey the same message. How can this advice be consistent or co-exist with support to caste distinctions based on birth? In the 16<sup>th</sup> Chapter, the Lord narrates the virtues He looks for in human beings and says that those who possess them are divine. Among these virtues are: non-violence, truth, compassion to all, absence of anger and hatred, giving charity and service selflessly, forgiveness, non-covetousness and modesty (XVI:1-3). It follows that high birth is hardly relevant.

The *Gita* opened the doors of religion to the lower castes and also to women, which were closed to them by jealous and narrow minded priests who misinterpreted the *Vedic Dharma* in terms of exclusive ritualism kept beyond the reach of the unfortunate classes. In a sense, the *Gita* played a more revolutionary role than even the later Bhakti movements in this respect. It was the first to reinterpret the very concept of '*yajna*', stripped of its rigid ritualism, and taken only in the sense of offering, which any body without wealth or high *Varṇa* status could perform. Such an offering could be in the form of help to others. Secondly, the *Gita* also opened other doors of easy access to God, by emphasising Karma and Bhakti too as paths of God realisation and not knowledge or Jñāna alone which perhaps only a few could feel competent to adopt. These two related steps enunciated in the *Gita* opened the

doors of religion and spiritual happiness to the masses of people. The masses of people benefited indirectly in another way too by the *Gita* through its emphasis on altruistic action (*Nishkama Karma*) and *Loka Sangraha*, which essentially meant that selfless service to people is service to God. The *Gita's* advice to see and feel God in every being, along with the advice explained above through the reinterpreted concept of *Yajna* and emphasis on *Nishkama Karma*, provided the philosophical base for ending deprivation and promoting human welfare. We thus find that far from supporting the caste system, the *Gita* opposed it very meaningfully and went much beyond.

The *Rgveda* too emphasises equality of all human beings. It goes to the extent of saying, which sounds quite modern: “No one is superior, none inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity”.<sup>10</sup> The idea that all human beings are equal before God irrespective of caste and that all are entitled to receive His Light comes out clearly from the following:

*Rucham nō dhehi brahmaneshu rucham rajasu naskrdhi /*  
*Rucham vishveshu shudreshu mayi dhehi rucha rucham ||*  
*(Taittiriya Samhita V.7.6. 3-4)*

[‘Put light in our Brahmanas, put it in our chiefs (kings),  
 (put) light in Vaishyas and Shudras, put light in me by your light’].<sup>11</sup>

It may sound surprising to critics of Hinduism but is a fact that Hindu scriptures have backed liberalism and humanism by undermining birth, and upholding character, holding the basic worth of persons as being more important. The Mahabharata makes this point very strongly, to an extent that it reflects a revolt against the caste system based on birth:

*Na kulam Vrttahinasya Pramanamiti me matihi /*  
*Anteshwapi Jatanam Vrttameva Vishishyate //*  
*(Mahabharata, Udyoga Parva, Ch.34, v.41)*

(High birth can be no certificate for a person of no character. But persons with good character distinguish themselves irrespective of low birth.)

The Mahabharata emphasises the same point again elsewhere too:

*Yastu Shudro dame satye dharme cha satatottithah /*  
*Tam brahmanam aham manye vrten hi bhavet dvijah //*  
*(Mahabharata, Vanaparva, , Ch.216, vs.14-15)*

(“That Shudra who is ever engaged in self-control, truth and righteousness, I regard him a Brahmin. One is a twice-born by conduct alone”).<sup>12</sup>

Uttaragita, which is also a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, makes the same point. When Arjuna specifically asks Krishna how *varna* is determined, he replies:



Shankaracharya prostrating before a chandala treating him as Guru.

*Na jatih karanam tata gunah kalyanakaranam /  
Vratastham api Chandalam tam devah brahmanam viduh //*

(“Birth is not the cause, my friend; it is virtues, which are the cause of welfare. Even a *Chandala* [an untouchable] observing the vow is considered a *Brahmana* by the gods.”<sup>13</sup>) The verse supports the interpretation given above of the three controversial verses from the Gita.

The story of Shankaracharya (8th century), prostrating before a *Chandala* is well known. When the latter stood in the way of the former, he was asked to move away. The *Chandala* asked him whether the *Acharya*’s behaviour was consistent with his philosophy. He asked further: *Viproyam Shvapachoyam ityapi mahān kōyam Vibhedabhramah* (what is this confusing distinction between a Brahmin and an untouchable?). Shankaracharya then prostrates before him as before a Guru and breaks out into five verses known as *Manisha Panchakam*. He reiterates his Advaita philosophy, but in his very first verse he says that a person who knows the Supreme, whether he is a *Chandala* or a twice-born, is a Guru for him (*Chandalostu sa tu dvijostu gururityeṣha manisha mama*).<sup>14</sup> Ramanujacharya who came in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, defied caste even more powerfully. He is reported to have taken into his fold several persons from the low castes and even untouchables, and looked upon caste distinctions with contempt (Seshadri 1996). Madhvacharya (13th Century) in his *Brahmasutra-bhashya* declares: “Even the low born [untouchables] have the right to the name and knowledge of God if they are devoted to him”.<sup>15</sup>

*Tirukkural*, an ancient text venerated by Tamils as Tamil Veda, authored by Tiruvalluvar, says: “Let him who thinks inequity be warned that ruin awaits him” (116<sup>th</sup> aphorism). Again, ‘All men are born alike; the differences are due to differences in what they do’ (972<sup>nd</sup> aphorism). (Rajagopalachari 1965; Sundaram 1990).

It is for these reasons that K M Sen observes: “when an orthodox Hindu suggests that the caste system, as we know it, is an integral part of Hinduism, he is ignoring a substantial part of India’s religious literature” (Sen 2005: 20). He clinches the issue by quoting from the *Bhavisya Purana* (*Brahma Parva*, 41, 45): “Since members of all the four castes are children of God, they all belong to the same caste. All human beings have the same Father, and children of the same Father cannot have different castes” (Ibid: 21).

There is an entire Upanishad, named *Vajrasuchika*, devoted to an attack on caste system based on birth. The name of the Upanishad can be translated as ‘Diamond Needle’ which pierces the hard caste system. The Upanishad is in prose and small in size, having only nine short paragraphs. It is included as the last Upanishad in *The Principal Upanishads* (Radhakrishnan 1994: 935-8). The following summary account is based on it. The Upanishad is argumentative in style and begins with a few questions (in second para): ‘Who is verily, the *Brahmana* (Brahmin)? Is he the individual soul (*Jiva*)? Is he the body? Is he the class based on birth (*jati*)? Is he the knowledge? Is he the deeds (*Karma*)? Is he the performer of rites?’ Then it answers the questions one by one. A Brahmin cannot be the individual soul, since soul is the same in previous births. He cannot be the body because the body consists of physical elements, which are common to all human beings. He cannot be determined by birth, because many sages attained high rank irrespective of birth. He cannot also be determined by knowledge, as there were many Kshatriyas and others who too attained highest knowledge and wisdom, and knowledge

has not been an exclusive feature of Brahmins. Deeds also cannot make a Brahmin, since all human beings can do good work. Similarly, rites and charity can also be done by all. Who then is really a Brahmin? He is the one who knows his Self like an *amalaka* fruit (gooseberry) on his palm, without caring for distinctions of birth, being devoid of infirmities, narrowness and ego, and who functions as the in-dwelling spirit of all beings. At the end, the Upanishad calls upon all to meditate on the Supreme, removing all distinctions and egoism from mind. There is no need for further proof to show that Hindu philosophy and religion are against the caste system, after reading this Upanishad.

## 6. LEGENDS AS A WEAPON AGAINST THE CASTE SYSTEM

Apart from such direct preaching discussed above, Hinduism fought casteism and untouchability by creating legends too. Such legends appealed to popular mind directly. A legend about Shankarācharya has already been presented above.

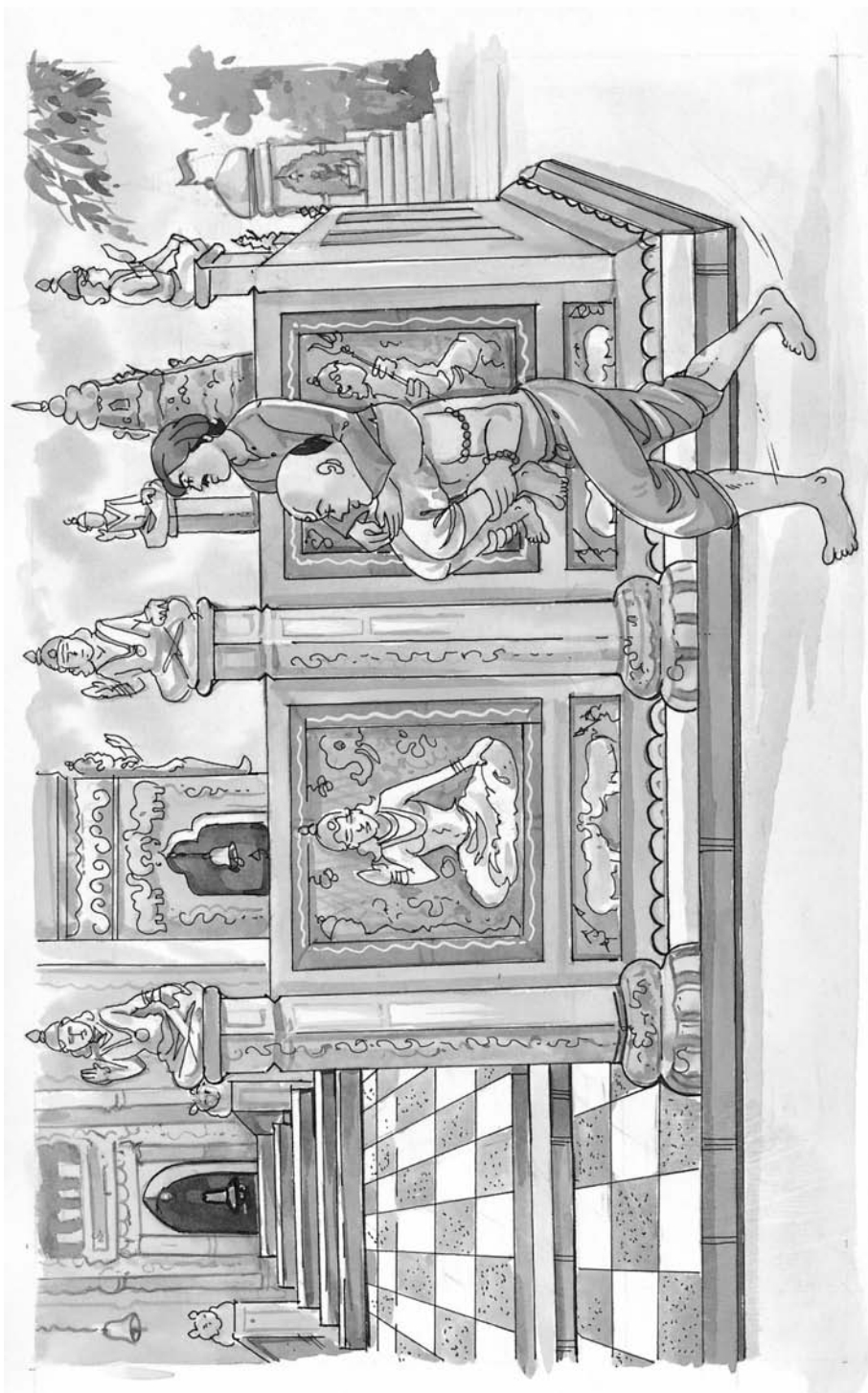
Tiruppan Alvar (10<sup>th</sup> century CE), an untouchable devotee of Lord Ranganatha, was insulted by a priest for standing in the way to the temple. The temple doors did not open to the priest, but a voice came from within the *sanctum sanctorum* said that unless the priest takes the Alvar on his shoulders and circumambulates the temple three times and brings him in the Lord's presence, the doors would not open. The priest had to obey, and thereafter, Tiruppan Alvar was hailed as a great saint.

There is an interesting legend about a devotee of Shiva, Suydari Bhoopa by name, who had to be born as a dog to atone for the sin of enquiring about the caste of another devotee of Shiva. The dog had to eat the leftovers from the plate of a Shiva Sharana, by name Shvapachayya, an untouchable Shaiva saint preceding Basavanna. Basavanna has spoken of Shvapachayya highly as a devout Sharana. The legend imparts poetic justice to Suydari Bhoopa for not forgetting about caste, though a devotee of Shiva (Javaraiah 1997: 29).

A legend about Kanakadasa (16<sup>th</sup> Century) is quite popular in Karnataka. When he was not admitted into Udupi Shri Krishna temple by the priests, the idol is said to have turned its face around so that Kanakadasa could have *darshan* (holy glimpse) of the Lord through a back window. It is still known as *Kanakana Kindi* (Kanak's window).

There are similar legends in other regions of India too. An interesting legend concerns working-class bhakti-saints of Maharashtra who came from low castes. The legend reflects poignantly the empathy felt by Lord Vitthala for His working class devotees who struggle for their livelihood and yet are deeply devoted to Him. The Lord responds by deeply identifying Himself with the devotees and participates in their work and toil, and brings them emotional relief. It is also a way of raising the status of manual labour in the eyes of particularly the upper castes for the Lord himself does this labour of love for His devotees. There is such a legend about several, but is particularly interesting in the case of Janabai, a woman saint from a Dalit caste. Chokhamela, a contemporary Dalit saint-poet, has immortalized this legend in his poems.<sup>16</sup>

There is one more legend from the Maharashtra Bhakti movement. The famous Sant Tukaram who composed thousands of *Abhangs* (devotional songs) is the central figure of this. Narrow-minded priests of Pandharpura grew jealous of Tukaram, coming from a low caste but becoming popular with



A temple priest carrying Tiruppan Alwar, an 'untouchable' saint, on shoulder and circumambulating Lord Ranganathan shrine.

his *Abhangs*. They drowned a '*Pothi*' (manuscript bundle) containing his songs in the Holy River of Chandrabhaga. They could not succeed. The river-goddess is said to have given it back into the safe custody of Tukaram.

There are similar legends about Sant Ravidas of Varanasi, born in Chamar caste regarded as untouchable but became famous due to his devotional poetry and singing. He was once invited by Queen Jhali to her home along with Brahmins. As per the caste system, he had to sit for lunch in a separate row, but just as the Brahmins raised their hand to mouth, they saw to their surprise that there was a Ravidas between every two Brahmins. The Brahmins protested and challenged the right of Ravidas to sit with them at which he peeled back the skin on his chest and showed a shining golden sacred thread inside (see Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: 14-5). Such legends should not be interpreted as attempts to 'brahminise' Sants like Ravidas or to show that anyone with distinction or talent can only be a Brahmin. On the other hand the clear message of these legends is that caste distinctions are irrational and unacceptable in the realm of God.

Interestingly, these legends cover both Shaiva and Vaishnava sects, showing that the attitude against caste was not an exceptional feature of just one sect, but covered Hinduism as a whole.

## 7. MOVEMENTS AGAINST CASTE WITHIN HINDUISM

The most prominent movement within the framework of Hinduism to fight against casteism was the Bhakti movement. Though started first in Tamil Nadu as early as in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE by Shaiva saints, it found a powerful expression against caste system when Veerashaiva Movement was led by Basavanna in Karnataka in the 12th Century. The Bhakti movements democratised, broad-based and humanised Hinduism as never before. Even if they may not have succeeded in eliminating the caste system, they brought home the important fact that caste distinctions based on birth can have no sanctity in the eyes of God. Since a false impression was created more by upper castes than by lower castes that the Vedas supported caste, several Bhakti sects declared that they rejected the authority of the Vedas, prominent among them being the Veerashaiva movement and the Kabir Panth.

The *Bhakti* movements cut across not only castes, but even religion and spread all over India. Kabir in North India, Shishunal Sharif in Karnataka, and Shirdi Sai Baba in Maharashtra were born as Muslims, but were a part of Bhakti movement and highly respected by Hindus. The movements explicitly and powerfully condemned caste system, including untouchability. Basavanna's movement in Karnataka was most aggressive against caste, and included several Dalit sharanas and sharanes as pointed out earlier. Basavanna went to the extent of getting a Brahmin disciple's daughter married to an untouchable disciple's son, causing a serious commotion. Basavanna was far ahead of his time. Since the lower castes were from the working class, he preached dignity of manual labour as an important principle of his philosophy. The Bhakti movement in Maharashtra also was very similar, drawing saint-poets from the lower caste working class, though it included Brahmins too. The movement in Maharashtra was started by an outcaste Brahmin, Sant Jnaneshwar, whose family lost caste because his father, a *Sanyasi* renounced *Sanyasa* and got married. The movement in Maharashtra too emphasised dignity of manual labour. There is thus quite a lot of evidence to show that Hinduism constantly, deliberately and consciously fought against caste system and untouchability from time to time, even before the modern age and before the influence of Western ideas.

Apart from the scattered and sporadic attacks on caste system, there were also concerted attempts to lift individual communities of untouchables as a whole and to bring them into the mainstream. These attempts started from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century itself. Two glorious examples may be taken – that of Ezhavas in Kerala and Nadars in Tamil Nadu. Both examples relate to the Pre-Independence period of the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These examples are of great interest as they involved two Dalit communities elevating their caste status entirely through self-efforts and very much within the framework of Hinduism. They have been much more successful than other efforts involving conversion to other faiths for the purpose of elevation in social status.

Shri Narayana Guru (1854-1928) was the chief force behind elevating the social status of Ezhavas, who is venerated by them as well as by others. He gave three slogans to his followers: “One caste, one religion, and one God for man”. “Ask not, say not, think not caste”. “Whatever be the religion, let man improve himself”. Though a religious leader, his religion was not sectarian and emphasized that all human beings are equal before God. He wanted to totally remove all caste consciousness. When he saw that the caste Hindus did not permit the entry of Ezhavas and other Dalits into temples, he first started building new temples for them into which non-Dalits too could enter. Then he started Vedic schools where Dalit priests could be trained both in rituals and the philosophy of Hinduism. Next, he encouraged general and secular education for all, by starting schools and colleges. His initial temple building programme was only to mobilise his community, but his later emphasis was more on general education so that all Ezhavas and other Dalits could get properly educated and seek good opportunities. He also started credit co-operative societies so that the dependence of Dalits on higher castes was avoided. Thus, the Guru sought all-round development of Dalits. Like Gandhiji, he also tried to change the attitudes of upper castes. He did not preach hatred of upper castes to his followers, as he did not want a rift between them. An example of his success in this regard is the support he received from the progressive sections of upper castes, which resulted in a *Savarna* procession in support of Dalits’ entry into the famous Vaikom temple during the Temple Entry Satyagraha started by Gandhiji. Narayana Guru and Gandhiji worked together in the Temple Entry Movement. Narayana Guru did not confine himself only to his own community of Ezhavas. There were other communities among untouchables in Kerala, which were even lower in social status than Ezhavas. The Guru involved them too in his attempts to elevate the status of all dalits.<sup>17</sup>

Though Nadars in Tamil Nadu did not seem to have had the advantage of a charismatic and religious leader like Narayana Guru, they also did equally well under their secular leaders. The elevation of caste status came mainly through the spread of education and skills, mutual self-help by making credit available for starting enterprises, by helping caste members to get jobs by functioning as an informal employment exchange and also through Sanskritisation (Hardgrave 1969; Rudolph and Rudolph 1969). The members of both these communities – Ezhavas and Nadars are now highly literate and occupy important positions. Nadars have also emerged economically strong, creating a niche for themselves in industry and commerce.

The example of Ezhavas and Nadars offers important lessons for Dalits. It is not enough to build their own organisation merely to spread awareness, make demands and protest against injustice, but it is also equally necessary to launch constructive programmes for the welfare of the community. The tendency to rely mainly on making demands on the government to promote social welfare among Dalits

is not enough. By its very nature, government bureaucracy has limitations in promoting social welfare and social mobility. The communities' own efforts at constructive programmes are also necessary. These programmes may be to induce Dalit parents to send their children to schools, to help them in getting training and skills for jobs outside the traditional vocations, to provide guidance and help to those who wish to migrate from villages to towns and cities in getting jobs and houses, preventing addiction to liquor and so on. The community organisations of both Nadars and Ezhavas took care of the members of their communities like parents. Once Dalit organizations take up constructive programmes, help will come to them in a big way from private sources too like voluntary and social service organizations and philanthropic associations.

The successful example of Ezhavas and Nadars also has shown how irrelevant are conversions to other faiths to solve Dalit problem. Another important lesson, particularly from Shri Narayana Guru, is that his movement was not adversarial in character. He broke through upper caste resistance to social change, without making enemies of them. He could even enlist their co-operation and support. He was Gandhian in his approach. In Indian ethos, conciliation seems to have been far more successful in effecting change than confrontation.

A difference between Ezhava and Nadar movements, however, is that the former was not concentrated only on one community, but aimed at reaching all untouchables and lower castes which suffered social deprivation. It was a serious attempt to hit out at ritual hierarchy, which existed among Dalits themselves. Success in this task, however, was perhaps not as great as in elevating the status of Ezhavas. Both Nadars and Ezhavas' movements however, were successful in significantly reducing social deprivation among two numerically important Dalit communities, which had also a higher level of social status than others among Dalits.

There have been more movements in modern Hinduism, which are not caste or community based and have helped to enrich the moral and spiritual life of their followers – such as those led by Ramakrishna Mission, Aurobindo, Brahmakumaris, ISKCON, Shri Satya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi. Their main significance for this chapter is that they have shown that Hinduism can very well thrive without the caste system.

## **8. HOW THEN DID CASTE SYSTEM EMERGE AND SURVIVE?**

If Hinduism as a religion and philosophy was so much against the caste system based on birth as claimed above, and even in practice, it opposed it, how then did the system emerge and survive for so long? It was simply because the system performed certain functions that were valued by the society as they provided stability and an operational framework that worked, in spite of the fact that it also involved inequity. The society simply preferred stability and a functional framework over ethical values though these values were supported and extolled by religion. It was a case of massive triumph of expedience over ethics, though it does not mean that the system had no rationale. The functions performed by the caste system had nothing to do with religion *per se*. The unfortunate part of the story is that caste identities have outlived these functions. These functions may now be enumerated and explained.

### (i) A System of Checks and Balances:

The *Varṇa* system was not just a division of labour. It also evolved as a system of checks and balances such that there was no concentration of power in any one *Varṇa* or class. It was more a system to avoid concentration of power than one meant for appropriation of economic surplus. As per the *varṇa* system, Brahmins were not supposed to seek regal power. Their duty was to seek knowledge and preserve the Vedas and carry on the Vedic tradition. They were not supposed to amass wealth and had to depend on other *Varṇas* for their sustenance. According to the *Dharmashastras*, “a *brahmana* [Brahmin] should not hanker after gifts; he may collect them only for his livelihood, a *brahmana* taking more than what is required for his maintenance incurs degradation” (Kane 1990: II-I: 531). As Dumont (1999: 66-72) says there was a clear separation of ritual status from material power indicating secularisation of kingship.

While the duty of Kshatriyas, particularly of Kings, was to maintain law and order, protect dharma and defend people, they too had no absolute power. It was their duty to consult their ministers and listen to people and meet their grievances. The Ministry consisted of representatives of all the *Varṇas*, including Shudras. Dr B R Ambedkar cites the *Shantiparva* of the *Mahabharata*, in which Bhishma advises Yudhishthira (Dharmaraja) to have four Brahmins, eight Kshatriyas, 21 Vaishyas and three Shudras as ministers to guide him in the affairs of the State (Moon 1990: VII: 112). The relatively large allocation to Vaishyas may be reflective of their then numerical majority as agriculturists, apart from their being merchants too. It is also possible that Vaishyas were the largest source of revenue for the State and hence were given greater representation. If the King was unable to uphold Dharma or protect people and their property, he could even be removed by the ministers with the support of people, according to the *Dharmashastras*. A picture of harmony and perfect alliance may not always have been obtained, but it was at least the ideal.

Another way of looking at the issue is to look upon the caste system as a way of securing balance between forces of conservatism and forces of liberalism, the brahmins representing the former and other castes representing the latter (Ashokananda 1998:18-9). A balance is required because if conservatism is given a free reign, it will make the society terribly static and rigid; it is a recipe for stagnation. On the other hand, if liberalism alone has a free reign, the society may become too dynamic, making it unstable and even vulnerable to any small crisis; it would not have any anchor. Many scholars have felt that the Hindu society could survive crisis after crisis because of the caste system. A problem with this way of looking at the issue is that not all Brahmins supported conservatism; nor were all non-Brahmins liberal. But the society as a whole certainly behaved in a way that secured a balance between conservatism and liberalism. When the situation required stability, conservatism dominated liberalism; and when the situation required adjustment and dynamism, liberalism dominated conservatism. It did not need birth-based *jatis*.

The flipside of the above arrangement was that nobody cared for the untouchables. There was no check on the upper castes in excluding and exploiting them, nor any balance between their welfare and others' welfare. The question of sharing some power with them was no issue at all, it was all left to the sense of compassion and charity of others to look after them.

### **(ii) Division of Labour - Easy acquisition of Skills and Knowledge**

Though there was significant social mobility initially, *varnas* became gradually hereditary and the jati system evolved with increasing division of labour and specialisation. It was easier for skills and knowledge to be imparted within family from father to children as there were no trade schools or polytechnics as such. Education in skills and knowledge required in hereditary occupations began quite early right at home from childhood. As families became specialised in arts and crafts, they flourished and sought even distant markets. Kane observes that “professional castes were wealthy and well organized” as seen from the *Dharmashastras* and epigraphic records. The organisations had reached such sophistication that there were larger professional associations called as *gana*, and village level associations called as *sangha* (Kane 1990: II-I: 66-7). Kane observes further that “the Shudra gradually rose in social status so far as occupation was concerned and could follow all occupations except those specially reserved for the *brahmana*, so much so that the Shudra became even kings and Manu (IV.61) had expressly to enjoin upon the *brahmanas* not to dwell in the Kingdom of a Shudra” (*Ibid*: 121). Incidentally, it also reflects on the inexplicable animus that Manu had against the Shudras.

### **(iii) Decentralised Democracy – Lobby Groups**

When the *varnas* transformed themselves into ethnic endogamous groups based on birth, they developed their own caste/jati panchayats to decide their own affairs, reducing their dependence on the King. The caste *panchayats* settled disputes within the caste in an inexpensive and prompt manner. They also imparted social stability. Kings came and went, but the society remained stable in spite of all invasions, wars and political instability. The panchayats looked after the welfare of the members of their castes in a decentralised way. The caste system provided a mechanism for decentralised democracy. Though this mechanism provided stability, it also made, at least, the medieval Hindu society more conservative. The panchayats strictly discouraged inter-caste marriages and severely punished elopement in love affairs, because inter-caste marriages had the potential of weakening caste-panchayats. The separation of caste from caste was made more rigid. The hold of caste panchayats, though weakened considerably after Independence, still continues particularly in a few regions. We still hear news reports of lovers across castes intending to marry driven to suicide. This is more common in rural India, including the so-called low castes and untouchables. Caste Panchayats invariably back parents, rather than youngsters. The continued hold of caste panchayats is ensured by continued dependence of families on members of their caste during birth, weddings and death, and excommunication by caste panchayat is still considered a matter of terrible disgrace and shame. Caste panchayats or their more modern avatar – caste lobbies – are simply the instruments to preserve caste identities, to seek concessions from or make demands on the larger society or the State.

### **(iv) Ecological Role**

There is also an ecological dimension to the caste system, brought out by Gadgil (1983) and Kavoori (2002). The caste system performed an important function of reducing competition for and avoiding over-exploitation of natural resources. Only fishermen caste could go for fishing, and their caste

panchayats evolved rules for sustainable exploitation of fisheries. Only hunters' caste could go for hunting wildlife in the forests, except the King who did it occasionally for pleasure and also to kill man-eating tigers, which intruded into villages. Only *chamar* or cobbler caste had the right to the dead animals and their skin. Caste panchayats evolved rules for restricting hunting in particular seasons, or particular animals so that wild life was protected and not driven to extinction. Certain forest areas known as sacred groves (known as *Devara Kadu* in Kannada, or *Dev-ran* in Marathi, or *Pavitra-vana* in Sanskrit) were out of bounds for any hunting or even cutting green trees. The caste system also functioned in a way so as to control the growth of population by creating barriers for marriage. After giving several illustrations, Madhav Gadgil observes:

“The caste society had thus developed two special mechanisms to regulate the exploitation of natural resources. The occupational specialisation of each caste ensured that any particular resource was primarily if not exclusively utilised by one particular caste. The intra-caste territoriality then spread the exploitation evenly over geographical regions.” (Gadgil 1983: 282).

Gadgil points out both positive and negative ways ‘of viewing this ecological steady state’:

“It may be viewed positively as a desirable state of man living in balance with nature. Alternatively, it may be viewed negatively as a state of stagnation. For, if the resources are used in a balanced fashion, there would be no pressures for cultural change and technological innovation. This is no doubt what happened and the Indian Society remained largely balanced (or stagnant!) freezing its caste system for perhaps two and half millennia between the time of Buddha when the agricultural colonisation of much of the subcontinent was complete and the beginning of the British rule. But value judgements apart, an important consequence of the Indian caste system was this attainment of ecological approximate steady state.” (*Ibid*: 282-3).

#### (v) Security of Livelihood and Employment - Safety Net

An important feature of the caste system was its localised system of production based on *jati*-wise division of labour for meeting the local needs, rather than the needs of the larger market. In most parts of India, there developed a system of making annual payments in kind or cash, as soon as harvesting was done, for services rendered by village artisans, barbers, washermen, agricultural labourers and the like. The system of payment was not based on piece-work, but involved the principle that taking care of the artisans and labourers and their basic needs was the responsibility of land owning families. Whenever there were special occasions of urgent need such as marriage, the working class families were given special help. M N Srinivas refers to different names of this system in different parts of India: ‘*Jajmani* in the North, *bara balute* in Maharashtra, *mirasi* in Madras, *adade* in Mysore. The relationship between the *jajman* and his *kamin* is unequal, since the latter is regarded as inferior’ (Srinivas 1980: 14). This institution in the past, at least, recognised the right to work and to livelihood, and in the process controlled competition. The relationship between the patron and the client extended beyond generations, and in

the traditional system at least, it was not open to a landlord to prefer a new client merely because he charged lower for the services offered. Nor could the client seek alternative employment outside his traditional patron for a higher wage – at least not when his services were needed by his patron. It was the obligation of the patron to see that the client and his family did not starve.

With the breakdown of *Jajmani* system, interdependence of castes in economic matters declined, but castes assumed the new role of serving as safety net. In the absence of an effective welfare state and non-availability of health insurance and such other institutional safeguards, joint families always served as safety nets in India. When families were poor, the caste or community provided the safety net. When somebody fell ill and could not afford the treatment, the caste mobilised the resources and took care of medical expenses. When somebody needed a job, the caste served as an employment exchange. When a girl was to be married, caste members helped in searching for a groom. Even as late as 1960s, there was an informal institution called *varanna* (weekly food) in some urban areas (at least in Karnataka) under which a poor student was fed on a particular day of the week by a caste member, covering the whole week by turn. This helped rural students in taking up higher education in urban areas. When students of a particular caste were numerous enough in a town, caste associations built hostels for their accommodation on concessional rates or were even free for poor students. Even now castes continue to be the basis for mobilising resources and creating of funds for education, medical treatment of the poor, and care for the aged poor. A serious limitation of the caste-based social welfare is the economic capacity of the caste. While richer castes are relatively effective, the poorer ones are not.

#### **(vi) Coping with Uncertainty and Scarcity of Labour Supply**

Last, but not least, role of the caste system was its help in coping with uncertainty and scarcity of labour supply. As the Hindu civilisation was advancing in economic terms, more and more of forests were being brought under the plough and even irrigation systems were being developed. Rearing cattle was encouraged, as cattle were a major form of wealth. All this needed assured and regular supply of labour. According to Lal (1988: I), the caste-system was ‘an ingenious second-best method of dealing with uncertainty of labour supply in the ecological and political environment that faced the ancient Hindu monarchies in the Indo-Gangetic plains’. According to him, the caste system was only an adaptation to scarcity of labour in an agricultural economy which needed labour availability on a regular basis. From the point of view of labourers, the system also assured some security of livelihood and employment particularly during periods of crisis such as drought when the demand for labour fell suddenly. The system would not have survived so long if it had met the need of only employers of labour, and not of labourers as well.

The caste system was certainly not an ideal one. All the shortcomings resulting from patron-client relationship, curbing competition and subsistence-oriented production followed from the system. In conditions of frequent droughts and high political instability since the medieval age, what mattered most was food security, more than growth. Yet, even under this system, arts and crafts flourished which was made possible by specialisation and division of labour, especially under political patronage, as happened, for example, under the Vijayanagara and Mughal emperors. It was no wonder that caste

system survived under such security. Neither the Muslim rulers nor the British interfered with the system. Many Hindus may have been converted, but the caste system was imbibed into the new religions of Islam and Christianity in India, since the jajmani system and other functions of caste system had nothing to do with religion.

Whatever may have been the earlier justification for the caste system, there was no case for inequality in social status and inequality before law (as for example envisaged in the *Manusmṛti*). There was absolutely no need for being inhuman with particularly the untouchables. The caste system may have served some purpose, but the way the class-stratification normal in all societies operated in India through the caste system, it had disastrous consequences. As Sukhdev Thorat and Narendra Kumar have pointed out in their Introduction to their edition of selected writings of Dr B R Ambedkar, the caste system separated learning and intelligence from physical work, and created contempt for manual labour. Other consequences, as pointed out by them, are ‘denial of equal rights, exclusion, discrimination and subordination of one caste by another’. They add: “And if any group suffers more than the other, it is the Untouchables who suffer not only from denial of property rights but also from human dignity” (Thorat and Kumar 2008:10). It is only a small consolation that many voices were raised against this discrimination within Hinduism itself. This is because, the problem of discrimination particularly against the former untouchables continues even now, in spite of the overall decline (if not a complete elimination) of the ritual significance and purity rules of the caste system.

## 9. JUSTIFICATION LOST, BUT CASTES CONTINUE – A PARADOX

A posthumously published paper by Srinivas (2003) carries the assertive title – ‘An obituary on caste as a system’. What he meant is that caste as a system implying localised production base under a patron-client type feudal system, hierarchy, occupational specialisation by castes, strict rules of purity and pollution, restrictions on inter-caste dining and marriages, has expired, but caste identities based on birth remain and show no sign of going. Though the reservation policy may appear to help caste consciousness to survive and even strengthen, it has also the long-term potential of reducing it because of its effect on bringing the deprived communities into the mainstream. Though castes continue, subordination of one caste by another and humiliation of a member of one caste by a member of another on the basis of caste are, no longer tolerated.

On the other hand, we have recent research by scholars such as Ashwini Deshpande (2011) and others which shows that castes have by no means lost their relevance in the Indian society and economy. Upward occupational mobility of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and lower castes and classes is still lower in India than in other developing countries, and that economic and even social discrimination against them continues to be fairly significant. What is more, mere increase in per capita GDP of the states or the country as a whole has not led to significant improvement in their condition. Industrialisation, urbanisation, modern mass transport, a significant increase in the habit of eating outside and such other modern factors have no doubt reduced the earlier rigour of the system and its rules of purity and pollution, and open forms of social discrimination at least in urban areas, but subtle forms of discrimination as in recruitment and promotions in the private sector still continue. Atrocities on Dalits still continue in rural areas, although they get more media coverage now than earlier.

It is not a question of who, between the two, Srinivas or Deshpande, is right. Paradoxically, both may well be right. The caste system has lost whatever justification it had in terms of its functions because these functions are no longer relevant. The very social and economic edifice of the system has collapsed. The collapse of the entire system thus is inevitable. But a social institution like caste is not a mere building; it may continue in spite of its justification being lost, because of sheer inertia and resistance to change and also because there are vested interests which have a stake in the continuation of the system. These interests are fighting a losing battle to retain the system and to delay the historically inevitable collapse of the system. Several factors have been contributing to the collapse of the system - ethical, political, social, economic and technological.

A major factor is the emergence of the modern state as a much stronger, much more powerful and pervasive institution than it ever was with its different wings – the Executive, Judiciary and Legislature, able to exercise powers on all. Hinduism has accepted the emergence of the modern state to enact its own laws, including personal laws, and the sphere of *dharmic* laws regulating the conduct of people in day-to-day life is almost gone for good. There is thus no need for either *Dharmashastras* which served as *de facto* legislation in *dharmic* matters, nor for caste panchayats which acted both as the executive and the judiciary. To the extent that their role still continues, it is much less powerful and is superseded by the role of the state. For the same reason, the role of the *varna* system in providing a system of checks and balances also has vanished. The legally enacted constitution, accepted by all, provides now a system of checks and balances to maintain equilibrium and stability.

Since in the bargain, decentralised democracy of the caste system has broken down, a new type of decentralised democracy, which is village based, has taken its place. It does not need any authentication by religion, but is backed by the constitution and state power, which is more important. For some time, the dominant castes (which are not the same as ritually upper castes) may try to hijack the village panchayats, and even the state governments, but it is a losing battle. The system of reservation for backward castes and untouchables and also for women will gradually but definitely reduce the role of dominant castes. The secular and inclusive forces will prevail over the caste forces before long, even if they have not already done so in some areas. The political consensus against caste system and the power of adult franchise in democracy will ensure the success of democratic and secular forces and defeat caste forces.

The next factor, which worked against the caste system, was the rise of modern secular education. Education need not be and is not family-based though family education will supplement outside education. It is in schools and colleges including trade schools, professional colleges and polytechnics that skills and education are provided. Thus, the need for hereditary occupation is now redundant, and social mobility will be easier.

The need for hereditary principle in occupation is now redundant also because of the rise of new occupations and the extinction of several old occupations. The dynamics of the growth of diversity of occupations is such that the hereditary principle looks totally outdated and nonsensical. The information age has thrown up an opening for new occupations, which cannot be classified into the sphere of the four traditional *varnas*. It is wrong to interpret that all the intellectual tasks were assigned exclusively to Brahmins in the traditional *varna* system. Brahmins had no monopoly of intellect even if they had

some monopoly to study the Vedas and officiate as priests. Even the monopoly as priests has been broken, with different jatis arranging their own priests from outside the caste of Brahmins and evolving their own rituals. The institutions started by Shri Narayana Guru and Mata Amritanandamayi have been training priests from all castes including women. The exclusive role of Brahmins in conducting rituals and ceremonies is highly exaggerated. In any case, it could not have been exclusively intellectual, because every task – regal, warfare, agriculture, arts and crafts required the role of intellect. This is even more so in the modern age, particularly the Information Age, under which every sector demands the role of intellect and information and not one sector alone. The reason why this point is elaborated is because the new intellectual tasks of the Information Age cannot be mechanically interpreted as Brahmanical. Can we say that the study and research in medicine fits into Brahmin *varna*, but practice of medicine into Shudra *varna*? How can we separate the two?

Just as new professions and occupations emerged, quite a few old occupations have vanished. Some of them have moved right into homes and do not any longer require specialised occupations and caste groups, thanks mainly to technological change. The technology of toilets has undergone a revolutionary change during the last 50 years even in rural areas, making it totally unnecessary to handle human waste and carry it on head as in the past. Toilets have moved inside the homes now, and family members themselves clean them. Several tasks which were considered as dirty and polluting need not be done now directly by hand, and can be handled by tools and machines. It is now possible to be clean and hygienic even while handling the so-called dirty tasks. Thus, any rationale for separate castes for doing dirty jobs and for isolating them is now totally lost.

Alvin Toffler in his book, *The Third Wave*, has pointed out to the recent phenomenon of what he calls the ‘prosuming’ or ‘prosumer’, occasioned by the blurring line between producing and consuming. This refers to ‘Do-it-yourself’ kits and self-service, which is becoming more popular. From furniture pieces to cars and computers, several things are supplied with step-by-step instructions for assembling them at homes. This has reduced the cost to producer and the price to consumers. What is more, the consumer enjoys the thrill of doing it oneself, of creating something (Toffler 1980: 282-305). This phenomenon is not limited to commodities and has invaded services too. Thus, we do the daily shave ourselves with safety razor, taking over a part of the task of barber. Many of us, with or without washing machines, wash our clothes ourselves and iron them too. The social significance of all this is that the old wall of distinction between artisans and arm-chair consumer is falling apart. The old division of labour separating manual tasks from the intellectual is losing its meaning.

M N Srinivas in his ‘Obituary on Caste’ refers to a combination of new forces in operation, responsible for weakening the caste system. These forces have led to the breakdown of the caste-based mode of social production in turn leading to the collapse of the caste system. The new forces are: breakdown of the *jajmani* system, emergence of the larger market and decline of the village based subsistence production, urbanisation, and above all the rise of democracy based on adult franchise. Along with these, there is widespread acceptance of new values – equality, self-respect, and human dignity. He cites several instances of how village artisan based production has given place to factory production – mass produced edible oil replacing the oil-seed pressing caste, factory produced plastic and aluminum vessels replacing the village potter caste, urban textiles replacing the village weaver

and so on. Srinivas observes significantly: “The moral is that ideological attacks on hierarchy and brahmanical claims to supremacy failed to create an egalitarian social order since at the local level the production of basic needs was intrinsically bound up with jati” (Srinivas 2003: 458). Now, there is no more economic basis or justification for the caste system.

Last, the caste system has also lost its ecological role and relevance, as observed by Madhav Gadgil himself in the same paper in which he pointed out this role of the caste system. The resources under the control of local communities have been depleted significantly, thanks to their take over by the state and their exploitation by the larger market forces. “Thus, alienated from their ecological resource base which was depleting rapidly, the Indian caste society was rudely thrown out of the ecological steady state maintained perhaps for more than a hundred generations” (Gadgil 1983: 283). The recent attempts at regeneration of local natural resources through local committees under schemes like Joint Forest Management, are not based on caste but are secular. Moreover, with the breakdown of social base of production, it is doubtful if the caste-based occupations will ever get a new lease of life.

Srinivas is not the only scholar to have observed the collapse of the edifice of the caste system. Seth (1999) has observed how the process of ‘secularisation of caste has detached caste from the ritual status hierarchy on the one hand, and has imparted it a character of the power-group functioning in the competitive democratic politics on the other’ (*Ibid*: 2504). Anirudh Krishna (2003) goes even further. On the basis of his extensive field work in North Indian villages (in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) for two years since 1997, he finds that not only traditional patron-client relations have broken down, the leadership of traditional caste leaders playing politics also has in many instances collapsed, giving rise to new leadership (*naye neta*) which is not based on caste, but on actual performance in giving benefits of development to the villages. He observes significantly that even in political organisation, other alliances have superceded caste, and ‘caste is no longer very important in these villages’ (*Ibid*: 1174).

In spite of the collapse of the justification for caste as a system and of its hierarchical and ritual significance, the organisational structure of Hindu society (and also of non-Hindu societies in South Asia) continues to be broadly on caste lines. The decrepit structure is propped up by two sets of institutions – caste panchayats and caste *Mathas*. These two sets of institutions are the hard core of orthodoxy, and they have a stake in the continuation of castes. They ignore their stake in the continuation of Hinduism which they take for granted. However, their hold, particularly of the former, is loosening and is being challenged by an increasing number of youngsters marrying outside their sub-castes and even outside castes in urban areas. But in rural areas caste identities and rivalries still play their role. This role comes into prominence in electoral politics, and politicians do not fight shy of playing upon caste consciousness and using the caste panchayats and even caste-based *Mathas*. To be fair to these *Mathas*, however, they are increasingly open to other castes in matters like education, providing health care and social work, though their financial base consists of their respective castes.

The most potent ‘weapon’ against caste discrimination is to empower the lower castes, through eliminating their poverty and other forms of deprivation, providing proper social security including food security, improving education levels and skills, increasing their freedom of choice in job and business opportunities, providing speedy justice in cases of atrocities based on caste hatred particularly

against SCs, urbanization, and taking similar other steps. Continuation of the SCs, STs and some of the backward castes in a state of extreme poverty is a major hurdle in eradicating caste system and caste consciousness. Unfortunately, our fight against poverty, disease and illiteracy has been far from decisive, thanks to incompetent and corrupt governance.

It is evident from the above discussion that the emergence as well as survival of the caste system had nothing to do with Hinduism as a religion. The caste system was purely a social phenomenon. The collapse of the caste system would pose no threat to the continuation and survival of Hinduism. Hinduism has been thriving with renewed vigour, thanks to such leaders as, Shri Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi and Sri Sri Ravishankar, and institutions like Ramakrishna Maths, Brahmakumaris and ISKCON that function on entirely non-caste basis. Also, important festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Dasara are no longer celebrated within the confines of homes. Their public celebration on neighbourhood – rather than on caste-basis is another testimony to non-caste character of modern Hinduism. Take also pilgrimages to famous shrines like Shabari-male in the south to Amarnath in the north, where various castes or jatis mingle without any consciousness of their ethnicity or jati. Hinduism does not need caste. This is because caste is not intrinsic to basic principles and tenets of Hinduism as enshrined in Hindu sacred scriptures. Hinduism itself has fought and is still fighting against casteism in a significant way. If caste system were intrinsic to Hinduism, Shri Narayana Guru, Mata Amritanandamayi and such others could not have worked within the framework of Hinduism.

## 10. GANDHIJI'S VIEWS

Our discussion on the caste problem would be incomplete without commenting on Gandhiji's views on it. He said: "The caste system as it exists today in Hinduism is an anachronism. It is one of those ugly things, which will certainly hinder the growth of true religion. It must go if both Hinduism and India are to live and grow." (CWMG 1971: Vol.79: 384). He deplored inequality in the caste system, the harsh restraints imposed on lower castes, and the privileges cornered by the higher castes. He believed this is what brought down the whole social system. However, in his earlier writings (1921 to 1927), he had accepted not only the original *varna* system but also the hereditary principle. Unwittingly, Gandhiji harmed his own cause by accepting the hereditary principle, or birth-based caste occupation, though he must have been well aware that the hereditary principle had broken down long back particularly in the case of upper castes, and was confined more to lower castes. Unwittingly, because, he was not opposed to elevating the status of lower castes; on the contrary, their uplift was his utmost priority. But in his early days he failed to appreciate the connection between elevating their social status and freedom necessary to break out of traditional occupations and move to new jobs. He was afraid that competition could result in unemployment. But he believed in according the same status to a scavenger as to a doctor or engineer in his ideal social system, which ensured job security. Gandhiji also accorded dignity to manual labour and wanted that everybody should be employed, and none should face unemployment. He would also respect a person only on the basis of his/her character and not birth. He believed in oneness of humanity, and in the dignity of all as human beings. It was in this context that he accepted *varna* but rejected unequal caste system. But he was wrong in thinking that according to

Hinduism, *varṇa* system had to be based on birth. The *Gita* itself advised us to follow our aptitude, our nature in deciding our work. Gandhiji perhaps overlooked the fact that freedom is necessary in an iniquitous actual world where different occupations carry different levels of pay and status, and that social mobility was a key to social justice and providing equal opportunities. Gandhiji, however, realised the inconsistency between caste system and Hinduism in his later writings and declared the caste system as an anachronism and that it was necessary for Hinduism to reject it, as the quotation above states. But Gandhiji's earlier acceptance of *varṇa* system (though as distinct from unequal caste system) created misunderstanding between him and Dr B R Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar thought that Gandhiji was ambivalent and even hypocritical about caste, which was unfair. In contrast to Gandhiji, Shri Narayana Guru rejected caste system – even the *varṇa* system - totally. However, Gandhiji also came close to the Guru in declaring that there is only one *varṇa* now – that of Shudras, since all have to live by their labour and are morally entitled to only simple maintenance (*Ibid*: Vol.54: 25). The Guru was more realistic without being less idealistic, and recognised explicitly both in principle and practice the importance of encouraging social mobility to end casteism.

Gandhiji, however, was forthright and consistent throughout in condemning and completely rejecting untouchability. He warned: “If untouchability is not removed root and branch, Hinduism is bound to perish, for no religion can nurture itself on the degradation of its votaries.”(*Ibid*: Vol.56: 194). Again and again he said: “... If there is the slightest vestige of untouchability left we should purge ourselves of it. It is my firm belief that if Hinduism is to survive, untouchability must go” (*Ibid*: Vol.79: 298). Out of his love and regard for the untouchables and as a token of his rejection of the practice of untouchability, he named them as Harijans – God's people. He firmly believed that untouchability was totally inconsistent with Hinduism, and declared that if untouchability were a part of Hinduism, he would not hesitate to reject Hinduism itself, and even rebel against it.

He followed up his rejection of untouchability by devoting himself to the uplift of Harijans, by taking steps to educate them, giving relief in times of distress, training them in skills, actively discouraging addiction to liquor which brought ruin to poor families, and, of course, by breaking all ritual and other social barriers on mingling with them. He took the lead in the famous Vaikom Satyagraha in Kerala to permit entry of Harijans to the temple there, and also in other struggles in providing them equal access to temples elsewhere, to schools, to drinking water and other facilities. He would not even attend weddings, unless one of the partners in the wedding was a Harijan (or Dalit). He was so strict in observing this rule that he refused to attend the wedding of Mahadev Desai's son on this ground, though Desai was very close to him. He did not mind taking the risk of facing a withdrawal of financial support, when he took a family of Harijans in to his Sabarmati Ashram. His friend, a mill owner of Ahmedabad, had to come to his rescue and financially saved the Ashram (Bathla 2009:149). But Gandhiji insisted on continuing to welcome Harijan inmates. In his Ashrams, there was no scope for caste rules in the allocation of work. All inmates including Gandhi himself had to do all types of work by turn, including the work of sweeping the premises and cleaning the toilets. He believed in changing the heart of upper castes, sensitising them to the injustice done to Harijans, and thereby ending

the system, as much as in encouraging the latter to uplift themselves. However, Gandhiji's approach to Harijan uplift, has been criticized by some as patronising on the ground that the management of his institutions for Harijan uplift was by upper castes without involving untouchables themselves in it. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to doubt Gandhiji's sincerity in the uplift of untouchables and in totally eradicating untouchability in India.

## 11. DID THE CASTE SYSTEM HELP ESTABLISH THE MUSLIM RULE?

In his provocative but insightful book, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, Koenraad Elst has, *inter alia*, raised the question of whether the caste system in India played an important role in establishing the Muslim Rule. He has answered it too, convincingly and with logical rigour and documentary proof (Elst 2001: 376-425). Elst points out that a few social reformers in their zeal to impress on the popular mind the necessity to eradicate caste system from Indian society, expressed the view that it was because of this system and the consequent disunity in India that it succumbed to Muslim invasions and rule. He refers to Swami Shraddhananda of Arya Samaj and Radical Humanist M.N. Roy as having given vent to such a view. Elst asserts that this view has no historical validity and by holding such a view the real factors behind India coming under Muslim rule get obscured. It is not Elst's intention to support the caste system, but truth had to be told. There is no need, according to him, to create a myth, a historical falsehood of such magnitude to oppose the caste system.

Elst argues, social inequity was not a characteristic of the Hindu Society alone. Europe gave tough resistance to Muslim invasions for nearly a century though it had a feudal system, which was as bad as the caste system if not worse. In the eighth century, both France and Spain had almost the same social order, yet Spain succumbed to Muslims but not France. Even within India, Elst argues that before Mohammad Ghori's decisive victory in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century CE, Hindu kings repulsed Muslim attacks several times. Even where they were defeated, they had given tough resistance. However, there was caste system in India before the 12<sup>th</sup> Century too.

Elst asks further, if caste system was the main factor behind Muslim victory, how was it that several countries like Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, and Central Asian nations were easily run over by Islam, with no trace of pre-Islamic culture left, while in India several centuries of Islamic rule could not blot out Hinduism, its religion and culture. The former countries apparently had no caste system. And in India, in spite of the caste system, Muslims remained a minority and Hindus remained a majority. To quote Elst: 'It is simply not true that the caste-ridden Hindu society was less capable of putting up defense' (*Ibid*: 393).

If the view about caste system being the main cause for Hindus succumbing to Muslim invasions suggests that the lower castes of Hindus were not serious in fighting Muslims, Elst shows it to be historically quite wrong. He points out that, on the other hand, the lower castes also gave a very tough resistance to Muslims and some of them attained quite a prominence as kings in the process. They did not have an inferiority complex as Shudras. Elst quotes an inscription of a Shudra king, Singaya Nayaka (1368 CE):

“The castes, viz, Brahmanas and the next [Kshatriyas and Vaishyas], were produced from the face, the arms and the thighs of the Lord; and for their support was born the fourth caste [the Shudras] from his feet. That the latter is purer than the former [three] is self evident; for this caste was born along with the river Ganga [which also sprang from his feet], the purifier of the worlds. The members of this caste are eagerly attentive to their duties, not wicked, pure minded, and are devoid of passion and other such blemishes; they are able to bear all the burden of the earth by helping those born in the higher caste” (*Ibid*: 403).

Elst also refers to another inscription, narrating how Singaya Nayaka’s relative, Kapaya Nayak, ‘rescued the Andhra country from the ravages of the Mohammadans’ (*Ibid*: 403).

Elst’s final nail on the coffin of the theory of Hindu caste system being the cause for Muslim success is that the Muslim society itself was not free from the caste system, slavery and social inequity. The main reason for Muslim success and the defeat of Hindu kings, according to Elst, was the utter neglect of the science and strategy of warfare by the latter, and also indifference to updating armaments. Hindu cavalry did not even have stirrups according to him, which the Muslim invaders had and used with effective advantage over the Hindu armies.

A L Basham also has rejected the theory that the Hindus lost to Muslims because of their religion. He has shown that Indian Muslims once settled here, were equally unsuccessful in driving away new Muslim invaders from the North-West. The real reason, according to Basham, was that the Indian armies were less mobile and more cumbersome, archaic in their equipment and outmoded in their strategy. The Indian armies also had a fatal fascination for elephants, which were unpredictable in war. Another important factor was the failure to recognise the threat from the North West and be prepared for that. On the contrary, they were more obsessed with neighbouring kings. When, however, they did perceive this threat from the north-west, they were more successful in countering foreign invasions as happened in the case of Chandragupta Maurya (Basham 1975: 54-8).

This section should not be misinterpreted as a defence of the caste system. If at all, it indicates that the caste system was not so suffocating as to be very relevant in determining the destiny of the country. The system did, however, adversely affect Hinduism and the Hindu society. Because of the impingements of the caste system, many among particularly the lower castes, found hope in leaving the Hindu society and converting to other religions. Some of the people from higher castes also may have converted first to Islam and later to Christianity for two reasons: one, they were perhaps disgusted with the dominance of superstitions and ritualism in Hindu society; two, they could see more prestige and better career prospects for themselves by accepting the religion of the rulers.

## 12. AGGRAVATION OF CASTE INEQUALITY DURING BRITISH RULE

There is evidence to show that economic and social disparity between castes grew sharply during the British Rule. This comes out clearly from Dharampal’s research based on a painstaking study of many village documents gathered from several parts of the country, surveys carried out during the British rule, and observation and records of British administrators, travellers and others.

The increase in revenue assessment, often up to half of gross agricultural produce, by the British, broke the back of the peasantry and considerably reduced their capacity to pay wages to agricultural labour, in several parts of the country like Bengal and Madras Presidency (Dharampal 1987:10). Real wage rates (at constant prices) declined by more than half within 50 to 100 years of the British rule (*ibid*: 27). This affected the buying power of the poorer sections of the people considerably, in addition to reducing their economic and social status. The significant enhancement of revenue assessment during the British rule had also another adverse impact. Earlier to the British rule, ‘a fairly large proportion of [agricultural] production went towards the maintenance of the social infrastructure and its small and great institutions’ (*ibid*: 25), as a result indigenous infrastructure as well as institutions languished. The inundation of cheaper British manufactured goods in the Indian market, particularly textiles, pushed many artisans to starvation, not to speak of the decline in their social and economic status. Creation of Zamindari and other such feudal institutions under which Indian agriculture was forced by the British, also created a class of peasantry which was vulnerable and extremely dependent for their survival and emergency needs on their feudal lords. Social and economic inequality in India thus aggravated as never before, which took place in a social structure marked by caste divisions.

Dharampal observes that on the eve of the British rule, upper castes may have been consuming different kinds of foodgrains (like rice) than the ones consumed by the so-called lower castes, but the total quantity of food-grains consumed was much the same (*ibid*: 28). Quoting a traveller’s account, even the ordinary labourer in places like Agra ate khichri (rice and pulses boiled together) with butter daily (*ibid*: 12). The living standards were so similar between classes, that even a perceptive British officer found it difficult to distinguish a noble from his servants (*Ibid*: 18). The disparity in consumption standards between castes aggravated sharply thereafter as a result of the British rule.

Dharampal shows that this was so even in education. Contrary to British opinion and popular impression created by them, the standards as well as the spread of indigenous education system in India were quite good both among Hindus and Muslims, and compared more than favourably with the education system in Europe (Dharampal 1983). It may look surprising but is true that the spread of education even among the so called Shudras and ‘other castes’ (other than upper castes and Shudras) among Hindus on the eve of British rule was more equitable. Gandhiji observed in 1931 at Chatham House in London, “India today [1931] is much more illiterate than it was before a fifty or hundred years ago”. Dharampal’s research and also the work of scholars like Daulat Ram Gupta and K T Shah strongly supported Gandhiji’s observation above (Dharampal 1983). British scholars themselves, like G.L. Prendergast, Thomas Munro and G.W. Leitner observed that almost every village in India had at least one school, and major villages had more (*ibid*). William Adam’s report in 1835-38 for Bengal Presidency estimated the existence of 100,000 indigenous elementary schools in Bengal Presidency alone at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Adam estimated that there was one village school to every 400 persons or every 73 children of school going age. This compared favourably with any country in the world (Panikkar 1995: 50). Panikkar also observes that these schools – *Pathashalas* as also *Madarasas* – did not cater exclusively to affluent sections or upper castes, but the children of the neighbourhood as a whole were also drawn to them (*ibid*: 49). The data gathered by Dharampal also

show that ‘Shudras’, ‘other castes’ and girls were also fairly well represented in the school system then and were not excluded (Dharampal 1983 and 1987: 29-33). The quality of education in the indigenous system was also quite good, according to Dharampal (1983).

When economic conditions deteriorated for artisans and agricultural labour due to reasons stated above, their educational and social status also suffered. A significant number of them became nomadic, going in search of work. This affected their access to education. While some castes adjusted to changed circumstances and took to western education, other castes could not do so. The former became higher and the latter lower than before in the caste hierarchy. Dharampal is clear about the relatively superior status of so-called Paraiyahs of south India and Mahars of Maharashtra till about 1800 (Dharampal 1987: 2).

Dharampal also has some observations on the state of science and technology on the eve of the British rule. The quality of steel produced indigenously was excellent, and so too the quality of other goods turned out by artisans. Hindu *vaidyas* (whom the foreign travellers referred as Brahmins) had even developed an indigenous system of small pox inoculation, which they administered without bothering about caste, class and religion. The state of health of the people at large was also fairly good. Interestingly for us, Panikkar observes that ‘a large number of Ayurvedic practitioners belonged to the lower and untouchable castes’ (Panikkar 1995:152).

British historians had created an impression that on the eve of the British rule, the Indian society had reached its lowest level and that British rule came as deliverance. This view was challenged by historians like Dharampal and K N Panikkar. Apart from the relatively satisfactory state of education and medicine noted above, there was also no evidence of any cultural decline. On the contrary, miniature painting and music showed a creative vitality and upsurge during the eighteenth century in spite of the breakdown of the Mughal Empire, as noted by Panikkar. Miniature painting thrived in Rajasthan and hill states of Punjab. Kishangarh and Bundi schools of painting grew spontaneously and innovatively, reputed for their ‘romantic beauty, careful finish and brilliant colours’. Both Sanskrit and regional Indian languages including Urdu came forth with several literary works of merit. In the world of music, especially Carnatic music, it was the period of the famous trinity – Tyagaraja (1759-1847), Muthuswamy Dikshitar (1775-1835) and Shyama Shastri (1763-1827). As Panikkar observes, “the era of the musical trinity was one of the most creative epochs in the cultural life of India” (1995: 45). Panikkar goes further: “Tipu Sultan’s efforts to acquire scientific skills from France and Jaisingh’s exchanges with European astronomers indicate that Indians were not averse to incorporation of knowledge developed in other societies’, and did not require the mediation of colonialism to do so” (*ibid*: 53).

The level of economic development in India and the standard of living of the mass of the people, were no worse than in England and Europe on the eve of the British rule. Dharampal is not the only scholar to point out these facts. Angus Maddison’s findings have already been referred to above (in Section 2 of this chapter) according to which India was not behind the world in terms of its GDP. Endemic poverty emerged in India *during* the British rule. Much before Dharampal, Dadabhai Naoroji in India and William Digby in England had shown how the British policy was responsible for creation

and aggravation of chronic poverty in India (Majumdar Vol.X Part I: 664). The publication of Naoroji's *Poverty and un-British Rule in India* in 1901 influenced generations of Indian freedom fighters and thinkers and exposed the hollowness of British claims to benevolent rule with a civilisational mission. We thus see that the miserable condition of lower castes during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was due largely to colonialism, which deprived them of the means of production and consequent loss of social status.

This chapter does not intend to gloss over the social evil of caste system, nor does it claim that there was no social inequality in India before the British rule, but it emphasises that both the origin and continuation of caste and aggravation of caste inequality had little to do with religion. The heinous features of caste like segregation and untouchability were simply instruments wielded by the propertied classes to validate and consolidate their hegemony over the exploited. These classes wielded power and shamefully used the fair name of religion to force the exploited classes into submission, and tarnish the image of religion in the bargain. The Bhakti sants called this a sham and showed religion in its true egalitarian light. But their task could not be completed till the political and economic situation changed. The most positive development in this respect has been the adoption of a secular Constitution for India assuring Fundamental Rights, equality before law, and ushering in democracy based on adult franchise at all the three important levels – Union, the States, and village Panchayats. It may appear that democracy has further consolidated caste identities. But the more significant point is that democracy has led to Dalits challenging caste hegemony in every sphere. The atrocities on Dalits, most deplorable though they are, are a result of the bold challenge thrown by Dalits against caste hierarchy and hegemony. That the Dalits should have the temerity to ask for higher wages and equal rights has infuriated the powerful land-owning classes accustomed to enjoying unquestioned higher economic and social status.

We have discussed above several developments which have weakened the caste system. Apart from these autonomous forces, state intervention has been playing a significant role. Land reforms initiated after Independence were a partial success. Though they succeeded in transferring the control over land from the upper castes of Brahmins and Vaishyas to lower castes (Shudras) and removed the upper layers of agrarian structure, they failed in transferring land to landless labour at the bottom of agrarian relations, mostly Dalits. As a result, almost all the conflicts now are between Dalits and 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) who own land, and not between Dalits and the so-called upper castes. Hinduism has nothing to do with these conflicts. Another state intervention, however, has been more successful. This is in the form of reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs both in government jobs and educational institutions. This has been a very significant and positive development, which pulled these deprived classes into the mainstream of the economy, society and polity. The shrinking of the sphere of the state as a result of privatisation, however, has amounted to pulling the rug from under the reservation chair. Privatisation has become more and more dominant both in the employment market and the education market. Education has ceased to be a social service and has become a marketable commodity. Overwhelmed by the forces of privatisation, the government

became indifferent to the need for maintaining the quality of its own educational institutions, particularly at the primary level. This hits Dalits the hardest. Without having the proper means, they are dependent on only government schools, which they can afford. Therefore, there is an urgent need not only to improve the quality of education in government schools, but also to extend the benefits of positive discrimination or reservations to the private sector too, both in respect of employment and admissions to educational institutions. The question of 'merit' cannot be seen in a narrow light. It has to be seen in terms of the need to lift an entire set of people, deprived of adequate opportunities so far, to a much higher level without which our economic development loses all meaning and merit.

We cannot, however, ignore certain contradictions and ironies in the reservation policy. In the course of implementing this policy over the last several decades for Scheduled Castes, – Tribes and OBCs, there has emerged a 'creamy layer' among them who have benefited from it, such as successful politicians, professionals and bureaucrats. This layer of people, taking advantage of the tag of SCs/STs and backwardness, corner most of the benefits of reservation, and those who are less fortunate, like the children of semi-literate and illiterate parents are simply left out. It is ironical that the very class of people who emotionally and forcefully advocate equality of opportunities, deny them to their less fortunate brothers and sisters. It is, therefore, necessary to urgently exclude the creamy layer from the benefits of reservation, both among Dalits and OBCs. There may be some difficulty in exactly identifying the creamy layer, but the injustice that results from it would be nothing in comparison to the much larger injustice caused to those who are left out under the present system.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. It is another story that both Brahmins and Shudras started accumulating wealth, some of the latter started owning bulk of the land in many villages and became, what M N Srinivas called, 'dominant castes' having dominance both in land ownership and numbers. Srinivas observes, 'A member of a higher caste often goes to a rich and powerful member of a lower caste for help and advice' (in *Collected Essays*, 2002, OUP, p.171). Though this observation was made with reference to the contemporary period, it could well have been relevant even in ancient times. The Brahmins then had to go to Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, if not the Shudras. Louis Dumont claimed that the dichotomy between ritual status and mundane power was an essential feature of the *Varna* system (quoted in *ibid.* p. 174 & 180). Srinivas observes further: "The function that is performed by the king in the *Varna* system is performed by the dominant caste in the *jati* system" (*ibid.*: 177).
2. See B R Ambedkar, 'Castes in India', published originally in 1917, included in Rodrigues (2002: 256-7).
3. See Note 1 above.
4. Cf. R S Sharma, *Shudras in Ancient India*, p.29, as cited in Arvind Sharma (2000:142).
5. See Dr B R Ambedkar's two books – *Who Were the Shudras? How They Became the Fourth Varna in Indo-Aryan Society* (1947), and *The Untouchables – Who Were They, and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948), both reprinted in Moon (ed.) (1990) Vol.7.
6. For such examples, see Arvind Sharma (2000), Ch.19 on 'Varna', pp.132-80.
7. The translation as by Dr Ambedkar, Moon (ed), (1990:VII: 22.)
8. Sharma (2000: 161-4) has identified these three verses and discussed them. The interpretation here is based on this, but goes a little further. The principle of comparative advantage attributed to the Gita here is not in Sharma's discussion. But without such interpretation, a full sense cannot be made of verse 35 in Ch.3 and verse 47 in Ch.18, both of which have the same message, with the first half of the two verses being common.
9. After quoting and translating the said verse, Sardar Panikkar observes: 'Krishna's words constitute a devastating attack on caste and not its justification. ...It is the most unequivocal repudiation of divine origin of caste based on birth, the most categorical denial of Brahmin claim to inherent superiority' (emphasis in original) (Panikkar 1961: 40-1).
10. The Sanskrit Original is '*Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya*' (*Rgveda* V.60.5). Translation and original from Pandurangi (1999: 3).
11. Original and translation from Kane (1990: II-I: 34).
12. The original of this verse taken as quoted in Kane (1990:V-II:1006) and the translation from Sharma (2000:158). Kane (1990) cites several more verses on the same theme, see esp. Vol.II, Part I, p.101.
13. As quoted by Sharma (2000:165). His source is S V Oka (1957), *The Uttara-gita with a Translation into English and Appendices*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, p.44.
14. Both the original and translation taken from Giri (2000: xiv-xviii).
15. K T Pandurangi drew my attention to this quotation.
16. See under the section on *Bhakti-marga* in the previous chapter.
17. For a more detailed account of Ezhavas' success (also known as Izhavas), see Pulapilly (1976), and Sivadas and Rao (2002).

## **Part-II**

### **DYNAMICS OF HINDUISM**

- 6. Dynamics of Hinduism–Continuity and Change**
- 7. The Ancient and Classical Phase**
- 8. Bhakti Movements**
- 9. Modern and Contemporary Phase**



# Dynamics of Hinduism– Continuity and Change

*Rtena Yavrtavrdhavyrtasya Jyotishashpati /*

*(‘Masters of Truth-Light who make the Truth grow by the Truth’)*

— *Rgveda* 1.23.5<sup>1</sup>

*“One need not despair of ever knowing the truth of one’s religion, because the fundamentals of Hinduism, as of every great religion, are unchangeable, and easily understood.”*

— M. K. Gandhi (1921)<sup>2</sup>

*“Hinduism abhors stagnation. Knowledge is limitless and so also the application of truth”.*

— M. K. Gandhi (1926)<sup>3</sup>

## 1. CANON VIS-À-VIS CHARISMA

In understanding the dynamics of Indian religions, Stietenron uses the dual concept of Canon *vis-à-vis* Charisma. Canon is an instrument of legitimisation of religion, cohesion and stability; whereas Charisma is an agent of innovation and change in religion. Every religion has a need for both – legitimisation as well as innovation, but there can be tension between the two. Hinduism seems to have been remarkably successful in resolving this tension. This is because canon itself provides for innovation, for orderly change.

Stietenron explains the concept of role of canon thus:

‘... a canon is the result of a deliberate attempt to collect, arrange and preserve the original message of a religious community, and to protect it against all corruption.

It transforms haphazard individual recollection into authoritative tradition or sacred scripture... In its contrast with the doctrines of other creeds, the canon is a continuous source of self-awareness and self-definition. It provides meaning and direction to the community as a whole and to each individual member by representing both the ultimate truth and the means of attaining it. ... Ideally a canon, once fixed, is permanent. Nothing is to be added, nothing to be taken away' (Stietencron 2001: 14-15).

The term 'canon' has to be used with abundant caution in the context of Hinduism. The scriptures of Hinduism are more like a common pool library where you pick and choose a certain book which you find useful, without insisting that all other books be destroyed or condemned, nor insisting that all the books must be read equally thoroughly to qualify for access to the library. Moreover, Hindus never had a central religious authority to check any interpolations in its scriptures. If we apply the strict test of --"... a canon, once fixed, is permanent. Nothing is to be added, nothing to be taken away", then there is no canon as such in Hinduism.

Even the *Rgveda*, which is the most ancient in all world literature, the oldest and the most sacred canon in Hinduism, grew over time from about 4000 BCE (according to Bal Gangadhar Tilak) to about 2000 BCE, with its 10th Mandala added much later. That is why it is very difficult to be certain about these dates. The verses in the *Rgveda* are arranged in accordance with deities or gods, like Agni, Indra and Varuna. They are essentially in their praise and are prayers. After the *Rgveda*, came the *Yajurveda* and the *Samaveda*, and the last *Atharva Veda*. Vedas by themselves are an enormous literature, the *Rgveda* consisting of 10 *Mandalas* (Volumes), containing 1,028 hymns, and 10,562 lines. It took about two millennia for all these to be composed and compiled systematically, beginning from about 4,000 or 3000 BCE. The four Vedas, which are collections of hymns, are called the *Samhitā* ('put together'). Of them, the *Samaveda* consists mostly of selections from the *Rgveda*, meant for chanting. Though the *Yajurveda* also contains some verses from the *Rgveda*, it has many original verses. The *Yajurveda* verses are essentially those used for religious sacrifices or *Yajnas*. By the time of the *Yajurveda*, the Vedic religion had established itself mostly in terms of sacrifices, moving away from the simple religion of the *Rgveda* of poetic prayers composed spontaneously in awe of nature, to formal ritualistic rites. However, the *Yajurveda* never replaced nor was intended to replace the *Rgveda*. The *Rgveda* always enjoyed its pre-eminence over all the other Vedas and the *Brahmanas* which were also ritualistic like the *Yajurveda*. The *Atharva Veda* is different in character, and belongs to a much later period. It marks a period when 'tribal' or 'popular' religion was absorbed into the Vedic religion. Macdonnel observes, "the *Atharva Veda* is, in the main a book of spells and incantations appealing to the demon world, and teems with notions about witchcraft current among the lower grades of the population, and derived from an immemorial antiquity".<sup>4</sup> However, an unbiased perusal of *Atharva Veda* would show this remark to be rather exaggerated, as one cannot miss refined and sophisticated ideas, emotions and prayers here. The *Atharva Veda* also contains lofty values. A verse in it (6.121.4), which sounds quite modern in tone and content, serves as an illustration contrary to Macdonnel's remark. Translated, it reads:

‘Open yourself,  
create free space;  
release the bound one  
from his bonds.  
Like a newborn child,  
freed from the womb,  
be free to move  
on every path.’

(Cited as in the *Times of India*, Bangalore, under ‘Sacred Space’, Nov. 11. 2003).

Another verse calls upon us with a full-throated voice: ‘Live your whole life!’ (*Sarvam ayur nayatu jivanaya*) (12.2.24). The Veda has a very positive attitude to life. It has also the *Prthivi Sukta* (12.1.1-63), an interesting hymn to Mother Earth with all its creatures, considered as significant from the point of view of modern environmentalism.

Though all the four Vedas are considered as the *Shruti* (‘revealed’, ‘heard’ from the Divine), the *Rgveda* not only enjoys a pre-eminence which the other Vedas do not have, as observed above; it is also more basic to the understanding of roots of Hinduism. Together, the four Vedas have an enormous 20,500 mantras or hymns.

As the Vedic religion became more and more elaborate and complex, special texts were composed known as the *Brahmanas* between 2000 and 1000 BCE. They were intended to explain the religious significance of rituals. They are also considered as part of Vedic literature, but do not have the same status as the *Samhitās*. They should not be confused with ‘brahmans’ as a caste or *varṇa*. To avoid the confusion, the latter are referred in this book as ‘brahmins’.

If *Brahmanas* emerged in the ritualistic tradition, there developed another branch from the Vedic literature – the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*, which were in meditative, philosophical and speculative direction. Both the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* also are part of *Shruti* or Vedic Literature and became the source of subsequent development of Hinduism into different philosophical schools of *Advaita*, *Vishishthadvaita* and *Dvaita*. While some of the early *Upanishads* influenced Buddhism, some of the later *Upanishads* in turn were influenced by Buddhism. The *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* were composed from 1500 BCE onwards, continuing in the post-Buddhist period too. They, particularly *Upanishads*, tried to come out of the shackles of ritualism that was developing a stronghold at that time, and represent a period of free, uninhibited, non-dogmatic philosophical thinking as well as the mystical experiences of the sages. It is said that there were as many as 108 *Upanishads*, but most of them are lost. They were not preserved with the same zeal as the *Samhitās*, but at least 19 of them are still available. The individual *Upanishads* are appended at the end of the respective Vedas. That is how the *Upanishads* are called as *Vedānta* (‘end of the Vedas’). They constitute Vedānta in another sense too – culmination of the Vedas. Philosophical thought, which is the offshoot of the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*, also became popularly known as Vedānta. Shankaracharya (Shankara) selected only ten *Upanishads* for writing his *Bhāṣya* or commentary, which became known as the principal *Upanishads*. They are listed in an easy-to-remember verse (in the order in which Shankara wrote his commentary):

“*Isha – Kena – Katha – Prashna – Munda – Mandukya – Tittiri /  
Aitareyam cha Chhandogyam Brhadaranyakam dasha //*”<sup>5</sup>

Sri Aurobindo (1981) wrote commentaries on three other Upanishads also – Shwetashwatara, Kaivalya and Nilarudra. Ancient Upanishads like Brihadaranyaka, Chhandogya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Kaushitaki and Kena are in prose (except Kena which is partly in prose), and are pre-Buddhist. The Upanishads in verses seem to have come a little later – Isha, Katha, Mundaka and Shwetashwatara, but not necessarily after the Buddha. The still later two Upanishads – Prashna and Maitrayani – are in prose, and are considered to be post-Buddhist (Radhakrishnan 1999: I: 142).

The two separate branches – ritualistic and philosophical - continued to grow separately, though there must have been interaction between the two in practice, in the sense that some people who performed yajnas (sacrifices) also took to philosophical speculation or, at least, studied the philosophical literature too. But intellectually, they seem to have continued separately. The sacrificial systems developed in the Brahmanas led to discussion and debates as to their significance and details in application. This led to what is known as the *Mimamsa* literature, or *Purva Mimamsa*, distinguished from *Uttara Mimamsa* which developed into Vedanta. The most important text in the Purva Mimamsa literature is Jaimini's *Mimamsa Sutra*s (probably written about 200 BCE, according to S. Dasgupta). It stimulated several commentaries (*Bhashyas*) and commentaries on commentaries (for example, Shabara's *bhashya* was further commented upon by several, including Kumarila, a senior contemporary of Shankara). S. Dasgupta observes: “The importance of the *Mimamsa* literature for a Hindu is indeed great. For not only are all Vedic duties to be performed according to its maxims, but even the *Smṛti* literature which regulates the daily duties, ceremonials and rituals of Hindus even to the present day, are all guided and explained by them. The legal side of the *Smṛtis* consisting of inheritance, proprietary rights, adoption etc., which guide Hindu civil life even under the British administration is explained according to the *Mimamsa* maxims” (Dasgupta 1975: I: 371). They do not attract much interest from the point of view of philosophy. It may seem surprising but is true that in the *Purva Mimamsa*, there is no concept of God; what mattered and what gave fruits and benefits are only the rites enjoined by the Vedas. In a sense, the *Purva Mimamsa* is agnostic (though orthodox), as it is silent on the question of Ishvara (Swami 1995: 385). So complete was the faith in rituals.

On the other branch, there grew the important text of *Brahmasutra*s, which is of great significance from the point of view of philosophy and is considered as the *Uttara Mimamsa*. They present a condensed version of Upanishadic thought in a very terse and concise form, which is easy to memorise. This is one of the three principal canons of ancient Hindu philosophical thought known as the *Prasthanatrayi* – the other two being the principal Upanishads and the *Bhagavadgita*. Every renowned philosopher considered it his duty to write a *Bhashya* on all the three. The authorship of the *Brahmasutra*s is attributed to Vyasa. They are also known as the *Badarayana Sutra*s, as Vyasa was known to have dwelt under a Badari tree. Divided into four chapters, the work has 555 Sutra, and is considered as the foundation of Hindu philosophy, though the work is, in turn, based on the Upanishads (*Ibid*: 203-4). The *Brahmasutra*s brought together in a logically coherent form what was spread over in many Upanishads, in a way that could be easily remembered. The *Gita* is also supposed to be the essence of the Upanishads, but

in contrast to the *Brahmasutras*, the *Gita* is placed in a dramatic setting which has a popular appeal. The language of the *Gita* is also more lucid and simple, while that of the *Brahmasutras* is quite terse. Even more than the Vedas, the foundation of philosophical Hinduism and the creeds that sprang out of it, could be said to be these *Prasthanatryi* – the Upanishads, the Brahmasutras and the Gita. No offshoots of Hinduism could ignore them even if they did not accept the Vedas.

The discontinuity which has sometimes been observed by scholars between the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita, is really superficial. The misunderstanding arose because of identifying the Vedic religion as a sacrificial religion of the Brahmanas. But this is hardly the essence of the Vedic religion, particularly of the *Rgveda*. On the contrary, it was the awe and the admiration of nature and its orderliness, that led the sages to a mystical experience of the Supreme Spirit behind everything. Satya Prakash Saraswat has explained how the mystical experience of the Vedas translated itself into the metaphysics of the Upanishads and then into the ethical principles identified in the Gita. The poetic awe of the Vedas led to an appreciation of the mystical power that created the beautiful universe. This prepared the ground for perception of the eternal and Basic Reality, which required discriminating wisdom and moral discipline. This in turn led to a more systematic presentation of ethical principles as a guidance for life, whether one is interested in mystical experience of the Beyond or not. (Saraswat 2005: 4-5). The ethics of the Gita was also by no means new, and was a continuation from the Vedas and Upanishads. Unfortunately, an identification of the Vedic religion with sacrifices continued, hiding its more important features.

Buddhism and Jainism reacted strongly against the sacrificial religion of the Brahmanas (both in the sense of texts and orthodox priests). Gautama Buddha and Mahavira were of Kshatriya origin. The Upanishads were also a reaction against the sacrificial religion, though they were still in the orthodox tradition and did not reject the Vedas explicitly for that reason. The sacrifices involved butchering animals, including oxen, occasionally in hundreds. An aversion to wanton bloodshed led both Buddhism and Jainism to emphasise *Ahimsa* or non-violence as a basic ethical value, which the *Upanishads*, the *Brahmasutras* and the *Gita* also upheld. In the meanwhile, *Nastika* schools (Agnostics /Atheists) also emerged independently (i.e., outside Buddhism and Jainism, but as part of Hindu society). They were *Lokayata* or *Charvaka* and *Sankhya*. On the one hand, the Agnostics rejected the sacrificial religion of the Vedas; on the other, they also rejected Buddhist and Jain philosophy of turning against ordinary happiness of the material world and seeking an unchangeable and ultimate state where all sorrows were supposed to be forever dissolved and infinite happiness achieved (Nirvana or Kaivalya). Unfortunately, the original texts of Charvakas are not available, because few would have seriously bothered to memorize them whole and pass them on to succeeding generations as in the case of canonical texts; only references to them are found in other philosophical works.<sup>6</sup> However, important texts have been left by the Sankhya School, the most important being Ishwar-Krishna's *Sankhyakarika*. The Sankhya thought can be traced back to the Upanishads. What Ishwara-Krishna did was to make a systematic and coherent presentation along with his own interpretation.

Another important school developed around this period, marked by Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. This school also rejects the sacrificial religion of Yajurveda and Brahmanas. Yoga, as a system, actually dates back to even the Harappan and *Rgvedic* periods, but Patanjali compiled and edited the different

yoga practices and concepts in a systematic manner. He was not the founder of Yoga as such (Dasgupta 1975:Vol.I: 229). *Yogasutras*, according to Dasgupta, were composed during the early Buddhist period, sometime around Second Century BCE (*Ibid*: 237-8). Yoga, unlike the Sankhya School, accepts God, but recognises the due importance of our body and mind, integrated with each other. While Yoga and its various *asanas* discipline both the mind and the body, help meditation and control illness, the aim is to have an experience of the ultimate unity of life and the whole universe. In the modern times, Yoga has been recognised mainly for its usefulness in reducing tension and stress, achieving relaxation, improving learning ability and work efficiency and preventing and controlling illness.

Only the four Vedas and Upanishads are accepted as the foundational canon or *Shrutis*. Though the *Brahmasutras* and the *Gita* are not considered as *Shruti*, they are nevertheless accorded a high status along with the Upanishads. The *Gita* is actually a part of the *Mahabharata* (Chapters 23-40 in the Bhishma Parva), but the rest of the *Mahabharata* does not enjoy the same status as the *Gita*. The rest of the *Mahabharata* also contains very interesting and valuable discussions on Dharma, which along with its main story and many anecdotes have guided countless generations of Indians. The *Shanti-parva* and the *Anushasana-parva* of *Mahabharata* are known for their rich ethical content. However, there are several reasons why the *Gita* emerged as the most important and popular scripture of Hinduism, though it never claimed exclusive authority. First, it presented the essence of Upanishadic philosophy and Vedic/Upanishadic ethics in a simple and lucid style, amenable to popularizing the *Sangtana-dhrama*. Secondly, the *Gita* opened the doors to the masses of people for God realisation and spiritual happiness by offering the new paths of Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga, which were accessible and affordable to the poor and rich, literate and illiterate, women and men, high castes and low-castes. A devotee did not need to conduct complex rituals, let alone an intermediary priest to conduct them. He had direct access to God. The *Gita* transcended the Vedas, giving a new symbolic meaning to the concept of sacrifice (*yajna*), rejecting animal sacrifice. It became a guide equally for ordinary persons struggling with the battle of life in the world, as for a *Sadhaka* - seeker on the spiritual path. That is what made it even more popular. In fact, it shows the potential of even ordinary persons to become *Sadhakas* in the ordinary business of life. Thirdly, the *Gita* emphasised selfless work for *Loka Sangraha* – Welfare of the World, which also indirectly helped the less fortunate in the world, as *Jana-seva* (service of people) was seen as *Janardana-seva* (service of God). Fourthly, the *Gita* is not sectarian in approach, and preaches a universal religion, and that is how it came to be accepted by the Vaishnavas as well as by the Smartas, Shaivaites, Shaktas and other sects among Hindus. Fifth, the *Gita*'s emphasis on ethical values relevant for leading day-to-day life, made it an invaluable guide for both worldly happiness and spiritual progress. Finally (well, there could be other reasons too), with 18 chapters and 700 verses, the *Gita* was handy and succinct for those interested in memorising chapter by chapter and making it a reference guide, which was easily accessible.

Dasgupta in his *A History of Indian Philosophy* holds the *Gita* to be pre-Buddhist, quoting strong reasons. He also points out that the *Brahmasutra* has referred to the *Gita* as an old sacred writing (Dasgupta 1975; Vol.2:549). According to Lannoy, and a few Western scholars, however, the *Gita* is post-Buddhist. Lannoy says that it was composed probably around the period of Ashoka (273-236 BCE), though the earliest version of the *Mahabharata* must have been completed between the seventh and

sixth century BCE (Lannoy 1971: 296-7). He thereby implies that the Gita was added to Mahabharata later. It is equally possible that the Gita was composed earlier and incorporated into the Mahabharata later. In racial or popular memory or according to tradition at least, the Gita is pre-Buddhist particularly because Kṛṣṇa is an earlier Avatar than the Buddha. There is no reference to the Buddha in the Gita directly or implicitly.

Irrespective of whether the Gita is pre-Buddhist or post-Buddhist, along with the great epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, it played an important historic role in the early post-Buddhist period, according to noted Kannada poet and author Aravind Nadakarni. The tradition of Upanishads, while it stimulated philosophical inquiry, was highly metaphysical and individualistic in approach. Buddhism imbibed the rational inquiry of the Upanishads, but emphasised organisation (*sangha*) and ethical path (*dharma*). Buddhism also tended to make people disinterested in a world declared to be full of sorrow (*dukkha*) and turn to monkhood in massive numbers. Buddhism emphasized non-violence, as the Buddha was greatly perturbed – not only by the senseless killings of hundreds of animals in the name of sacrifice or *yajnas* but also by enormous violence by man on man in mutually destructive and frequent wars at that time. He was a pacifist par excellence. However, as Buddhism became more popular and got established in the North and North-West, it made people vulnerable to attacks from outside – particularly North-West. At this juncture, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – the latter inclusive of the *Gita*, gave a philosophy to the people by which they could resist invasions and defend themselves. This philosophy not only accepted the notion of personal God who would come to the succour of His devotees, but also emphasised the duty of humans in this world (*aihika*) and to fight evil (Nadakarni 1998:22-4). It may not have effectively prevented subsequent invasions from the North-West, but made Hinduism strong and resistant. While people in the regions dominated by Buddhism, succumbed to Islam, Hindus in other regions did not give up their religion even when politically defeated and subjected to Muslim rule.

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are sacred epics, more so the former. While the *Ramayana* is considered as a *Kavya* (poetry), the *Mahabharata* is an *Itihasa* (history) (Kane 1990: I-I: 356). While the focus of the *Ramayana* is more on an individual's journey (*ayana*) to perfection under all odds, dilemmas and testing times, the *Mahabharata* depicts the struggles of a variety of humankind to find a meaning and place for themselves in the light of values they believe in – values, which differ from one set of people to another. Both epics proclaim the ultimate triumph of the good over the evil, but this triumph does not come about without a struggle. The insight of particularly the *Mahabharata* into human psychology is so deep that it has not lost its relevance even today. While the epic became as popular as the *Ramayana*, it did not claim the religious status of the latter, and retained its secular and universal appeal. In contrast, the secular and poetic character of original *Ramayana* of Valmiki eventually turned into a scripture in the hands of people. Rāma's story in whatever language it was told, acquired spiritually elevating significance. Telling Rāma's story, listening to it and even meditating on it are considered acts of high merit (*punya*) and a means of liberation. Simply reciting the name of Rāma itself is also considered to be having the same effect.

Similarly, another epic focussing on Kṛṣṇa also appeared, viz. the *Bhagavata*, which overlaps to a considerable extent with the *Mahabharata*. While the *Mahabharata* has no single hero – there could



Lord Krishna teaching the Gita to Arjuna, his friend and disciple on the battlefield. According to Gandhiji it is only an allegory for teaching ethical conduct in facing the battle of life.

be several contenders to a hero's status including its unique women characters of Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi, – the Bhagavata has only one hero, the Divine Kṛṣṇa and its primary aim is to induce and strengthen love or bhakti for Kṛṣṇa among the mass of people. It also contains philosophical discussions on the nature of the Divine and the *sādhana* required for God-realisation. They cover moral values too, in so far as moral integrity is needed for *sādhana*. The *Bhagavata* is considered as a sacred text particularly by Vaiṣṇavas, while the *Mahabharata* does not have that status. It is difficult to determine the date of these epics, though the Bhagavata may have appeared later than the other two, along with other *Puranas*. The actual events, to the extent they are historical, which are the subject matter of these epics, may have taken place before the Buddha, even if the composition of the epics is post-Buddhist. They played an important role in spreading awareness of moral values and popularising the *Sanatana Dharma vis-à-vis* Jainism and Buddhism.

The Jains have their own version of *Ramayana*, and in South East Asia where both Hinduism and Buddhism had spread, Rama and *Ramayana* co-exist peacefully with Buddha in Buddhist temples. Even today, one can see pictures from the *Ramayana* stories depicted on the walls of Buddhist temples in Thailand and other places in South-East Asia. Emperors in Thailand were named after Rama. The *Ramayana* became a part of the culture of several countries in South East Asia, as much as in India. An important difficulty with these epics including *Puranas*, is that the original texts did not remain what they were and grew in course of time. Some portions were clearly interpolations added later to justify contemporary practices and customs. For example, the story of Rama punishing a Śūdra with death for doing *tapas* (austerities and meditation) ignoring his caste duty, was considered by Gandhiji as being definitely an interpolation.<sup>7</sup> Gandhiji's verdict is quite plausible because the story appears in the Uttara *Kāṇḍa*, which is not a part of the original Valmiki *Ramayana*. There have been instances of interpolations in several of our texts and to that extent the Hindus were unable to protect the original purity of all their texts, though they were much more scrupulous and strict in doing so with regard to at least the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita.

The next important group of texts is called the *Dharmashastras*, containing both Sutras and Smṛtis. Sutras are in prose in terse and concise sentences, while Smṛtis are generally in verse. They are not a part of Shruti at all, but came to acquire an authority in spite of it, which was because they aimed at regulating the day-to-day conduct of people. The *Brahmasutras* constitute a class by itself and are not counted among *Dharmasutras* under *Dharmashastras*. Kane speaks about the *Kalpasutras* of which the *Dharmasutras* are a part. The *Kalpasutras* consist of (1) the *Shrautasutras* that deal with Vedic sacrifices prescribed in the Vedas including particularly the *Brahmanas*, (2) the *Grihyasutras* that deal with domestic ceremonies such as Upanayana, marriage, daily rites, and periodical rites, and (3) *Dharmasutras* which apart from dealing with some of the topics in the *Grihyasutras*, also deal with matters concerning social and economic life, politics, government, civil and criminal law (Kane 1990: I-I: 10). Some of the *Dharmasutras* are known by the name of their authors – Gautama (not Gautama, the Buddha), Vasishṭha, Apastambha, Baudhayana and Hiranyakeshin.

The *Dharmashastras* also include the *Smṛtis*, apart from the above three types of Sutras. They are in verse form and known by their authors' names – Manu, Yajñavalkya, Narada. The commentaries on some of the *Smṛtis* also acquired significance, as they led to different schools of law: The *Mitākshara*,

*Dayabhaga*, *Mithila* and others. They acquired the status of law in settling disputes. The *Smrtis* also played the same role as the *Dharmasutras*. Together they gave guidance in the *Pravṛtti-dharma* – required in conducting the affairs of the world, while *Upanishads* dealt with the *Nivṛtti-dharma* – dharma needed for God realization. The *Gita*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* brought about a synthesis between the *Pravṛtti dharma* and the *Nivṛtti dharma*, bridging the gap between the two. According to Kane, the *Dharmashastras* existed, at least, prior to the period 600-300 BCE, and by the second century BCE they had attained a position of supreme authority in the conduct of people. Since the language of the *Dharmasutras* is generally more archaic than that of *Smrtis* (*Ibid*: 14), chronologically the former must have come first (*Ibid*: 21). Moreover, while the *Dharmasutras* do not follow an orderly arrangement of topics, the *Smrtis* arrange their contents and treat their subjects under *achara* (rules of conduct), *vyavahara* (guidance for day-to-day life), and *prayashchitta* (penitence) (*Ibid*: 21). Bühler's Introduction to his translation of the *Manusmṛti* estimates its date anywhere between the 2nd Century BCE and the 2nd Century CE, though Max Muller considers it to be later than the 4th Century CE. Kane includes Kautilya's *Arthashastra* also under the *Dharmashastras*, though it is secular in character and scope. The *Dharmashastras* consider duties under secular, civil or government domain as pertinent to their scope since they are also subject to principles of dharma. They also deal with the principles of statecraft, including taxation and state expenditure, which throw insights in to the then prevailing ideas about and systems of state economy and governance. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is of particular interest in this respect.

It is doubtful how far the *Dharmashastras* played a truly positive and healthy role in the development of Hinduism. They have certainly contributed to distorting Hindu ethics, for their whole focus appeared to be to protect extreme and rigid orthodoxy in relation to the caste system. Far from preaching equality before law, some of them, particularly the *Manusmṛti*, made their concept of justice highly discriminatory. Even while maintaining that the Brahmins should not accumulate wealth, the *Manusmṛti* was keen to ensure that this requirement did not erode the social and ritual status of the Brahmins. It therefore stipulated lightest punishments for the Brahmins and heaviest punishment for the Shudras for the same offence, though the Shudras also were not supposed to accumulate wealth. The *Dharmashastras* did, however, recommend humane treatment of the Shudras by the upper castes. For example the *Manusmṛti* (X.124) asks the householder and his wife to first feed the Shudra servants before eating themselves and ensure their suitable maintenance and care. However, such small mercies on them could not offset the overall discrimination against them, and it was supposed to be the duty of kings to protect the caste system, though in the name of the *varna* system. But it is difficult to throw out all the *Dharmashastras* in their entirety as irrelevant. Apart from their historical interest, they also contain gems of moral wisdom here and there, some of which have been mentioned in this volume itself.

Unlike the *Dharmashastras*, the *Tirukkural* ignored the caste or *varna* codes of conduct, and taught equality and non-discriminatory values to all. It is a text focussed on ethics and humanism, and is not a 'religious' text in its narrow sense. The *Tirukkural* is a great classic of antiquity in Tamil, composed between second Century BCE and first Century CE. Written by Tiruvalluvar, a sage, it is highly venerated and recited regularly by devout Tamils even today. It is universal and nonsectarian in appeal, and aims at imparting moral guidance both to ordinary people in day-to-day life, and also

to kings and officers of kings. Though the text opens with the praise of God, its god is not a sectarian deity. The rest of the text is quite secular. It consists of actually three Books, consisting of 38, 70, and 25 chapters respectively (Sundaram ed. & tr.1990).

The *Agama* texts have also had considerable influence on Hinduism, particularly its practice. Later, they also came to be known as Tantra texts, after the Tantra tradition became established in Bengal and other places where new texts were created. It is claimed that the Tantrik path to god realisation is quicker and hence, is best fitted for Kaliyuga, an age when people do not have enough time for penance or resources for long-drawn Vedic Yajnas. Because of their emphasis on practical aspects of spiritual seeking, the *Tantra-Agamas* are said to constitute *Sadhana-shastra*. The influence of this tradition and its texts is both deep and wide but is not easily recognised, because it has inconspicuously fused with the Vedic tradition as well as with Yoga. Many of the ‘techniques’ of meditation and God realization taught by most of the Gurus in Hinduism right from the classical to the modern phase, are drawn from Tantra. An interesting feature of the Tantrik path is that it was kept open to all irrespective of caste, class or gender. However, it also got into disrepute because of the abuse and repulsive practices by some of the Tantric practitioners. (See Woodroffe 2003:17-88). The *Agamas* in the south as well as in Kashmir were nevertheless able to maintain their reputation and purity. Since they have been associated with Shaivism, they are also known as the *Shivagamas*. It is claimed that just as Vedas came from Brahma’s mouth, *Agamas* came from Shiva’s mouth. There is a separate class of texts known as *Nigamas*, said to have come from the mouth of Shakti, the female aspect of Shiva. *Agamas* also venerate Shakti as Shiva’s consort. In the Shakti cult, which is a part of the Tantra tradition, Shakti is Guru and Shiva is her disciple; or, Shakti is the active principle and Shiva is the passive principle of the One Divine. An interesting feature of the *Agamas* is that they originated both in the extreme north – Kashmir, and extreme south – Tamil Nadu, and *Nigamas* seem to have originated from the East – Bengal and neighbouring regions. Shaivism is as old as Harappan-Vedic era (about which we shall discuss later), but gained in popularity particularly in Kashmir and Tamil Nadu, though, of course, it prevailed in other parts of India too. But the contributions to the *Agama* literature came first from Kashmir and Tamil Nadu, and are all in Sanskrit. Some of the better known texts originating from Kashmir are *Malinivijaya*, *Svachchanda*, *Netra*, *Gandharva* and *Tantraloka*. Authors of most of these texts are not known, except for the *Tantraloka* written by Abhinavagupta. The texts from Kashmir were written between 200 BCE and 700 CE.<sup>8</sup> There are also *Vaisnava Agamas*, with Pancharatra Agama considered the most authoritative, believed to be revealed by Shri Narayana himself (Mahadevan 1999: 35-6).

The basic or fundamental *Agamas* (*Mulagamas*) are said to be twenty-eight, while there are also secondary *Agamas* (*Upagamas*). The *Agamas* in Tamil Nadu are dated between the 3rd and the 7th Century of the Common Era. They are still studied by those who train themselves as priests in Shiva temples, as they are the source of instructions on how to conduct temple worship and rituals, both routine or daily rituals and special rituals such as those during ‘car’ festivals (Rathotsava). The *Agamas* are also a source of instruction on temple architecture and sculpture, giving specifications and details about temple construction and idol making. While Hinduism permits considerable flexibility in individual or private worship in one’s own homes, the rules are rigid and have to be strictly followed in the case of temple worship. *Agamas* have not received the same attention of scholars as the Vedas

and Upanishads, mainly because of the emphasis of Agamas on rituals. They are thus comparable with the *Brahmanas* in the Vedas. While the *Brahmanas* are concerned more with rituals connected with sacrifice (Yajna, homa etc.), the *Agamas* are concerned with rituals of worship in temples. Temples came into prominence in Hinduism after the Vedic and Upanishadic period, and that is when the *Agamas* also gained in prominence. Since specifications of temple architecture and sculpture and also of rituals of worship have all symbolic meanings and reflect some philosophical ideas and values, this is an area with scope for further research.

A scholarly work on the *Agamas* in Tamil Nadu in the 13th Century by Meykantar is held in high regard. He brought out the first Tamil work on the *Agamas*, which summed up the basic doctrines of the Sanskrit texts in Tamil to help common people understand the meaning of rituals. This work is known as the *Chivananapotam*. Interestingly, though Meykantar came from Velala caste, supposed to be in the Shudra group, his greatness attracted Brahmin disciples too, a well known one being Arunati. In the Shaiva saintly tradition, both Brahmins and Shudras worked together to promote Shaivism. While the earlier Agama works emphasized the rituals part, the later Tamil works emphasised Jnana (knowledge) and bhakti (devotion), though rituals were hardly done away with.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a body of literature known as the *Vedangas*, i.e., the limbs of Vedas, which are six. Since they are six, they are also called as *Shadangas*. A scholar in Vedic studies has to study them too as part of traditional knowledge, but being in the secular domain, they are strictly not a part of Hindu canon though very much a part of Hindu philosophical and intellectual development. The *Vedangas* are: *Shiksha* (phonetics), *Vyakarana* (grammar), *Nirukta* (lexicon or etymology), *Kalpa* (manual of rituals), *Chhandas* (prosody) and *Jyotisha* (astronomy and astrology).<sup>10</sup> For each of the six philosophical schools of thought in Hinduism, Shatdarshanas, there are texts, which will be discussed in the next chapter. These schools are also ancient, some of them dating back to the Buddha or earlier.

All the above mentioned literature is formidably vast. Even if we consider only the Shruti literature (including the Upanishads), the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavata*, the *Brahmasutras*, and the Bhagavadgita as sacred, it remains quite enormous. The vastness of this literature makes it impossible for a common man to peruse it fully. Even Pundits who may dedicate their entire life to study it, may be able to go through only a good part of it but not all of it! Very few Hindus would have gone through all the Vedas and Upanishads even in translation. But this cannot be said with respect to the *Ramayana* and the Gita, which are more popular and are read and retold by many. In North India, it is Tulsidas' *Ramacharita Manasa*, a Hindi version of the *Ramayana*, which is accepted as the sacred text, more than Valmiki's *Ramayana* in Sanskrit. The *Mahabharata* though not considered as sacred as Ramayana, is highly regarded and equally popular. As a witty scholar has put it, no Indian has heard the *Ramayana* and the Mahabharata for the first time! Some of the Puranas like the Vishnu Purana and the *Bhagavata Purana* also have the same status as the *Ramayana*. Some sects regard the *Bhagavata Purana* as the only accepted canon. Because of the impracticality of receiving guidance from such a vast literature, the Gita has come to be accepted as the main canon by many Hindus if not all, particularly as it contains the essence of Upanishads. In Maharashtra, more than the Sanskrit original, the Marathi commentary cum explanation of the Gita by Jnaneshwar, known as the *Jnaneshwari*, is accepted as the canon for recitation though it is bigger in size than the original. For common people in many parts

of the country, the Puranas as told and explained by the Pouranikas or the Kirtankars, constitute the canon. The Pouranikas and Kirtankars draw from a variety of religious sources for their exposition, including the rich medieval Bhakti literature, apart from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Though in theory it is the Vedas and Upanishads which constitute the basic canon, in practice it is the two epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and the Bhakti literature which have served as the canon for common people, - that too, not in their original form, but as expounded and explained by the Pouranikas, Kirtankars, and the Saints. The vastness of canon has thus led to charisma of these religious persons in Hinduism.

The Bhakti movement gave rise to many charismatic persons – the Alwars in Tamil Nadu, the Shivasharanas and Dasas in Karnataka, Saints in Maharashtra and North India, and their devotional songs became the canon for the people. They interpreted *dharma* for the common folk. The *Gita* itself says that the Lord reincarnates himself again and again to explain and uphold *Dharma* and prevent the rise of *Adharma* (the opposite of Dharma) (IV.7). There has been no conflict between canon and charisma in Hinduism. Charismatic leaders like Gandhiji interpreted and reinterpreted scriptures they liked most and rediscovered old principles for new application. They completely eschewed dogma even in following canon, and sought orderly change in society, balancing change with continuity. It contributed to stability. There never was a complete break with the past or rootlessness. Yet stagnation was prevented, and growth of ideas and creativity was given full scope. The kind of tension between Canon and Charisma, which is present in most other religions, is thus much less in Hinduism, though not entirely absent. Other religions had this problem because of granting Charisma only to the Founder of the religion to whom the Canon was revealed, no other having the same status. It was not easy for them to resolve the consequent tension between legitimisation and the need for change and innovation.

Charisma, according to Stietencron, is

“a spark of divine presence flashing into ordinary life and legitimizing leadership and change. It is divine agency operating through man... It takes precedence over the Canon by bringing into convincing shape those innovative ideas, concepts, models of behavior and approaches to the divine that create a new religious movement. It is to the credit of Charisma if such elements of religious content can be successfully propagated against the natural resistance of established religions....”(2001: 15).

Stietencron also raises an interesting question: “How do Hindu religions provide their devotees with sufficiently frequent Charismatic experiences to keep both their emotional engagement and their intellectual interest in religion alive”? (*Ibid*: 17). This is related to the question of why Hinduism has been relatively much more successful in managing change and innovation and in overcoming resistance to established Canon. Though Stietencron raises the former question, his answer to it is not clear or direct. He mentions the various ways in which Charisma is legitimised and institutionalised and how it reduced resistance to change. But this does not explain why Hinduism threw up so many Charismatic leaders right from the Vedic rishis to present day religious leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Shri Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritamandamayi and Sri Sri Ravishankar, and the relatively greater success of Hinduism in accommodating change and innovation.

The explanation seems to lie in the fact that the canon in Hinduism was itself neither rigid nor exclusive, new canons being created almost all the time, and even the old canons also provided for orderly change through charismatic leaders. Apart from the Gita's own declaration that the Lord reincarnates Himself again and again to uphold and interpret Dharma, the much maligned Manusmriti, supposed to be an ultimate in orthodoxy, itself comes out clearly to provide for innovation and accommodation of change. Its stand comes out at least in two verses (Ch.2.1 and Ch.4.176), which have been quoted earlier. The two verses together give a wholesome guideline for change. Change is not according to individuals' caprice and convenience. Change comes when established rules of conduct are found to lead to unhappiness and righteous indignation, and when the change is recommended and followed by great persons – those who are pure at heart and unselfish and who are wise and know what constitutes the welfare of the society and the world at large.

In this context, it is easy to see how misleading it is to assert that Hinduism is Veda-centric or, that those who do not regard Vedas as their canon are, therefore, not Hindus. To say so may suit their politics but it exposes their ignorance of both Hinduism and the sect or faith they refer to. However, even sects and cults in Hinduism which claim to follow canon other than Vedas or may not have any text as canon, have their roots in the Vedas and the Upanishads whether they are aware of it or not. It is only in this sense that the Vedas and the Upanishads are basic and comprehensive. Children may move away from their parents once they are grown up, but it is hardly necessary to disown their parentage merely because they have now become spouse-centric.

## 2. DRIVING FORCES BEHIND DYNAMICS

True to its commitment to continuous search for Truth, Hinduism has never been rigid and stagnant. As Radhakrishnan puts it, "Hinduism is a movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation" (Radhakrishnan 1971: 91). Even as it laid stress on *Achāra* (practice) based on ethical values, it also made progress on *Vichāra* (thought, philosophy) to guide *Achāra*, and also for its own sake in the interest of pursuit of truth. Contradictions between philosophy and practice emerged from time to time, particularly on issues like caste discrimination and treatment of women, giving a stimulus to the emergence of charismatic leaders who clarified and interpreted philosophy and tried to resolve these contradictions. In the dialectical process, philosophy too developed. Basically this was the nature of dynamics of Hinduism. Even as the pursuit of philosophical development was a pursuit of truth, reform of practice in accordance with rediscovered philosophy was also equally a pursuit of truth. Unfortunately, the latter pursuit may have lagged behind the former.

It is difficult to trace the dynamics of development of Hinduism right upto its origin. There has been a fierce debate about whether the Indus or Harappan Civilisation was Vedic or Dravidian, or both. I have no intention to go into this debate. Nevertheless, irrespective of whether the Indus and the Vedic civilisations were one and the same or different, Hinduism grew out of both. Also irrespective of whether the Aryans and the Dravidians were different races or the same – differentiated only by language, both have contributed equally to the development of Hinduism. Not much is known about the religion of the Indus civilisation, except that they also had some form of fire worship and sacrifice, they also worshipped a form of Shiva, identified as Pashupati, and even had a cult of mother Goddess. The science of yoga also may have originated from the Indus civilisation, as seen from yogic postures

in some of the seals found. There is thus some evidence of overlap between the Indus and Vedic civilisations. (see Rao 1991: Ch.9 on Religion; Majumdar ed. 1988-96: I:189-91).

We can broadly mark the following phases in the development of Hindu philosophical thought and religion:

- (i) Vedic phase (including the *Brahmana* texts);
- (ii) The phase of the *Upanishads*, *Brahmasūtras* and the *Gita* and interaction with Buddhism and Jainism; systematic development of the foundation of Hindu philosophy in terms of six major schools of thought – *Shad-darshanas*;
- (iii) The phase of the *Dharmashāstras* including *Dharmasūtras* and *Smritis*;
- (iv) The phase of Epics (the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*);
- (v) The phase of philosophical crystallisation under the three *Acharyas*;
- (vi) The phase of Bhakti movements;
- (vii) Modern Phase.

These phases are only broadly in chronological order, since there is a significant overlap between them. While the first phase is clearly pre-Buddha, the second phase led by the Upanishads is both pre-Buddha and post-Buddha, influencing as well as being influenced by Buddhism. The third and fourth phase existed side by side with Buddhism's ascendancy, while the fifth phase coincides with the decline of Buddhism. The Bhakti movements began much before the Muslim rule established itself in India, but their later and more conspicuous phase was during the Muslim rule. During this phase, they both influenced and were influenced by Islam. The last phase began during the British period, and was a response to forces of modernisation from the West and also to modern Christianity. The next three chapters deal with the course of development of Hinduism through these phases, which will show both continuity and change. The first five phases are clubbed together under the Ancient and the Classical Phase in the next Chapter 7, while the succeeding two chapters deal with the Bhakti Movements and the last phase (including the contemporary period) respectively. At this stage, we may only note that what led one phase to the other was probably a dialectical process under which emerging contradictions were resolved and a new dynamic equilibrium was achieved, which lasted for some time till new forces created further contradictions. Contradictions were not insurmountable. Neither were they necessarily violent. The political vicissitudes and the external stimuli were of course a factor in the dynamics. There were wars and violence on the political front. But in the world of ideas and religion, accommodation and adjustments were relatively peaceful.

The purpose of this chapter and the next three is to give a feel of the dynamics of Hinduism and its philosophy, rather than to present a full history of Hindu philosophy – a task which has already been accomplished in detail by eminent writers.<sup>11</sup> Apart from the modern writers who wrote in English, indigenous writers also have in the distant past written reviews of Indian philosophical systems which have been cited by Radhakrishnan (1996: I: 59-60). The first such work known in history, entitled *Shad-darshana-samuchchaya* (Epitome of the Six Systems of Philosophy), was written by Haribhadra who died in 529 CE. The most popular account, according to Radhakrishnan, was *Sarva-darshana-sangraha* written by Madhavacharya, who lived in the 14th century in South India (to be distinguished from Madhvacharya). The three eminent *Acharyas* – Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva also critically

reviewed the main philosophical systems to which they were particularly opposed. Shankara's comprehensive review (*Sarva-siddhanta-Sarasangraha*) was the earliest among the three, written in the 8th Century CE.

What were the driving forces behind this dynamics of Hinduism – spanning several centuries beginning with the pre-historical Harappan-Vedic phase right up to the contemporary period? A major feature of the dynamics of Hinduism is the continuous synthesis it tried to achieve in all its periods and phases. The *Atharva Veda* is the first prominent example of such synthesis, reflecting the assimilation of the 'Little Tradition' of various tribes into the main stream or the 'Great Tradition' of the Vedas. Next important example is the synthesis between the Vedic religion and the Upanishads, reflected particularly in the *Gita*. The *Gita* fused together the outward spiritual path of the Vedas with the inward path of the Upanishads. The seeker in the *Gita* is involved actively in the world but with detachment and without selfishness, being calm, collected and composed within. The synthesis in the *Gita* revolutionised Hinduism and made it relevant for all time to come. Lannoy observes: 'This luminous poem is an audacious attempt to fuse together the divergent traditions of the past and express their synthesis in universal terms' (Lannoy 1971:306). Then followed the synthesis between Vedic-Upanishadic religion, on the one hand and Buddhism, on the other. This resulted in a renewed emphasis on ethics, particularly nonviolence. The medieval period witnessed several further attempts at synthesis with the best of Islam. This led to a rediscovery of the old values emphasised by the *Gita* – simplicity in religion shorn of ritualism, and stress on simple devotion. By then the term 'Hinduism' had already established itself making it a clearly identifiable religion, but it did not come in the way of its traditional openness.

There was also synthesis between mainstream Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma and Tantra tradition. The latter had established itself during the classical phase itself, influencing not only Hinduism but also Buddhism. Bodhisatva Padmasambhava is said to have taken not only Buddhism but also the Tantra tradition to Tibet. Along with Bengal, Tibet and Nepal also became important centers of the Tantra tradition and literature. A lot of Tantra literature stocked in Buddhist universities was said to have been destroyed during Muslim invasions, but a lot also survived particularly in Tibet and Nepal. During the medieval phase, however, Tantra influenced all major sects of Hinduism – Shaiva, Shakti and Vaishnava; what is more, it influenced even the Sufis in Islam. While Tantra was not an independent religion as such, it overlapped with almost all sects or faiths in India. Its synthesis with Hinduism was somewhat on a love-hate basis. While mainstream Hinduism forcefully rejected and condemned some of the repulsive practices of Tantra, it also absorbed some of its practices and techniques that were found effective for a spiritual seeker and they fused well with Yoga.

The modern phase witnessed a further synthesis of Hinduism with Christian as well as Western values. M K Gandhi was the best example of the capacity of Hinduism for synthesis, combining as he did the best of all religions and western thought, and rejecting the undesirable features of Hindu society. The synthesis in Hinduism has two significant features. It did not wipe out the culture, value system, customs and sometimes even the rituals or the methods of religious practice of peoples with whom the synthesis was achieved. Secondly, the synthesis was achieved often by rediscovering and invoking the own earlier values in the scriptures and traditions of Hinduism, without having to lose Hinduism's own identity. Hinduism became more diversified at the same time. The synthesis represented change as well as continuity.

Hinduism responded both to internal and the external stimuli in its dynamics. What is discussed in the preceding paragraphs can be said to represent response to external stimuli. Internally also, differences and dissent emerged which had to be accommodated. Philosophical and theological issues were often mixed with social issues which took a philosophical garb. For example, the Bhakti Movements gathered momentum and spread widely all over the country in the context of discontent about deprivation and isolation of lower castes. Apart from the caste system, there were also other social evils like child marriage, *Sati*, oppressive codes of conduct and dress for widows who did not opt to commit *Sati*, prohibition of widow remarriage, animal sacrifice, and many superstitions which suffocated both social and spiritual growth. Unfortunately, even the otherwise humanising impact of the Bhakti movements of the medieval age could not eradicate these social evils, which continued beyond the 18th century. Since such evil practices had nothing to do with genuine Hinduism, its philosophy could be – and was – interpreted to impress upon people that what they were doing was immoral and against religion. Since even this was insufficient, social reformers advocated changes in law so that these practices were illegal as well and offenders could be punished as per law. Social reform and also social service to fight hunger, illiteracy and poverty thus became the major agenda of Hinduism during the Modern phase. Even if these are all taken as internal stimuli, the awareness of the urgent need to remove the social evils and shortcomings in Hindu society were due to external stimuli, particularly the humanistic and modernising values from the West. This need not – and does not – belittle Hinduism in any way. On the contrary, it can take pride in its capacity for openness, accommodation and assimilation, which are making India a modern nation, achieving both social and economic development.

The dynamics of Hinduism involved no compulsion on any, but promoted tolerance for diversity. Though Hinduism did not have any permanent fixation common to all Hindus of all times on a given Book or a Founder, different individuals and different sects could have their own anchor for their spiritual solace. If the *Gita* was an anchor for some, it was the *Bhagavata* for others; if it was *Rama-charita-manasa* for some, it could be *Manache Shlok* for others; if it was *Vachanas* of Shiva-Sharanas for some, it was *Tirukkural* for others. Not only that, a ‘staunch Sanatani’, as Gandhiji called himself, could regularly read the Quran and the Bible with reverence and yet be a Hindu. Gandhiji’s own anchor was in the values of Truth and Non-violence in which he believed and he did not need one exclusive book as the anchor. There was no limit to the choice. This inclusiveness of Gandhiji and his finding an anchor in the ethical values he believed rather than in an exclusive book or an exclusive prophet, is the quintessence of Hinduism. Unique among the world religions, even while recognising the authority of canon, Hinduism always tempered this respect by ‘the recognition of the truth that God has never finished the revelation of His wisdom and love’ (Radhakrishnan 1971:16). It was this openness and liberal attitude, which is the basic factor behind its dynamism.

The major factor behind the openness in Hinduism was the fact that Hindu society was never homogeneous. Its diversity made it necessary to accommodate different points of view. And this accommodation was accomplished without any community or culture or school of thought losing its identity. The inclusiveness of Hinduism was not at the cost of eliminating the identity of the new comers. All shades of philosophy and tradition found a place in the generous bosom of Hinduism. This accommodation was not limited to one point in time. As wave after wave of foreigners, either as invaders or traders, came and settled in India, they also could find a comfortable place along with their tradition, beliefs and culture. Often their deities were absorbed into Hindu mythology. Since generally

the deities in the 'Little Tradition' were female, a familiar strategy was to call them as consorts of Shiva, and absorb them into the 'Great Tradition'. The process of assimilation of tribes was mutual or dialectical. It influenced the newcomers and they in turn also influenced Hinduism. It spurred new ideas and even new customs. It is just not true that assimilation was not on a basis of equality and kept deliberately hierarchical. There is evidence of several tribes and communities assimilated on equal basis as Kshatriyas and not necessarily as Shudras or Antyajas.<sup>12</sup> The accommodation was not once over or static, but dynamic, making Hinduism to respond continuously to different stimuli even while keeping its basic and eternal values in tact. In the bargain, Hinduism became richer, more robust and sustainable, rather than weak.

This inclusiveness could have led to disputes, disagreements and even temporary conflicts. But this phase was transitional. The differences were resolved mainly by allowing the freedom to dissent or be different through forming a new '*sampradaya*' (tradition) or '*Pantha*' (way or road), or '*Mata*' (school of thought). In Christian parlance, such groups are called 'Sects', but 'Sect' does not strictly have the same connotation as these three terms. The three terms are often used interchangeably, but we use the term 'sect' in this book to convey the meaning of all these three Sanskrit terms. They do not convey the meaning of different 'religions'. In fact, there is no Sanskrit equivalent for 'religion' in the Western sense. These groups were not 'sects' in Christian sense either. A Christian sect still has the Bible as its scripture, and Christ as its founder, which is common to all Christian sects. There is no such common authority for all 'sects' in Hinduism, and they had the freedom to differ and even reject the Vedas, though each Hindu sect had its own Founder or a Guru. An interesting feature of these 'sects' is that they were not on caste lines, and were generally open to all castes. These sects co-existed and even competed with others in attracting followers, but conflicts were minimised. There was nothing like the Inquisition. If the dissent came to a point of severe conflict, the concerned group simply broke away to form its own '*sampradaya*' and start its own tradition. In spite of these differences, they could also draw upon a common pool of cultural and scriptural resources of their choice, without losing their identity. Madan observes that Hinduism 'has dealt with internal dissent through accommodation, sometimes carried to the furthest extremes. Occasionally, this strategy has failed and ... resulted in breakaway sects that in course of time grew into independent religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, adding a new dimension to the religious plurality of India' (Madan 2003: xxi).

It is commonly assumed that proselytisation was not the instrument of Hindu inclusiveness. It is true that many foreign invaders were assimilated into Hinduism without any attempt at proselytisation but simply through a natural process of Sanskritisation over a period of time. This was achieved without any formal ritual of conversion into Hinduism as such, and they often maintained their identities as separate castes or communities within Hinduism. No force was necessary for the purpose. However, formal conversions through 'Deeksha' ceremony started with Buddhism, and so did attempts to propagate the religion both in India and abroad, particularly since the reign of the Emperor Ashoka. A noteworthy feature of conversions to Buddhism is that force was never used for the purpose. Assimilation of tribes, including invading tribes, into Hinduism continued even after this, without any conversion ceremonies. However, the concept of Deeksha was taken up by new individual sects during the medieval period, particularly by Shaiva, Veerashaiva, Shreevaishnava, and Vaishnava sects. Conversion, if ever it took place, was to a particular sect within Hinduism.

There is also another view of the driving force behind dynamics of Hindu philosophic thought – the conflict approach. It views the Hindu society as consisting of classes or castes, and the conflicts between class/caste interests were the major factor in producing a change. The change was essentially meant to produce in turn new hierarchical or social relations. Broadly, this is the kind of approach suggested by Randall Collins.<sup>13</sup> Applying this approach, one would get a picture somewhat like this: Brahmin dominance of the Vedic period was challenged by Kshatriyas during the Upanishadic period, a process which accelerated with Buddhism and Jainism. The Brahmins then fought back and re-established their dominance during the period of the *Dharmashastras*. This was in turn challenged again through the Bhakti movement, a democratic religious revolution, whose leadership was taken not by kings or kshatriyas as such, but by the so-called lower castes. Since this democratic revolution was by no means complete, it was renewed again in the modern period and took the form of anti-caste and even anti-Brahmin movements, pioneered by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890).

The conflict approach throws valuable insights no doubt, particularly as it highlights the fact that the history of Hinduism is not simply a history of Brahminism. It is not as if throughout its history, Hinduism has been led, defined and dominated by Brahmins. It shows that Hinduism is not Brahminism, and other castes, including even the so-called lower castes, played an important role in the development of Hinduism and its philosophy.

A major difficulty in accepting the caste conflict approach as the only or even the main driving force behind the different phases of philosophical development of Hinduism, is that it ignores the mutual co-operation between castes, which was a prominent feature of the Hindu society. There never was domination by only one caste. Though it can certainly be said that upper castes looked down upon and exploited lower castes, there was no clear polarization. There was not even a clear hierarchical gradation, as shown in the preceding chapter. The Vedic phase was hardly Brahminical in an exclusive sense. Vedic *Rshis* were not necessarily all Brahmins, and many others too contributed to the composition of Vedic Hymns (strictly speaking, others too ‘heard’ and perceived them, as Vedic hymns were ‘heard’ rather than ‘written’ or composed). Similarly, the Upanishadic phase was hardly led by Kshatriyas, in a dominant sense. All *varnas* participated in this unique phase of philosophical development. Though the Buddha and Mahāvira were Kshatriyas, many of their monks came from the Brahmin *varna*. In the Bhakti movement too, not only the so-called lower castes but also others participated to a significant extent. Even the protest against caste distinction during the medieval Bhakti period was not posed in an adversarial fashion. The protest, particularly against the dominance of Brahmins in cultural and social fields, took an adversarial tone only after the emergence of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra and Periyar in Tamil Nadu. Even here, it was nonviolent in form and strategy and never acquired the character of a violent conflict, though there may have been a few isolated and occasional instances to the contrary.

In spite of the above-mentioned problems with the caste-conflict approach, it need not be rejected as irrelevant. Caste conflict approach helps atleast in *partially* explaining the rise of the shramanic traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, and to some extent the rise of Bhakti movements. But reconciliation and synthesis was equally a part of the dynamics of Hinduism. There is much in Hindu philosophy which rises above caste, dealing with issues of moral and spiritual advancement, and God realisation. The quotation from *Rgveda* (as translated by Sri Aurobindo) with which this chapter begins could well

be the essence of the driving force behind the dynamics of Hinduism and other Indian religions. But the pursuit of Truth could not be separated from the observance of human values and nonviolence to others. Inhuman treatment of other human beings on the basis of caste, and indifference to others' suffering, violated all principles of pursuit of truth and ethics, particularly nonviolence and compassion. For Gandhiji, the pursuit of truth meant nonviolence in his interpretation of Hinduism.

Each of the three phases of the development of Hinduism, which form the focus of the next three chapters, made distinct contributions of their own. While the philosophical and theological foundation of Hinduism was laid during the ancient phase, the Bhakti movements of the medieval age democratised Hinduism, making it broad based. It actively drew the common masses within the fold of Hinduism as never before. The dichotomy between the religion of the elite and popular Hinduism was greatly reduced, raising the latter to the status of the former. The renaissance and modern interpretation of Hinduism, started in the 19th century, was also a very positive development. It created greater social awareness as never before. It made Hinduism a modern religion even while being based on rediscovered ancient heritage, and also brought out its universal values of ethics and spirituality before the world audience, irrespective of their religious background.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. As translated by Aurobindo (1970: 919).
2. *Young India*, 6.10.1921, reproduced in Gandhi (1950: 8).
3. *Young India*, 8.4.1926, reproduced in Gandhi (1987: 6).
4. Cf. A A Macdonnell in *History of Sanskrit Literature*, quoted by Dasgupta (1975: I: 3).
5. As quoted in Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami (1995: 219).
6. A good exposition of this philosophy is available in Debiprasad Chattopadhyay (1978). He includes all agnostic schools of thought under the term *Lokayata*, including *Tantra*, *Saṅkhya* and early Buddhism.
7. See, Gandhi 'Sanātana Hindu', *Young India* 27.8.1925, reproduced in Gandhi (1950: 10). Gandhiji gets support of Kane who considers the whole of the Uttarakanda to be an interpolation (Kane 1990: I-I: 389). See also Ch. 5 here about this.
8. For a study of the *Shaivagamas* from Kashmir, see Drabu (1990).
9. For more details see Fuller (1997); and Ishimatsu (1999).
10. For details, see, Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami (1995: 276-377).
11. See, for example, Dasgupta (1975; first edn. 1922) (Five Volumes); Radhakrishnan (1996); Bouquet (1948); Sarma (1955); Prabhavananda (1978); Brockington (1997; first edn. 1981); Nakamura (1983 Indian Edn.); Halppass (1991); Mohanty (ed. by Bilimoria) (1993); Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (1993); Mohanty (1997); Hirianna (1999; 2000-b and 2001); Mahadevan (1999).
12. Shourie (1997: 13), for example, mentions how Ahoms were absorbed as belonging to Indra-vamsha, how a royal household of Dimapur and Kachar was recognised as descendants of Bhima, how Bodo rulers of Tripura were treated as Chandra-vamsha Kshatriyas, and so on.
13. Collins (2000), Ch.5, on 'External and Internal Politics of the Intellectual World: India', pp.177-271.



# The Ancient and Classical Phase

*‘The Brahmins have propagated the view that the Hindu Civilisation is Sanatan, that is, unchanging. ... I want to make the mass of people to realize that Hindu religion is not Sanatan. ... It will be noticed how the Brahmins have changed and chopped. There was a time when they worshipped the Vedic Gods. Then came a time when they abandoned their Vedic Gods and started worshipping non-Vedic Gods. One may well ask them – where is Indra, where is Varuna, where is Brahma, where is Mitra – the Gods mentioned in the Vedas? They have all disappeared. ... Not only did the Brahmins abandon their Vedic Gods but there are cases where they have become worshippers of Muslim Pirs ...’*

— B.R.Ambedkar.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. VEDIC PHASE

Hinduism is certainly not ‘Sanatan’ if it is taken to mean ‘unchanging’. The aim of this and the next two chapters is to show how the claim of being *sanatan* in its correct sense of ‘eternal’ or ‘perpetual’ is justified precisely because of its quality of combining change with continuity. Though, for example, the names by which God was worshipped changed from time to time, the Divine spirit which inspired Hinduism did not. Brahmins get undeserved credit for all this change and continuity in Hinduism. As we can see from the course of its development during all the three main phases of its development, there is nothing exclusively or even dominantly Brahminical about it. We begin our account of the dynamics of development of this liberal religion with the ancient and the classical phase. The difference between the ancient and the classical is not chronologically sharp; the former could be taken as constituting the Vedic and the Upanishadic phases, while the latter as covering the phase of the six philosophical schools of thought (*Shad-darshanas*) and the two great epics, *Puranas* and the *Dharmashastras*. The role of the epics - including the Gita, and the Puranas and the Dharmashastras has already been discussed in the last chapter. We begin now with the Vedic phase.

Irrespective of whether different schools of Hinduism – orthodox or heterodox – accept the Vedas as their canon, the fact remains that the Vedas laid a firm foundation not only for Hinduism and other Indian religions but also for world religions at large. The Vedas served as the starting point of many important concepts of seminal significance in Hinduism, such as ‘Eka (the One), yajna (sacrifice), jnana (knowledge), prana (life energy), dhyana (meditation), Karma (moral action), tapas (austerity), sat/asat (being/non-being), satya or rta (truth), vak (divine speech), dharma (moral law), shraddha (faith), brahmacharya (chastity), ojas (spiritual strength), vrata (vow), muni (sage), kama (desire) and papa (sin)’ (Feuerstein et al 1999: 173). The word ‘*bhakti*’ may not have been used, but the sentiments of devotion, adoration and surrender before the Almighty, which constitute Bhakti, are very much present in most of the hymns, particularly of the *Rgveda*. However, the sentiment was turned into a clear and crystallised concept and was given a name a little later. These concepts have played an important role in all Indian religions including Buddhism and Jainism, the heterodox faiths which did not accept the Vedas. What is equally interesting is that these concepts are used with almost the same meaning even today, except for a little further elaboration of them in subsequent literature. The Vedas represent the first recorded attempt by human beings in the world to express their religious sentiments and ethical thoughts.

That is how the *Rgveda* continues to inspire devotion and awe even today and will always continue to do so. It is not a museum piece preserved for its own sake or merely for its heritage value. Its *Mantras* are recited even today in temples and homes during worship (*puja*), *homas*, prayers and meditation. The *Rgveda* (RV) gave to us the sacred invocatory syllable ‘*Om*’, and also the *Gayatri mantra* (III.62.10), *Mrtyunjaya mantra* (VII.59.12) and others recited daily for *japa* for peace of mind and spiritual uplift. The Gayatri mantra can be translated as: ‘*Om*! I meditate upon the glorious and adorable Savitr who pervades the whole universe. May He stimulate our intellect (so that we can realise Him)!’ Savitr may be taken here not as one particular deity (though it is the Sun god) but as the One Supreme.

Sri Aurobindo has long demolished the then current notion among English educated scholars that the hymns of Vedas were compositions of ‘a primitive and still barbarous race written around a system of ceremonial and propitiatory rites, addressed to personified Power of Nature and replete with a confused mass of half-formed myth and crude astronomical allegories yet in the making’ (Aurobindo 1971: 1). On the contrary, according to Sri Aurobindo, they have been ‘the reputed source not only of some of the world’s richest and profoundest religions, but some of its subtlest metaphysical philosophies’ (*Ibid*: 4).

The foundation that the Vedas laid for Hinduism was not just in terms of concepts, but also in terms of thoughts, approaches and attitudes. The open mindedness and a cosmopolitan outlook which have characterised Hinduism all along can be traced easily to the well known *Rgvedic* saying – *A no bhadrāḥ kṛtavo yantu vishvataḥ*’ (‘May noble and auspicious thoughts come to us from all over the Universe’, RV 1.89.1). It is not this saying alone which reflects open mindedness, but also the general attitude of inquisitiveness, adoration of diversity both in nature and thoughts – not just tolerance. Differences are discussed without threat. A skeptic asks bluntly ‘who is Indra? Who has ever seen him?’ (RV 8.100.3). The *Rshi* replies to him patiently without invoking any threat of punishment either in this world or in the world after death (RV 8.100.4).<sup>2</sup> There is also humour in the Vedas, and an ability to laugh, to

joke at one's own expense. The 103rd Sūkta in the 7th Mandala of *RV* is remarkable in this context, which compares the recitation of Mantras by priests with the frogs crying out loudly in unison with the onset of rains. The 'hymn moves on two parallel but sharply contrasting levels: as a naturalistic poem, it describes the frogs who are rejuvenated when the season of rains comes; as a sacerdotal hymn, it describes the brahmins [priests] who begin to chant at the start of the rains. The point of comparison is the voice, a sacred and creative force throughout the *Rgveda* (which is of course a book of songs). ... What makes the poem a tour de force is that every verse applies simultaneously to both frogs and Brahmins, a most elaborate and playful pun.'<sup>3</sup> Only two verses are quoted here for illustration:

"After lying still for a year, Brahmins keeping their vow, the frogs have raised their voice that Parjanya [rain] has inspired." (7.103.1).

"Like Brahmins at the overnight sacrifice who speak around the full bowl of *soma*, so you frogs around a pool celebrate the day of the year when the rains come." (7.103.7) (O' Flaherty 2000: 233).

The overall mood of the Vedas is cheerful, life-loving and world-adoring, though there are also sombre reflections on life after death. This is reflected not only in hymns in praise of nature – dawn, rivers, rains, storm, wind, fire, lightening and the Earth at large, but also in the kind of prayers offered at sacrifices which ask for worldly wealth and happiness, and not liberation from the world. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty observes: "The *Rgveda* is a sacred book, but it is a very worldly sacred book. Nowhere can we find the tiniest suspicion of a wish to renounce the material world in favour of some spiritual quest; religion is the handmaiden of worldly life. The gods are invoked to give the worshipper the things he wants – health, wealth, long life, and progeny. This is not to say that there is anything superficial about Vedic religious concern, but merely that these meditations stem from a life-affirming, joyous celebration of human existence" (*ibid*: 229).

There is solace even to a dead person, who merges back into nature. A hymn in *RV* (10.16.3) addresses a dead person. 'May your eye go to the sun, your life's breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to earth, as is your nature; or go to the waters, if that is your fate. Take root in the plants with your limbs' (*ibid*: 49). Again, 'Open up, earth; do not crush him. Be easy for him to enter and burrow in. Earth, wrap him up as a mother wraps a son in the edge of her skirt'.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, as scholars have pointed out, 'there is no trace of the doctrine of transmigration in the Vedas'. The idea seems to make its first appearance in the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (Ghurye 1965: 176).

It is very misleading to see the religion of the Vedas as animism, though one need not take it as an offence even if some regard it so. It is true that different aspects of Nature were invested with a divine soul that blessed worshipping human beings. But the Vedic R̥shis also saw the One beyond nature and all diversity. It was this seed from the *RV* which grew later in the Upanishads as a major philosophy. It was also the seed for the monotheistic religions that came later elsewhere in the world. The concept of the One is unmistakably seen in several hymns.<sup>5</sup> The best known of these is *Ēkam Sat viprah̥ bahudhā vadanti*: The One Truth is spoken of variously by the wise (*RV* 1.164.46). A few more such sayings are given here for illustration:<sup>6</sup>

*Ekam va idam vi babhūva sarvam.*

(The one alone is this; It manifests wholly in everything. *RV* 8.58.2).

*Ekah bahūnam asi manyuh ilitah.*

(That one manifests as the many; thus is the Force of Mind adored. *RV* 10.84.4).

*Bhūtasya jatah patih eka asit.* (That one is the Lord of all created things. *RV* 10.121.1)

*Ekah it Raja jagatah babhūva.*

(That one indeed is the sovereign of the moving Universe. *RV* 10.121.3)

*Ekah dhātara bhuvanāni vishva.*

(That one is the supporter of all things in the Universe. *RV* 1.154.4).

Sarma observes that the concept of Ekam was not one of monotheism, but of monism – ‘no longer the worship of a Supreme God who is separate from the world, but the contemplation of a spirit in and beyond the world, which is only Its partial manifestation. This stage is fully reached only in the Upanishads’ (Sarma 1955: 5). However, the language in which the concept is expressed is such that it is amenable to interpretation both as monotheism where the Supreme God is a sovereign who is separate from the world but rules it, and also as monism where the whole universe is a manifestation of the Supreme who transcends it as well. It was the latter idea, which got a clearer expression and elaboration in the Upanishads. However, there is a support for both concepts in the *RV*.

A seminal contribution of the Vedas, particularly of the *RV*, not only to Hinduism, but to all religions of the World, is the dual concept of *Satyam* and *Rtam*. *Satyam* or *Sat* is simply Truth, more or less in absolute or existential sense. In its metaphysical sense, *Satyam* is Reality, and in moral sense truthfulness and integrity. That is how *Satyam* and *Sat* became almost synonymous terms. *Rtam* is the cosmic law that is behind the dynamics of the universe. It is not a physical law alone, but a moral and spiritual law. Varuna was considered as the upholder of this Law but even other deities are described as having Truth and Moral Law as their essence. The Vedas had a fairly developed sense of ethics, which was more important than sacrificial rites, since the latter had no effect without observance of the moral law. *Rtam* is a wider concept, which includes justice and righteousness and became synonymous with Dharma. This moral law is in a few places also expressed as the law of Law of Dharma (for example, *RV* 1.22.18, 8.43.24). The term Dharma became more prominent later, i.e., in post-Vedic Hinduism and also in Buddhism, which was interpreted in various ways. The ideal was ‘*Satyam Vadan Satya-Karman*’ (truthful in speech as well as in action, *RV* 9.113.4). The Vedas believed that what upholds the Earth and keeps it moving is this law of Dharma (*Prthivīm dharmanā dhrtam*, *Atharva Veda* 12.1.17). There is a constant battle between forces of truth and goodness on the one hand and forces of evil, symbolised by battles with Dasyus, who were described as those not following the moral law (*anavrata*) and were inhuman (‘*amanusha*’). When a sceptic asked who has seen Indra, he was asked to see him in the working of this world itself, and in the beauty and order resulting from the working of the moral law, *Rtam* (*RV* 8.100.3-4). There are prayers to God to illumine the road to righteousness, so that

the humble human beings do not err (*RV* 10.31.2) – an ancient precursor to Newman’s ‘Lead Kindly Light’. It is also clarified that it is by going on the path of righteousness alone that ‘That’ (Supreme One) can be sought and realised (*RV* 8.12.3). Apart from values like truthfulness, generosity or charity for the poor was also emphasised.<sup>7</sup> This should set right the misconception of those who think that the Vedas offer nothing but a compilation of rituals, rites and incantations for conducting sacrifices.<sup>8</sup> The Vedas, particularly the *RV*, went much beyond rituals and rites, and showed deep moral as well as metaphysical concerns which paved the way for all world religions. Unfortunately, the *Yajurveda* and the *Brahmanas* concentrated on rituals and rites of a sacrificial religion, but the *Upanishads* further developed the metaphysical and moral ideas into a more systematic philosophy. Even the sacrificial rites and rituals were only a means of helping to develop a spiritual frame of mind, and were meant to keep the world moving. The mutual dependence between human beings and deities was projected to the human world too, which also was kept moving through the principle of give-and-take.

There were no temples and no image worship during the Vedic phase. The concepts of *Avatara*, reincarnation, special forms of image worship, going on pilgrimage (*Tirthayatra*) were all later developments of post-Buddhist period. Vedic religion found expression mainly through sacrificial rites. The sacrifices were of two types – the small ones performed at home by individuals and families and the large ones performed in public involving communities under the patronage of senior *Rshis* or kings.<sup>9</sup> It is not correct to say that only the elite had access to sacrifices. Even those without resources to sponsor sacrifices could attend them and prayers were made for the welfare of all (*sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarvessantu niramayah, ...* etc, which are recited as *swasti mantras* even today), and not of the *yajamana* (the patron) alone.

The *Rshis* came from a variety of background – hunters, fishermen, weavers, agriculturists, cowherds, kings and priests. Some of the verses clearly imply the class background of the concerned priests, for example the 101st hymn in 10th Mandala of *RV*, two verses of which are quoted here in translation:

“Make your thoughts harmonious; stretch them on the loom; make a ship whose oars carry us across; make weapons ready and set them in place; ... drive the sacrifice forward, my friends. Harness the plough and stretch the yoke on it; sow the seed in the prepared womb. And if the hearing of our song is weighty enough, then the ripe crop will come nearer to the scythes” (*RV* 10.101.2-3).<sup>10</sup>

Even after the caste system came into vogue, a sage in *Yajurveda* invokes blessings to all people and to each of the castes including *shudras* (*Yajurveda* 26.2).<sup>11</sup> No one is excluded from the blessings of the *Yajna* and the gods. There was thus nothing exclusively Brahminical about the Vedic religion, either in terms of sages who composed – or rather ‘heard’ – the hymns or in terms of the mode of worship and benefits invoked from the worship.

Vedic thought was completely free from dogma, as in the next phase of the *Upanishads*. It was also free from any attempt to impose dogma on others. On the contrary, as Amartya Sen has observed explorations of religious belief co-existed with skeptical arguments that are also elaborately explored. He cites the Creation Hymn in *RV* (10.129) as evidence (Amartya Sen 2005: 22). The *Lokayata* school

of thought later may not have accepted the Vedas, but the roots of even *Lokayata* sceptical thought are to be found in the *RV*.

It also appears that the Vedic polity was democratic and not authoritarian, which is quite consistent with the freedom of thought that prevailed. King's powers were restricted by the institutions of *Sabha* and *Samiti*, in which people were represented from different classes including the common people. There were also *Ganas* or Republics, which were ruled by *Sabhas* and *Samitis* and not by Kings. While *Sabha* was a smaller select body, the *Samiti* was a larger and more comprehensive body. There are several verses in *RV* calling upon people assembling in *Samitis* and *Sabhas* to be in harmony with each other for common purpose. For example: 'Assemble, speak together in harmony and let your minds be of all of one accord for good understanding' (*RV* 10.191.2). 'One and the same be your resolve; may your hearts be of one accord; united be the thoughts of all that happily agree' (*RV* 10.191.4)<sup>12</sup> Decisions appear to be based on consensus rather than on voting. But differences in opinion were respected. The age of the *RV* laid the foundation for not only world religions, but also for democratic political institutions. Its outlook was cheerful, optimistic, life-loving, but with equal regard to basic moral concerns, democratic and human values, and for metaphysical reflections.

## 2. UPANISHADIC PHASE

The *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* developed the mystical, the metaphysical and the philosophical elements in the Vedas. They do not, however, represent an attempt to repudiate the Vedas, as the conflict theory would presume. The Upanishadic sages have on the contrary drawn from the Vedas to support their arguments and interpretations. There are also descriptions of Vedic sacrifices being conducted by sages in the Upanishads. However, the Upanishads transcended a sacrificial and ritualistic element in the Vedas, fully exploiting their philosophical potential, and transformed the Vedic religion into a universal religion. The trend towards undermining rituals and sacrifices had started in the early Upanishadic phase, before the Buddha's appearance. There is both continuity and change in the Upanishads, from the Vedas. The open-minded inclination for speculation about the Ultimate Reality, about the Self (*Atman*), about the world, and about interrelation among them, and at the same time the insistence that search for Truth and its realisation is possible only for those who observe moral values, made the Upanishads a rich fountain of seminal ideas that enriched world religions. No Indian religion – including heterodox religions such as Buddhism and Jainism could ignore the Upanishadic thought. However, as Radhakrishnan observed, 'we do not have in the Upanishads a single well-articulated system of thought. We find in them a number of different strands...' (Radhakrishnan 1994: 8).

The style of Upanishads is no less impressive. Often it takes the form of discussion or dialogue and is, therefore, appealing. Take for instance the following dialogue from the *Chhandogya Upanishad* (Ch.VI, Section 12) between Uddālaka (father-guru) and Shvetaketu (son and disciple):

“ ‘Bring hither a fruit of that Nyagrodha [banyan] tree’. ‘Here it is, venerable Sir.’ ‘Break it’. ‘It is broken, venerable sir.’ ‘What do you see there?’ ‘These extremely fine seeds, venerable Sir.’ ‘Of these, please break one.’ ‘It is broken, venerable sir.’ ‘What do you see there?’ ‘Nothing at all, venerable Sir.’

“Then he said to him, ‘My dear, that Subtle Essence which you do not perceive verily, my dear, from that very essence this *nygradha* tree exists. Believe me, my dear.

“‘That which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for its self. That is the truth. That is the self (*atma*). That art thou (*tat tvam asi*), Shvetaketu’.

‘Please instruct me still further, Venerable Sir.’

‘So be it, my dear,’ said he.”

(Tr. by S. Radhakrishnan 1994: 462).

The Upanishads represent a clear shift of focus from the multitude of gods of Vedas to the one Supreme who was there in the Vedas too, but comes out brilliantly clear as Brahman in the Upanishads. The basic thrust of Upanishads is not just adoration and awe as in the Vedas but a search for the One, which underlies everything.<sup>13</sup> The Upanishads marked a shift of emphasis from prayers or poems in praise of gods perceived as outside of us to search within, since the One Supreme sustaining everyone is within us all. The Supreme, Brahman, when spoken in the context of the principle or power within each being is called as *Atman* or Self. Though, the seed of the concept of the One (*Ekam*) power behind everything was already in the Vedas, the shift of emphasis on approach to the divine ‘out there’ to the ‘one within’, is unmistakable. It is misleading to dub this shift as one from extrovert world-loving liveliness of the Vedas to world-indifferent introspective pessimism in the Upanishads, as a few have observed. The shift can be taken more as a mark of a greater maturity and depth in the development of ancient Hinduism and constitutes a seminal contribution to the world religions and metaphysics.

There could, however, be a debate as to whether the philosophy of Upanishads amounted only to monotheism or went beyond it to monism. Verses could be quoted in support of both positions. Sometimes the Upanishads compare God to a spider, that creates a web from its own body and lies at its centre, but is still distinct from the web. In this image, the creator is separate from his creation. In many verses, God not only manifests Himself in this Universe but also transcends beyond it. He is also Complete Reality (*Purnam*), so complete that even if you deduct infinity from it, It remains complete; if you divide It by Infinity, then also It remains complete (The original is quoted at the outset of chapter 2 above.). The Upanishads thus give a complete definition of the Absolute, though they also say that Brahman is something, which cannot be fully grasped by intellect, nor has properties (*gunas*), thus making any definition of it impossible.

The undermining of *yajna* or ritual sacrifice as a form of propitiation of Gods and shift to contemplation and *Tapas* become meaningful in the context of the focus change from the multitude of Gods to one Supreme. One can pray to a personal deity, but the impersonal Brahman can be only meditated or contemplated upon. From the Upanishadic age onwards *Tapas* almost replaced *Yajnas*, at least among the sages and the spiritual elite, though kings, rich merchants and such others continued with *Yajnas* both to get earthly benefits and flaunt their power and wealth. The eminence of *Tapas* in spiritual endeavour has continued to this day, though after the Upanishadic age this path had to ‘rival’ with *Bhakti* and *Karma*. *Tapas* was essentially a path of *Jnana* or knowledge to realise Brahman, but it was more than mere contemplation. It also meant austerity, mental serenity, and self-control, conquering the six enemies – *kama* (lust), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed, avarice), *mada* (arrogance),

*moha* (infatuation or attachment), and *matsara* (jealousy). *Jnana* was seen as an inevitable outcome of *tapas*. *Jnana* meant that on realization of Brahman, the *Jnani* sees the divine in all and looks upon all creatures – human and nonhuman, including plants and Nature with compassion and love. With *Jnana*, attachment for one's family is extended to, or converted as, compassion for all. It does not mean aversion to family life, though quite a few mistakenly thought so. The Upanishadic sages did not renounce family life.

### 3. SIX SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY: *SHAD-DARSHANAS*

A systematic development of the philosophical foundation of Hinduism in terms of six schools of thought – the *Shad-darshanas* took place during the Upanishadic phase. These schools are considered *Astika* (Theistic or Orthodox) as they accept the existence of God, either explicitly or implicitly. The six schools are *Vedānta*, *Yoga*, *Mīmāṃsa*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Vaiśeṣika* and *Nyāya*. They are closely associated with six *Rshis* who founded and developed these schools. They are respectively: *Baḍarayana* (Vyasa), *Patanjali*, *Jaimini*, *Kapila*, *Kaṇāda* and *Gautama* (not the Buddha). They are not listed here in chronological order. They belong to a hoary past, some of them like *Kapila* and *Baḍarayana* belonging to an age before the Buddha. *Sarvadarshana-sangraha* of *Mādhavāchārya* includes a discussion of all these schools. But subsequently, not all books on Hindu thought include the exposition of all these schools, with *Vedānta* always occupying a pre-eminent position in any discussion of Hindu philosophy and thought. However, Max Müller (*The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*), Hirianna (2000-b), Potter and Bhattacharya (1992), Dasgupta (1975: I), Radhakrishnan (1996: II), and Mahadevan (1999) do include these schools in their works. A work at popular level, *Founders of Philosophy* edited by V. Raghavan (1975) gives equal importance to all the six schools with a chapter devoted to each. Paul Williams' essay (1998) is also a very useful source for understanding some of these schools.

As an introduction to the various schools of Indian Philosophy, Paul Williams' observation is noteworthy:

'Indian Philosophy is as diverse as European philosophy and can only with distortion be characterized in a few simple expressions. The all-too-common slogans that "Indian philosophy is mystical" or "spiritual", or "Indian Philosophy is intuitive" or "non-rational" (and therefore is not really philosophy at all, as Westerners understand the term) are, as characterizations of Indian philosophy, simply nonsense. They betray a gross ignorance of the vast critical analytic writing produced in India covering the nature of knowledge, perception, causation, truth, the nature of valid inference, consciousness, word and referent, ontology, and so many other clearly philosophical issues' (1998: 794).

The first of these schools, **Vedānta**, both directly and indirectly, has influenced much of what is discussed above in the chapters in Part I in this book. Vedānta as a school of philosophy rose in to significance and gained an identity due to the ***Brahmasūtras*** credited to **Baḍarayana**. This text has been discussed, though briefly, in the previous chapter (first section) already. Vedānta has been a

most pervasive school, and has also stood the test of time. While the other schools, except Yoga, are hardly in popular mind, Vedanta continues to dominate Hinduism and Hindu thought. Vedanta refers basically to the content of the Upanishads, the *Brahmasutras* being only a summary of the Upanishadic thought as conceptualized by Badarayana. Vedanta thus cannot be said to have been ‘founded’ by him and extends much beyond him. Vedanta school was developed later by the three Acharyas too – Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, and also by others, like Vallabhacharya in the medieval phase, and by Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi and others in the modern phase. It is difficult to characterise Vedanta as a singular school of thought, since there are distinct schools in it – *Advaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, *Dvaita* and other such schools. The essence of Vedanta irrespective of the schools is an inquiry into Ultimate Reality, which also indicates how to realise or experience this Reality and enjoy liberation and Bliss. The Ultimate Reality according to Advaita (Non-dualism) is One, a Supreme impersonal or Nirguna Power, Brahman the Absolute, which is also the same as Atman or Self – not the egoistic and body conscious empirical self, but the Self behind all the relative realities, which is beyond all pain and pleasure. **Adi Shankaracharya (Shankara)** (788-820 CE) propounded this view deriving authority from the Upanishads, the *Gita* and the *Brahmasutras*. He was not the first to teach Advaita, as he was preceded by many seers of the Upanishads, such as Yajnavalkya and Uddalaka. Yajnavalkya’s teaching – *ayam atma brahma* (this Self is Brahman) and Uddalaka’s famous saying – *tat tvam asi* (That thou art) formed the foundation of the Advaita school (Mahadevan 1999: 123-34). The way to liberation here is to realise the identity of the Atman with the Brahman and its basic nature of Being, Consciousness and Bliss, and also to know that empirical world of sorrow is only a relative reality. Shankara accepted the concept of a personal God only as a step towards self-realisation. In Advaita, liberation is not a state to be newly attained, because it is in the nature of the Self itself. The Upanishads state ‘That thou art’, and not ‘That thou becometh’ (Hiriyanna 2000-b). Liberation consists in realizing it. As Mahadevan emphasises, Advaita does not believe in any dogmatic idolatry of scripture. He quotes Shankara: “that which is accepted or believed in without proper inquiry, prevents one from gaining final good and leads to evil consequences” (Mahadevan 1999: 136). Spokesmen of orthodoxy claiming support from Shankara, please take note.

**Ramanujacharya** (1017-1137 CE) is known to have lived for 120 years. According to him the Ultimate Reality is a Supreme Person, *Saguna* God, who is adorable, Protector of all, answers prayers and responds to our devotion and love for Him. It is a theistic philosophy and accepts personal God, with attributes of truth, beauty and bliss. ‘His conception of Reality is that of a complex whole that is organic. Reality for him is not homogeneous, non-composite consciousness. Its unity is like that of a living organism, one element predominates and controls the rest. The predominant and controlling element is God’ (Rao 1990: 165). The world of souls and the world of matter are also a reality, but they are subordinate and stand in the relation of *Visheshanas* (adjectives) to the Lord. They have no *independent* reality, apart from the Lord. The complex whole is one, a Unity, and therefore the school is called as *Vishishtadvaita* (Qualified or Distinct Non-Dualism). The way to salvation is Bhakti and Devotion, and better still, *Prapatti* – complete surrender to God’s will. Though Ramanuja also claimed to have derived authority for his thoughts from the Upanishads, the *Gita* and the *Brahma Sutras* and commented on them, offering his interpretation, he was inspired even more by the philosophy and teachings of Alvars (discussed in the next chapter), the *Bhagavata* and *Pancharatna Agamas* (*ibid*: 164).

According to **Madhvacharya** (1197–1276 CE), the Reality is five-fold (*Pancha-bhedas*), God being the Independent Reality, a Supreme Person without defects but with all adorable qualities, who is self-contained and perfect in Himself. Out of his sweet choice and pleasure, he created the souls and the matter. God, souls and matter are all realities, each different from other, with souls differentiated from each other, and each type of matter differentiated from other types matter. It is thus a pluralistic reality, all controlled ultimately by God as our freedom is given by Him, and subject to Him. The school is known as Dvaita – or Dualism. There is no difference between Rāmanjua and Madhva as far as the nature of *Sādhana* and the means of salvation are concerned, since both emphasise *Bhakti* and *prapatti*. However, ritual has a greater role in Viśiṭhādvaita. The Dvaita school also claims its authority from the Upanishdas, the Gita and the Brahmasutras. All the three schools also emphasise taking a moral path, compassion for all and shedding egoism. The reason for the pervasive and enduring popularity of Vedānta, compared to other schools of philosophy like Mīmāṃsā, Sāṅkhya, Vaiśeṣhika and Nyāya, is its amenability for easier understanding, flexibility that allows scope for taking into account differences in individuals' capacity and inclination, applicability to day-to-day problems of living in the modern world, and also acceptance of a moral path explicitly.

**Yoga**, or more specifically Rajayoga developed by **Patanjali**, is almost equally popular as Vedānta, and has been introduced in the chapter-4 on *Sādhana*. Yoga means yoking, it is 'yoking of the powers of the mind by special disciplines of concentration' (Armstrong 1999: 38), or joining the spiritual path to the Supreme, where a personal god is not necessarily involved. Yoga is the science of how to achieve it. It is also the art of mind control. Just as Bādarāyana is not the founder of Vedānta, Patanjali also is not the founder of Yoga. Like the former, Patanjali also systematised what was known in a creative way, and again like the former expressed his system in brief aphorisms. Yoga as a system is pre-Buddhist, though Patanjali may not be. Rajayoga also has the same goal as Vedānta – personal realisation of ultimate Reality and experiencing Bliss. Both Yoga and Vedānta emphasise the importance of being moral, and ethics is a part of their system. However, while Vedānta is more a philosophy, Rajayoga is more a practical approach or *Sādhana* and a technique. In Hāṭhayoga, the emphasis is almost wholly on the technique. Both Rajayoga and Hāṭhayoga also emphasise maintaining and improving physical health combined with mental health, which then lead to spiritual health. An obsession with technique has the disadvantage of leading to neglect of related philosophy, and even of the basic and the ultimate goal of Yoga. Patanjali, however, did not make the mistake of being obsessed with technique. He developed a step-wise approach wherein moral readiness of the individual is absolutely necessary to attain the goals of yoga. The contribution of yoga to the understanding of states of consciousness of human mind is significant. Yoga distinguishes between four states of consciousness – *Jagrta* (awake); *Swapna* (dream), *Sushupta* (sleep) and *Turiya* (fourth or ultimate). In the *Turiya* state also, there are two stages – the first is consciousness of the self (not the ego, - active in the first state of *Jagrta*), leading to the next stage of identification of the individual self with the Universal self, the stage known as *Samādhi*. Some yogis do not recognise any difference between the two stages in the fourth state. While the first three states of consciousness are natural, experienced by any person, the last can be achieved only through *Sādhana* (spiritual practice). Achieving the last state means fulfillment of the seeker's destiny.

*Mīmāṃsā-darshana* of **Jaimini** takes a rather narrow look at religion and approach to God realisation. It is the sacrificial acts and *Karmakāṇḍa* which constitute Dharma as per this work. This was even taken as the Karma-marga, till the Gita broadened the meaning and significance of the term as explained earlier in the book. *Karma-kāṇḍa* was meant essentially for householders, who were absorbed in the mundane work of the world but had to spare some time for the rites and rituals for success both in the material and spiritual world. The *Brahmanas*, composed during the Vedic phase, constituted the authority for this school. Rites and rituals, done with purity of heart, with austerity, with correct procedure and pronunciation of Mantras, bring the desired results – material as well as a place in heaven. This is the sum and substance of the philosophy of *Mīmāṃsā*, though the term literally means ‘investigation’ or ‘philosophical inquiry’. Jaimini gives interpretation of the *Brahmanas* and the various rituals prescribed therein, bringing out their significance. He classifies different rituals and acts (Karma) into three categories – *nitya* (to be done daily, and mandatory), *naimittika* (dictated by occasions such as birth and death, marriage etc), and *Kāmya* (motivated by particular desire, such as desire for a son, wealth, or a place in heaven, which yields *phala* or desired result). The philosophy of *Mīmāṃsā* (also known as the *Purva Mīmāṃsā* to distinguish from the *Uttara Mīmāṃsā*, i.e., Vedānta). Being too narrow and intellectually not appealing, it was sidelined by other schools, particularly by Vedānta. However, some of the *Dharmashastras* took *Mīmāṃsā* seriously and the influence of *Mīmāṃsā* has not totally disappeared. Quite a lot of rituals have given a shape to Hinduism. No religion is purely intellectual or emotional. A religion acquires a magical aura and attraction because of its rites and rituals. Some simple rituals may even be quite helpful in concentrating the mind, creating a spiritual environment, and help in the resolve to be austere and ethical. The *Brahmanas* and *Mīmāṃsā Darshana* played their role in providing a ritual base for Hinduism, though arguably they overdid their job. Quite a few spiritual leaders of Hinduism, since the Upanishadic age, continuing through the medieval age and to the modern phase, refused to consider these rituals as basis of Hinduism and suggested more meaningful alternatives. Though a few simple rituals may be helpful on the spiritual path, at best they can only be aids and not ends in themselves. They cannot define and exhaust the totality of Dharma. While helpful in moderation, beyond a limit they can only divert the mind from basic spiritual goals. Performed with no knowledge of their significance, rituals lose whatever spiritual significance they have. Priests trained only in conducting rituals, with no knowledge of their meaning and significance, and ignorant of Vedānta, can hardly be spiritual helpers, let alone being spiritual leaders. Hinduism, as practised, lost a lot of its prestige and value by ignoring this.

**Sankhya** (same as *Samkhya*) school of philosophy is supposed to be the oldest among the six Shatdarshanas, its founding father being **Kapila**. Origins of this school are traced to the Upanishads, particularly *Maitrayani* and *Shwetashvatara* (Dasgupta 1975: I: 211). The age of Kapila is not known, but there is a reference to him in the Gita as the most eminent among the perfected sages (Ch.10.26), and is considered to be much earlier to it. There are references to the Sankhya philosophy in the Mahabharata, Dharmasutras and Puranas. However, a systematic exposition of the philosophy came later in *Sankhyakarika* by Ishwara Kṛṣṇa of the 2nd Century CE. At the end he refers to Kapila as the founder of this school of philosophy whose teachings were transmitted to his disciple Asuri and in turn to

a long line of disciples (See *Sankhyakarika*, verses 70 and 71 as in Swami Virupakshananda 1995:128). In size, *Sankhyakarika* is small, with only 72 verses, but very dense in content. It thus stimulated several commentaries as for example by Sri Vachaspati Mishra and Vijnanabhikshu in Sanskrit. There are also at least two other works on the Sankhya School, the *Sankhya Sūtras* and the *Tattva Samāsa*, but the *Sankhyakarika* is rated as the most authentic and better known (*ibid* : ‘Introduction’ : vi).

The Sankhya School made valuable and lasting contributions to Hindu philosophy. The idea of transmigration of souls and the theory of three *Guṇas* – Sattva, Rajas and Tamas, originated from this school, both of which are incorporated in the *Gita*. However, apart from its components entering mainstream Hinduism, the school also stands by itself for its uniqueness and richness in rigorous reasoning and depth of thought and has made Hindu philosophy and its diversity richer thereby.

The basic point of this philosophy is the dualism between *Purusha* (Spirit or True Self or Pure Consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (everything else which is not Purusha, i.e., nature, matter). Purusha is regarded as the male principle and Prakṛti as the female. This dualism does not correspond to the dualism between mind and body as in western philosophy for Prakṛti includes even mind as it is closely related to body and nature. An important characteristic of Prakṛti is its diversity. It is also real, and not just an appearance (*mayā*). It is Prakṛti that consists of the three *Guṇas* and not Purusha. The *Sattva* *guṇa* is the quality of being luminous, gentle and pure. *Rajas* is the quality of being active, aggressive and stimulating. *Tamas* is the quality of being passive, coarse and heavy (*jada*). These qualities cover not only mind but also matter. According to the *Sankhya* School, the process of creation and evolution starts when the three *guṇas* get into a state of imbalance and produce a multitudinous diversity. The *Sankhya* School does not need God to start creation or evolution. Prakṛti herself starts it through a disequilibrium in the *Guṇas*. Purusha is unattached and uninvolved in the whole process, who only stands as the silent witness. Liberation from all sorrows of the mundane world takes place when one perceives or realizes the separation of Purusha or True Self from Prakṛti, as per the Sankhya School.

The Sankhya School goes further in explaining the process of creation through its theory of *Satkaryavāda* – the doctrine (*Vāda*) of existent (*Sat*) effect (*Kārya*) (Williams 1998: 798). According to this theory the effect is present in latent form in the cause. ‘Causation’ here is actually transformation, for the theory disputes the possibility of creation out of nothing, or complete void. Nothing is ever newly created or totally destroyed. *Sṛṣṭi* is evolution from *Prakṛti* and *Pralaya* is dissolution within it (Mahadevan 1999: 114). The whole process takes place in the Prakṛti, and not Purusha. The Spirit or Purusha is ‘neither evolvent nor the evolute’ (verse 3 in the *Sankhyakarika*, Virupakshananda 1995:10).

What then is Purusha for? What is his role? Is there only one Purusha? Since the Purusha does not have any attributes and is beyond the *Guṇas*, his role is like that of a referee in a match, an uninvolved spectator, and in that capacity controls Prakṛti through Prakṛti. He exists because all this drama of Prakṛti must have an experiencer who is also in the position of a non-playing director or presiding officer (*Adhishṭhānat*) (*Sankhyakarika*, verse 17, as in Virupakshananda 1995:59). There are, however, as many Purushas as the individual selves who take birth and die (*ibid*, verse 18, p.61). These selves have a subtle body – *Linga Sharīra*, which is involved in transmigration, and which is separate from the gross body. It is probably because of the emphasis on multitudinous number of Purushas or plurality of spirits as well as the elements of Prakṛti that this school is known as *Sankhya*.

Other schools of philosophy regard the Sankhya School as imperfect and inadequate, though they also respect it for its creative and vibrant originality. The main weakness of *Sankhya* is considered to be that it just stopped short of taking the next step of indicating the existence of a Super-Purusha – *Purushottama*, or Almighty God, who puts some order in the functioning of *Prakrti*. If *Purusha* is multitudinous in nature, there must be one controlling Principle to which all individual selves as well as *Prakrti* is subordinated. This led to *Dvaita Vedanta* (Vedanta of Dualism) on the one hand, whereas the other path taken by Advaita Vedanta was that the individual selves were the same as the primordial *Purusha*, *Prakrti* being a projection on the Brahman (in Vedanta parlance) or the primordial *Purusha* (in Sankhya parlance). Here again, liberation consists in perceiving that the self is not the same as the gross body, but that it is *Purusha*, which is what *Sankhya* also teaches. We see thus how the different versions of Vedanta are a logical culmination from a start given by *Sankhya*. Though *Sankhya* does not make any reference to One Supreme and Absolute, it is counted among the *Astika* (orthodox and theistic) school of philosophy like the other five, and not among the *Nastika* (Heterodox and agnostic) schools that comprise Buddhism, Jainism and the Lokayata Schools. *Sankhya* is considered as *Astika* because the presence of God or *Purushottama* is considered implicit or logically derived from it, even if not explicit.

Though several modern Indian philosophers consider both *Vaisheshika* and *Nyaya* schools together because of their significant overlap, traditionally they are regarded as separate. The former conceptualises the universe into a system of physics, while the latter focusses more on psychology, inference and logic. The **Vaisheshika** School can be credited to be one of the earliest philosophies of physics, with the concept of God only incidental and hardly explicit, at least, in the initial phase of the development of the school. It is probably the first school of thought to have advanced the concept that underlying the physical world, its basic or ultimate constituents are the *Anus* or Atoms. Atoms were conceptualised as the final individual constituents. Interestingly, according to the Vaisheshika School, the *Anus* are so minute as to look alike, but the *Anus* of one substance have distinct properties of their own which are distinguishable from the properties of *Anus* of another substance. In other words, the physical structure of the *Anus* of a given substance is distinct or *Vishesh* (distinct, particular), which means emphasis on diversity of the Universe, rather than on its ultimate unity. Vaisheshikas also considered the Universe as real, and not just an appearance. Hiriyanna calls its approach as one of ‘pluralistic realism’ (Hiriyanna 2000-b: 228) and Mahadevan calls it as ‘atomic pluralism’ (Mahadevan 1999: 103).

The date of *Vaisheshika-Sutra* of **Kanada** is undecided but supposed to be ancient and probably pre-Buddhist (Radhakrishnan 1999: II: 177). It has ten chapters, each divided into two sections. The earliest known commentary on it is by Prashastapada of fifth century CE. According to Hiriyanna (2000-b), it is more a restatement than a mere commentary, and as a result the school of thought was further developed. While the original work was not explicit on any Creator or God, Prashastapada developed the doctrine of creation by God (*Ibid* : 226).

According to the Vaisheshika school, the Universe is a multitude, a multifarious system, but not unconnected between parts. It consists of *dravyas*, translated as ‘substances’ by modern Indian philosophers like Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna. The substances are nine in number: (1)

*Prthivī* (earth), (2) *ap* (water), (3) *tejas* (fire and light), (4) *Vāyu* (air), (5) *Ākasha*, (6) *Kāla* (time), (7) *dik* (space), (8) *ātman* (Self, soul), and (9) *Manas*. They are further distinguished in so far as the first four – earth, water, fire or light, and air have atoms or particles, which are physical in nature. The fifth one – *Ākasha*, is partless and infinite, and does not produce anything. It is only the substances, which are constituted of *anus* that can produce something. Time and space are objective realities, even if they do not consist of atoms. They are also partless and infinite like *ākasha*. *Ākasha* is distinguished from space; it is what fills the space (Hiriyanna 2000-b :230). There are many selves in Vaisheshika school, ‘each being regarded as omnipresent and eternal. Though theoretically present everywhere, the feelings, thoughts and volitions of a self are confined to the physical organism with which it is, for the time being associated. So, for all practical purposes, the self is when it acts’. (*ibid*: 230). Each self has its own *manas*, the ninth and the last *dravya*. Hiriyanna says that ‘*Manas*’ in Vaisheshika is not the same as mind as usually translated, because *manas* is only an instrument of the self for knowing (*ibid*: 230). ‘It is through the *manas* that the relation of the self to the senses and the body is established; and through them the self comes to be related to the external world (*Ibid* : 231).

There are categories (*Padārtha*) other than *dravya* which have a role to play in the Vaisheshika universe. These ‘*Padārthas*’ are *Guṇa* (quality), *Karma* (action), *Sāmānya* (universal), *Vishesha* (distinctive, particular, individual), *samavāya* (necessary relation) and *abhāva* (absence, negation). These categories are accepted in the Nyaya School too. *Dravya* is also a category, but other categories are conceptual in nature, and yet ‘real’ (not illusory). The highest universal in Vaisheshika is *Satta* or Being or Existence, as it is found in the highest number of entities (*ibid*: 233).

The Vaisheshika school also has its own theory of causation, which is called *Asatkāryavāda*, seemingly the opposite of Sankhya’s *Satkāryavāda* explained above. Hiriyanna translates *asatkāryavāda* as ‘the doctrine of non-existent effect’, according to which ‘the effect, once non-existent, comes into being afterwards. Hiriyanna clarifies that it does not mean that the effect can exist apart from the cause. The effect is inherent in the material cause ‘as a quality may be said to do in substance’. The crucial point in Vaisheshika is that ‘*asatkāryavāda* signifies not only that the non-existence comes to be, but that an existent product sooner or later ceases to be’ (*ibid*: 239). Also, ‘every whole that is constructed out of parts is wholly different from the parts’ (Mahadevan 1999: 109).

The concept of God as the Creator (and Maintainer and Dissolver) was added to the philosophy of Vaisheshika school by later commentators as they felt that this world and the universe with all its complexity and diversity, has some orderliness, and could not have been produced without a creator. God was merged with the concept of Atman or the Self. He is *Paramātman* (the Super-Soul) distinguished from individual souls (*jivatmans*). The world operates in a cyclical process of creation, maintenance and dissolution, and again creation leading to another cycle. The *Rgvedic* idea of moral order also was incorporated by later commentators like Udayana, because it is through the moral order that the world is maintained (*ibid*: 242-3). The most interesting feature of the Vaisheshika philosophy, particularly as formulated by its founder – Kanāda, is its scientific speculation about the nature of the world and its working, trying to arrive at a holistic understanding of it.

As observed above, there is a significant overlap between Vaisheshika and Nyaya schools and even when they differ, they complement each other. As Radhakrishnan says both ‘represent the analytic type

of philosophy, and uphold commonsense and science'. With logical inquiry and criticism, they try to repudiate the scepticism of Buddhist philosophy 'which merged external reality in the ideas of mind'. Radhakrishnan further observes that 'both seek to restore the traditional substances, the soul within and nature without, but not on the basis of mere authority', but also using rigorous analytical logic. (Radhakrishnan 1996: II, 29-30). While, however, the emphasis of Vaisheshika is on ontology, that of Nyaya is on epistemology. While Vaisheshika attempts to conceptualise in a holistic way the phenomenon of the world and its working, Nyaya develops philosophy of mind and knowledge, the psychological process of perception, and develops a rigorous system of logic. The field covered by Nyaya is so vast that it is not possible to do justice to it here. In what follows, there is only an indication in broad terms of the thrust of the Nyaya and the interested readers may have to go to sources referred in the beginning of the section for a more detailed discussion. There are also two more books of particular interest on the Nyaya School – Matilal (2002) and Chakrabarti (2001). Buddhism and Jainism too developed their own approaches to ontology and epistemology, which are discussed in these sources.

The founder of the Nyaya School is said to be Akshapada Gautama, who is different from both the ancient sage Gautama of Vedic period, and also from Gautama Buddha. Akshapada was his first name, and Gautama is the name of his family or Gotra (Thakur 1975: 39). A tradition of systematic rules of logic existed even before Akshapada, and forms of debate, of *Pramanas* (proof or valid source of knowledge) etc. were known earlier. Akshapada, however, systematized existing knowledge and developed it further in his *Nyayasutras*. The work was composed in the third century BCE (Radhakrishnan 1996:II: 36) or in the fourth century BCE (Mahadevan 1999: 95). There were several commentators and logicians who developed Indian logic further as a scientific discipline. The first such commentary was by Vatsyayana (400 CE); Gangesha's *Tattvachintamani* is also a standard work on the school, which started the *Navya* or modern version (1200 CE).

Radhakrishnan (1996: II: 29-175) characterises the approach of the *Nyaya* School as one of Logical Realism. The *Nyaya* school is 'willing to admit as true whatever is established by reason, ... (But) that which gives distinction to the *Nyaya* (from Upanishads) is its critical treatment of metaphysical problems.' (*Ibid* : 30). Because of its emphasis on analytic logic, *Nyaya* is also called as *Tarka-vidya* or *Tarka-Shastra* (Science of logic). It is also known as *Anvikshiki* (science of research). In brief, it is the science of right reasoning. Akshapada analyses the nature of knowledge and discusses the right ways of arriving at it and the pitfalls to be avoided. It points out types of possible fallacies in reasoning.

The *Nyaya* school accepts four means of valid knowledge (*Pramanas*): Pratyaksha (perception or direct apprehension, not confined to sense perception alone), *Anumana* (inference), *Upamana* (comparison), and *Shabda* (testimony or authority either of Vedas or of a trustworthy person) (for details, see Mahadevan 1999: 96-101). Considering the fact that the scope of *Pratyaksha* includes intelligent observation and even experimentation, it is interesting how *Nyaya* developed a theory of knowledge which continues to have relevance. Testimony or *shabda* is not limited by scriptural authority, but includes trustworthy and objective persons. *Nyaya* is thus a rational and undogmatic approach, which it applies even to matters of religion.

The relevance of *Nyaya* to religion consists in its attempt to prove the existence of the Self and God through logic, as a response both to the Buddhists and materialists (*Lokayata* school). According

to this school, the object of the notion of 'I' is the Self or the soul. It is the Self (or Jiva in live body) which perceives; as for example, two images created by the two eyes are perceived as one image by the Self. It is the Self, which 'recognises', relating the perception of a present image of a person to a thing previously perceived. The process of knowing is done by the Self. Body is only an instrument or vehicle of the Self. It uses the senses and controls them. It is the Self, which imparts unity to the knowledge gained through senses. Buddhi or intellect is a quality of the Self, not the Self itself. According to Nyaya, the Self or the soul is unique to each individual, and there is infinite number of them. This position comes close to that of pluralist realism of Vaisheshika. Souls are eternal, while their bodies are not. The souls have a past and also a future, and their present is determined by the ethics of actions in the past, and the future is determined by the ethics of actions in the present. Though, however, the Nyaya School does admit of the possibility of release of the soul from the cycle of pain and pleasure, birth and death, and its entry into a state of blissful freedom, it does not indicate how it is achieved. It is here that the Vedantins show the way (Radhakrishnan 1996: II: 52).

Radhakrishnan explains that as per the Nyaya and Vaisheshika schools, the real is a complex of souls and nature. 'The natural order is not the product of souls, but is arrangement of a God, who so fashions the atoms as to make the natural order the medium for the souls' experiences. The harmony between souls and nature is due to divine design' (*Ibid*: 165). While the later followers of the Nyaya school were emphatically theistic, the *Nyayasūtras* only casually refer to the theory of divine causality (*Ibid*: 165). Nevertheless, even the later followers accept the theory of the freedom of will and recognize the role of human effort (*Purushakara*), but this freedom is not absolute and is subject to control by God (*Ibid*: 161). The school does not accept the existence of a non-intelligent cause like *adrshṭa* (luck), since everything is either the result of our own past deeds or subject to ultimate control by the divine power (*Ibid*: 167). The remarkable orderliness in Nature is because of an ultimate intelligent power – Ishwara, according to this school. But the Ishwara of Nyaya is not the one as perceived by Advaita Vedanta; He is a force or power external to the world. The nature and the souls are not manifestations of God, but fashioned by him (*Ibid*: 172). Thus it is a dualist conception, which led to Dvaita Vedanta.

Whatever be the theological position of the Nyaya School, its contribution to Hindu thought in particular and Indian thought in general is immense. It provided a system of analysis, debate, refutation and of proving different philosophical positions which were very useful to later philosophers like the three eminent *Acharyas*. As Radhakrishnan observes, "the strength, as well as the weakness of the Nyaya philosophy, is in its faith that the method of ordinary common sense and experience can be applied to the problem of religion and philosophy" (*Ibid*: 174).

#### 4. HETERODOX SCHOOLS

The mainstream Hinduism in the ancient period, represented by the Vedas, Upanishads and the *Gita*, was theistic in character, and could, therefore, be called as Gnostic (*Āstika*) Hinduism. In contrast, some heterodox or agnostic (*Nāstika*) schools – some of which like Jainism and Buddhism became separate religions – did not believe in God and soul. It is usual to distinguish between two main traditions in Indian religions in another way too – as Vedic and Shramanic, with only Jainism and Buddhism included in the latter. It is well to remember, however that the two terms - Vedic and Hindu - are certainly not

synonyms. It would also be naïve to make caste system as the criterion for distinguishing between the two types of traditions. Being ascetic religions, Buddhism and Jainism did not of course come under the grip of the caste system, but the ascetic traditions within Gnostic Hinduism were also outside the pale of caste. The distinction between Gnostic Hinduism and Heterodox Schools is also more comprehensive than the one between the Vedic and the Shramanic traditions. The Heterodox schools include the independent *Lokayata* school, which is also agnostic but independent of the two Shramanic schools. The heterodox schools have significantly contributed to the richness of Indian philosophy, culture, literature and art, whose proportion is not indicated by the number of their followers. Their present number is certainly no indication of their past popularity in the classical period. No account of the development of Hinduism can be complete without some attention to their contribution not only to Indian philosophy but also to Hinduism as a religion.

The main contribution of the three heterodox schools in the classical phase of Hinduism – Lokayata, Jainism and Buddhism – was that they presented a counterpoint – a countervailing philosophy – to the excess of ritualism of the Vedas and the metaphysics of the Upanishads and it forced Hinduism to strike a balance. It is this balance, sidelining ritualism and emphasising the virtue of ethical life, which was achieved in the Gita. In terms of the development of Hinduism, therefore, it is plausible that Lokayata, Jainism and early Buddhism preceded the *Gita*.

The *Lokayata* School, which is agnostic in its thrust, was propounded by Charvaka. Though his original writings are not available, references to and quotations from his works in subsequent philosophers' and scholars' writings help in knowing, at least, some of the basic tenets of the school. The real or original name of Charvaka and the period to which he belonged are not known, but he appears to be pre-Buddhist as early Jain and Buddhist texts have referred to him (Chattopadhyay D: 1978: 6-8). He was called as Charvaka as his sayings were liked and enjoyed immensely (*Charu* + *vak* = *Charvak*, a person with charming speech) (Kaikini 1995: 11). His philosophy was termed as Lokayata as it is based (*ayata*) on this world (*loka*). Loka also means people, and Lokayata could also be translated as philosophy of the people. Both S Radhakrishnan and S Dasgupta have drawn attention to the two meanings of the word in their monumental works on Indian philosophy (Chattopadhyay D: 1978: 3). The two meanings are quite consistent with each other. It is plausible that Charvaka gained significant popularity for his views and a lot of following. A few sources like *Maitri Upanishad* refer to Brhaspati as the original teacher of the heretical philosophy (Hiriyanna 2000-b: 187). It is not unlikely that both Brhaspati and Charvaka are the same.

According to Lokayata philosophy, sense perception (*Pratyaksha*) is the only means of valid knowledge. Even inference (*anumana*) was rejected as guess work and speculation. *Shabda* in the restricted sense of the authority of Vedas was also forcefully rejected as a source of knowledge. Charvaka believed neither in God nor in soul, and rebirth was out of question. Soul 'comes into being, according to him, with that peculiar concatenation of the elements which we call the living body. Charvaka accordingly does not deny a conscious or spiritual principle; only he refuses to regard it as ultimate and independent. It is a property of the physical aggregate of the body and disappears when the latter disintegrates' (*Ibid*: 191). Hiriyanna regards this philosophy as the Indian counterpart of the western view that mind is a function of matter. A verse attributed to Charvaka is quite popular:

*Bhāsmibhūṭasya dehasya punaragamanam kutah /  
Yavajjīvet sukham jīvet rnam kṛtvā ghṛtaṃ pibet //*

It means: ‘How can a body return to life once it is turned into ashes? Live happily as long as you live. Enjoy ghee (clarified butter, a delicacy), even if it means borrowing!’ May it be noted that he did not say ‘*raṇam kṛtvā ghṛtaṃ pibet*’ (enjoy ghee even if it means fighting), but only ‘*rnam kṛtvā ghṛtaṃ pibet*’ (enjoy ghee even if it means borrowing)! Charvaka thus called upon people to boldly enjoy the pleasures of this world, without any feeling of guilt, and peacefully too. One of his sayings is ‘*yadi kaschit bhīruḥ dṛiṣṭam sukham tyajet sa paśuvat mūrkhō bhavet*’ (if any one out of timidity gives up an opportunity of pleasure, he is a foolish creature) (Kaikini 1995: 34). Pain is admittedly a part of our existence, but that is no reason to reject the pursuit of pleasure. According to him, ‘nobody casts away the grain because of the husk’ (Hiriyanna 2000-b: 194). But this pursuit of happiness is subject to the rule of law (*Danda*) and moral obligation to other people, and not unqualified. It is significant that he called upon people to enjoy ghee by borrowing it, not by stealing it or by robbing someone of it. About the question of the creation of the Universe, he believed that it came into being and evolved through natural or physical forces, or through laws of nature. There is a close similarity between Charvaka view and Buddhist view of *Pratitya Samutpāda* (*Pratichcha Samuppāda*), which means ‘contingent co-generation’, in explaining the emergence of the Universe, and of life and consciousness in the world. To produce an event such as life, several factors happen together. Many events may take place, but when a few key events coincide together, they produce a new event. This was a theory of evolution in embryo form. The theory presumes no single all-knowing intelligence, omnipotent power which causes the universe, the world, the life or consciousness in it. While the Buddha used reasoning to show that a perfect, omniscient and omnipotent creator could not have created an imperfect world, Charvaka used ridicule to chastise both Vedic rituals and Upanishadic metaphysics. However, Lokayata did not evolve as a separate and systematic religion, both because it was not intended to be a religion – it was on the contrary, rationalist and anti-religion, and because Charvaka did not develop a strong moral content for his philosophy. As Hiriyanna (2000-b: 195) observes, it is not necessary to teach a philosophy of self-indulgence. It comes naturally, and what is necessary to teach, as religions do, is to moderate it. Also for ordinary people in distress, he could not offer the solace, which a theistic religion provided.

Lack of a strong moral content in Lokayata was more than made good by Jainism and Buddhism. They disproved a commonly made critique of agnostic schools that they did not bother about morals. On the other hand, both the religions laid such a strong emphasis on moral content, that ethics became their major focus, and all other questions either became secondary or of no significance. The concept of Dharma was endowed with a renewed ethical emphasis, stronger than in the Rgvedic concept of Rta, which was again incorporated into Hinduism in a revitalized form. The Buddha preached – “In this world of suffering, only one thing is stable. This is Dharma, the truth about right living, which alone could free us from pain” (Armstrong 1999: 42). Hinduism took over this preaching with all enthusiasm. To both Buddhism and Jainism the need for morality did not have to depend on the need for the concept of a Supreme Power or Personal God. Both did not accept the concept of God and both

rejected the authority of Vedas. The need for ethics arose out of their conviction that this world is full of sorrow and the way to get rid of sorrow was to follow a morally right path. While however, Jainism accepted the existence of soul, Buddhism did not. Both, however, accepted the Law of Karma and transmigration. While the physical Universe and matter were real according to Jainism, in Buddhism they were only labels for the aggregates or assemblages of certain physical and psychical factors. The world is in a state flux and is impermanent according to Buddhism. Jains accept the *Syādvāda* (the doctrine of *may be*) to conceptualise universe; it means that the universe can be looked at from many points of view, and is, therefore, indeterminate.

Jainism is older than Buddhism, and according to Jains, as old as – may be, older than – even the Vedic tradition. Though Jainism is named after Jina, the victor, a title given to Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, he is the last prophet (*Tīrthankara*) of Jains, there being 23 preceding him dating back up to a few millennia before him. But it is Mahāvīra who systematically organised the religion and its texts. He was born at Vaishali in around 599 BCE and died at Pawa in 527 BCE. He was a senior contemporary of Gautama Buddha who was born at Kapilavastu in around 567 BCE and died at Kusinagar in about 488 BCE.<sup>15</sup> Both came from royal Kshatriya families. Both were disgusted with hundreds of animals being killed at sacrifices in the name of Vedic sacrifices, and also with the violence in the form of wars between kings around them. No surprise that both advocated nonviolence and compassion as their basic creed. But they also went beyond it. Both started an order of monks who were supposed to be living examples of ethics they preached and provided moral guidance to the laity in their day-to-day life. This was new to Hinduism, which knew *Sanyas* as an *Ashrama* for individuals, and also a *Guru-Shishya Parampara* (lineage of spiritual teachers and disciples), but did not have an organised order of numerous monks to preach a given religion directly to the mass of people. *Hinduism* incorporated with renewed emphasis, both the ethical values as well as organisational models of Jainism and Buddhism. It took some time, as an organised order of monks to preach and propagate a given school of religion seems to have been started not before Shankaracharya did it in the 8th century CE. Jainism and Buddhism emerged to remedy the deficiencies and ills of Hinduism and made it strong enough to compete with them both. It was this assimilation which made Hinduism survive and thrive.

Jainism and Buddhism did not accept the caste system, either as based on birth, nature or inclination. But they do not seem to have condemned it either. It was left to the Gita to reject the caste system based on birth. People from all walks of life joined the two new religions, but the monastic order seems to have been dominated in number by Brahmins and Kshatriyas, though the laity came from all classes and castes. Once into the fold, however, the caste distinctions melted away. There were no Buddhist Brahmins and Buddhist Kshatriyas, or Jain Brahmins and Jain Kshatriyas, unlike the Catholic Brahmins, or Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits of today. To that extent, Jainism and Buddhism of those days could counter the caste system more effectively than Christianity and Islam of today.

In spite of several similarities between Jainism and Buddhism, there were also major differences between them. It is not necessary to go into their respective philosophies here, a good exposition of which is available in the books on Indian philosophy, particularly in the comprehensive works by Radhakrishnan (1996: Vol. I, Ch.5, 6, 7, 9 & 19), Dasgupta (1975: Vol.I, Ch. 5 & 6), Sangharakshita (1975), Upadhye (1975), Hiriyanna (2000-b) respectively. We are here interested mainly in the links of

Jainism and Buddhism with Hinduism. The differences between the two religions also had a bearing on Hinduism. Jainism was diametrically opposed to Lokayata philosophy in the attitude to sensual pleasures and worldly happiness. Jainism considered sensual pleasures as a sin and laid emphasis on austerities; the more extreme it was, better it was for liberation. Buddhism took a Golden Mean (*Suvarṇa Madhyama*) between the two positions, a Golden Mean which the Gita also adopted. The following two verses (16 & 17) from the chapter 6 of the *Gita* could fit very well in to any Buddhist text:

‘(Success in) Yoga is not for him who eats too much or too little – nor, O Arjuna, for him who sleeps too much or too little’ (V.16)

‘To him who is temperate in eating and recreation, in his effort for work, and in sleep and wakefulness, Yoga becomes the destroyer of misery’ (V.17).<sup>16</sup>

Mutual borrowing between Hinduism and Buddhism is evident also in the emphasis laid on reasoning. The older Pre-Buddhist Upanishads contain logical reasoning as a method of finding out what underlies the Universe and its working. Dialogues in the Upanishads are an intellectual feast. This was perfected by Gautama Buddha, who relied much more on a dialectical method of employing reasoning and logical conviction than the Upanishads. The Upanishads had employed speculation as well as reasoning. The more perfected method of Buddha was taken up in subsequent philosophical schools of classical Hinduism, especially Nyaya and Vaisheshika and also by the three Acharyas. The logical rigour of the Vajrasuchika Upanishad (referred to in chapter 5) bears the stamp of the Buddhist method of reasoning.

Though Buddhism is believed to be agnostic, not believing in ‘God’, the Buddha’s concept of Nirvana comes so close to the Upanishadic concept of Brahman, as to be almost identical with it. Though the Buddha insisted that Nirvana could not be described or defined, he did give some indication of it: “There is, monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, uncompounded. If, monks, there were not there this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded” (quoted in Armstrong 1999: 44). Liberation in the sense of realisation of Brahman and Nirvana are almost identical. Nirvana is not a negative State, ‘but plays a role in Buddhist life that is analogous to God (Ibid: 43). Like realisation of the Brahman, it is ‘the supreme goal and the one and only consummation of our life, the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace’ (quotation from Edward Conze in *Buddhism: its Essence and Development*, 1959: 40, as given in Armstrong 1999: 43).

The ideas of the Law of Karma and rebirth, which are prominent in Hinduism, are found also in Jainism and Buddhism. Though Buddhism rejects the concept of soul, it still accepts the idea of rebirth and the Law of Karma, which is a riddle difficult to explain. Jainism had no such difficulty, since it accepts the idea of Jiva. It is interesting that in all the three religions including Hinduism, the Law of Karma is an impersonal Law, which can operate without any monitoring by a super power. While, however, Hinduism allows for Grace of God, there appears to be no scope for it in the other two. But all the three religions allow for remission of punishment for bad karma through a corrective code of conduct. Since it was difficult for any religion to grow and survive without the concept of a

superior power which can provide solace and help liberate from the sorrows of the mundane world, Jains developed the worship of Jina and Tirthankaras, and Buddhists developed the worship of the Buddha, who was raised to the status of the Supreme Divine. This seems to have been the direct influence of Hinduism.

As between Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, it is difficult to say which borrowed from whom and which influenced whom. Even the central doctrine of Buddhism about the impermanent world being a source of sorrow and transcending it by controlling one's desire and ethical discipline are a prominent part of classical Hinduism as well. Except for the idea of God, the *Gita* could as well be taken as a Buddhist text. The Buddha himself claims no originality, and refers with humility to his Noble Eightfold Path as 'an ancient road followed by the enlightened ones of former times.'<sup>17</sup> In the Pali texts of proceedings of meetings, there is no reference to condemnation of the Vedas or the Upanishads by Buddhist monks, nor any such thing by Brahmins about Buddhist doctrines (Kane 1990: V-II: 1004). Radhakrishnan observed that 'the remarkable resemblance between Jainism and Buddhism, in their ethical aspects, is due to the fact that they both borrow from the same Brahmanical sources' (Radhakrishnan 1996: I: 329). It is evident that they influenced each other immensely, the final outcome being that each contributed to the others in enriching and perfecting themselves.

A few western scholars have tried to distinguish Shramanic concept of Dharma in Buddhism and Jainism from the Vedic concept of Dharma. In brief, their contention is that while the former is absolute, the latter is relative. Such a distinction is alleged on the basis of the concept of Dharma applied to specific persons or situations in Classical Hinduism – *Varna Dharma* (Dharma of different classes), Dharma according to different *Ashramas* like student, householder and ascetic, *Rajadharma* (Dharma of government), *Prajadharma* (Dharma of citizens), *Stree Dharma* (Dharma of women), and even *Apaddharma* (Dharma in life threatening emergencies). Such distinctions between dharmas of different people, however, were made by Shramanic tradition too. Both Buddhism and Jainism had a high proportion of monks devoted to the pursuit of spiritual goals and preaching, who had to be supported through economic surplus earned by householders. It was thus the dharma of householders to earn their livelihood honestly for themselves and also give charity. If they too had followed the dharma of renunciation like the monks, who would have fed and maintained the monks? To speak of different duties and obligations of different sets of people, does not mean that there are no common absolute values to be followed by all. The term 'Dharma' refers both to such special duties and obligations of different people, as also to common ethical values to be observed by all (*Samanya Dharma*). In the famous sayings of Upanishads like '*Satyam vada...*' ('Speak the truth'), or in the *Gita's* insistence on ethical values discussed above, there is no hint of any relativism. Even the concept of *Apaddharma* is not an escape clause to act according to convenience in all matters, but an exception to be used to serve a higher moral necessity. The Hindu Epics and *Puranas* have glorified the stories of persons who stuck to the values they believed in despite adversities and temptations (such as the story of Shri Rama going to the forest, of Sita not yielding to the temptations of Ravana, of Satya Harischandra, King Shibi and so on), showing that the ethics of Hinduism was not a matter of mere relativism or convenience. No religion can ignore practical dilemmas of people in everyday life even when committed to strict moral life, because while respecting one value they come into conflict with another. Both Hinduism

and Buddhism emphasised the purity of motive in resolving such dilemmas, and also the criterion of whether the action led to the greater good of humanity. A selfless motive makes the problem of choice easier, which does not mean relativism in ethics. To say that ethics of one religion is absolute while that of another is relative is itself absolute nonsense.

A puzzle in the history of India's religions is the eclipse of Buddhism and then its reappearance noticeably only in the 20th Century under Dr B R Ambedkar's leadership, while Jainism did not undergo any such crisis and has continued to survive and remain in an active state all along till today. A related puzzle is how Buddhism succeeded in spreading to other countries in Asia, but Jainism did not do so. First, about Jainism. S. Radhakrishnan has quoted at length Mrs Stenvenson's answer to this puzzle in her book, *The Heart of Jainism*. It is reproduced below:

"The character of Jainism was such as to enable it to throw out tentacles to help it in its hour of need. It had never, like Buddhism, cut itself off from the faith that surrounded it, for it had always employed Brahmins as its domestic chaplains, who presided at its birth rites, and often acted as officiants at its death and marriage ceremonies and temple worship. Then, too, amongst its chief heroes it had found niches for some favourites of the Hindu pantheon, Rama, Krishna and the like. Mahavira's genius for organisation also stood Jainism in good stead now, for he had made the laity an integral part of the community, whereas in Buddhism they had no part nor lot in the order. So, when storms of persecution swept over the land, Jainism simply took refuge in Hinduism, which opened its capacious bosom to receive it; and to the conquerors it seemed an indistinguishable part of that great system" (quoted in *ibid*: 328-9).

As to the question why Jainism did not spread outside India, the answer seems to lie in its rigid adherence to the principle of Ahimsa, which meant a strictly vegetarian diet, apart from equally strict austerities. Long travels for going to other countries, could not make it possible to observe either strict vegetarian diet or regular austerities and penance for the monks. They did not, therefore, permit themselves to travel abroad. Buddhist monks had no such extreme strictness about Ahimsa and austerities, and had no reservation about eating animal food or meat, though only animals killed by others – not by themselves – could be eaten. This inclination to adjust to circumstances made it easier for them to undertake long travels abroad and spread their religion.

The question of disappearance of Buddhism from India needs a little more attention than what is given in the quotation from Mrs. Stenvenson above. It is sometimes alleged that it disappeared because of persecution by Hindu Kings at the instance of Brahmins. But even during his lifetime, the Buddha did not face any persecution. Elst has observed: "Hindu India has also had no history of book burning, of executing heretics or confining dissidents to lunatic asylums. The Buddha could preach his heterodox doctrine till old age without ever being persecuted" (Elst 2001: 30). P V Kane has given lengthy evidence from inscriptions and other sources about extremely cordial relations between Hindu Kings and Buddhists, and how the former gave grants and supported them (1990: V-II: 1008-19). The great Buddhist universities at Vikramasila, Nalanda and Takshasila, the splendid monasteries and

architecture of Buddhists, magnificent cave paintings at Ajanta and other places would not have been possible in an atmosphere of persecution. Kane quotes Rhys Davids, an eminent Scholar on Buddhist period and Buddhism, who emphasised that both Hindus and Buddhists lived in peace side by side, and that Indians never indulged in persecution compared with the Inquisition in the history of Christianity (*Ibid* : 1010-11).

There is another popular theory that the ideological onslaught by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th Century CE was responsible for the disappearance of Buddhism. But his main targets were Mīmāṃsakas for whom ritualism was the religion, many of whom converted to become his disciples. There are no records of any major engagement of his in ideological debates with Buddhists. On the contrary, he was mockingly described by opponents as a hidden (*prachchanna*) Buddhist. Probably it was this, which proved to be a decisive factor in the eclipse of Buddhism. Ashish Nandy has observed: ‘It is Sankara’s Vedanta, carrying the clear impress of Buddhism which finished Buddhism as a living faith in India, and not either Brahmanic orthodoxy or any state-sponsored anti-Buddhist ideology’ (1983: 99).

We have to distinguish between the decline in popularity of Buddhism and its final disappearance, as factors behind the two are different. Its decline relative to Hinduism was mainly because Hinduism took several steps to appeal both to intellectuals and to the masses. As noted above, the *Gita* shifted focus from metaphysics and contemplation of the Upanishads to the path of action and path of devotion, advocating simplified religion by sidelining ritualism. It strengthened and expanded further the ethical content of Hinduism, and struck a moral balance between Charvaka’s emphasis on the right to enjoy and Jains’ extreme austerity. The *Gita* also rejected caste system based on birth. The *Gita* thus took the wind out of the sails of Buddhism, and what is more, it gave a loving personal God to masses to whom people in distress could always appeal for solace and strength. Buddhism also gave this attribute to the Buddha offering him as personal God, but Hinduism assimilated the Buddha as the ninth Avatar of Vishnu and started worshipping him along with other Hindu deities. They ceased to be two distinct faiths in several places. Even today in Nepal for example, many Nepalis believe in both Hinduism and Buddhism. It could have been so in India too till the population censuses during the British rule insisted that people can have only one religion to profess.

In meeting the challenge of Buddhism, Hinduism also took unprecedented steps to make itself attractive to the mass of people, who wanted a simple religion which they could also enjoy practising (in a good sense, not in a permissive sense). This was a task initiated earlier by the *Gita*, which got a tremendous momentum now. The great Epics – *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as also the *Bhagavata* and the *Puranas* played a major role in attracting the masses to Hinduism and keeping them in its fold. The power of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* was such that they became popular throughout the length and breadth of the country, in every nook and corner of it, even among the unlettered. They became popular in South-East Asia too. The *Puranas* eminently complemented the role of the two great Epics. The *Puranas* are essentially compilations of stories and parables along with some discussion of cosmogony and philosophy too. Their main purpose was to bring the noble principles of religion and philosophy to common people and above all to impart ethical values in the form of illustrations from the lives of past heroes – sages, pious kings and other spiritual seekers. Though the *Puranas* do refer to *yajnas* and *yagas* done in the past by Rshis, they represent a departure from the Vedic religion in so

far as they expect nothing more than Bhakti or devotion to a personal god of choice and a high moral life for spiritual advancement. The devotion does not have to be expressed through elaborate rituals, but simply through *nama-sankirtana* (recitation of the Holy Name of God) or singing the praise and glory of God. To sing the glory of God, a lot *Stotra-sahitya* (literature consisting of poems/verses in praise of god) came to be developed, inspired by the two Epics and the *Puranas*. Shankaracharya made valuable contribution to such literature, apart from his brilliant contribution to philosophy. His poems, full of devotional fervour in enchanting language, are still sung to this day. The *Puranas* reiterate belief in the Law of Karma, which however can be overcome through a path of devotion and virtue, as taking such a path makes the devotee being liked and loved by God who will bestow Grace on the devotee. Truthfulness, equanimity in hours of crisis as well as happiness, fairness, charity, doing good to others and compassion are emphasised repeatedly among the virtues. The *Puranas* take the world as real even if not permanent, and emphasise doing one's duties in the world according to one's capacity and nature. Bhakti was not offered as a substitute for one's duty to the society and the world, but was combined with the latter. Salvation was possible for a person of the world too if the path of Bhakti and virtue was followed simultaneously. This was in contrast with the two heterodox religions in which salvation was not possible unless one renounced normal work of the world and took to monasticism. This is how the philosophy of the Epics and Puranas captured the imagination of the masses. This was the philosophy, which inspired the Bhakti movement. *Vishnu Purana*, *Bhagavata Purana*, and the *Gita*, played a significant role in providing a canonical basis for the Bhakti movement. It is pertinent to note that all this development had taken place much before the Muslim invasions started. The battle between Hinduism and Buddhism, if it can be called so, was fought on ideological, philosophical and theological grounds, but not on political grounds and with physical force.

It is pertinent to remember that in spite of the assimilative character of Hinduism, Buddhism in India survived right up to the beginning of the Muslim rule, that is, well beyond Shankaracharya's alleged ideological onslaught on Buddhism in the 8th Century. The final disappearance of Buddhism was on account of the total destruction of its monasteries—cum—Universities by Muslim invaders (Sangharakshita 1975:99; Allen 2012: 2-5). The famed Nalanda and Vikramashila universities, Odantapuri and other monasteries all succumbed to the fury of Muslim invasion. It is said that Muslim invaders' primary target was Brahmins whom they considered as the torchbearers of Hinduism. But they could not distinguish between the Brahmins and the Shramanas - Buddhist monks, and killed thousands of the latter mistaking them to be the former. It is also doubtful if the invaders were serious in distinguishing between Brahmins and Buddhist monks. Many of the surviving monks fled to Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. The last bastion of Buddhism in India was Bengal, whose Pala Kings patronised it. When Muslims took over Bengal, many Buddhists converted to Islam (Kane 1990: V – II: 1025; and Majumdar ed. 1988-96: V: 425-6). It is a significant fact of history that it was in areas where Buddhism was a dominant religion, like Central Asia, Afghanistan, the present day Pakistan and Bengal, that large scale conversions to Islam took place, and Muslim majority areas were formed. Buddhist dominance in these areas had continued, unthreatened by Hinduism, till Muslim invasions took place. In other areas in India, Hinduism could withstand Muslim invasions. Even where Hindus lost political power, they did not give up their religion, – at least a large majority of them.

## 5. HINDUISM ON THE EVE OF MUSLIM INVASIONS

There is a widespread impression that Hinduism also went into decline on the eve of the Muslim invasion for several reasons. One was the rise of Advaita School, crystallised and popularised, though not founded, by Shankaracharya, which is alleged to have made people to be indifferent to the affairs of the world and even to the need of defending themselves. Second, the rise of Advaita led to other rival schools of metaphysics and philosophy such as Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita, which aggravated schism and even confusion. Third, whatever be the sophistication of philosophical arguments and debates at the level of the scholars, the common masses were victims of ritualism and superstition and were left high and dry without proper guidance from the leaders of religion. The focus had shifted from principles to rites and rituals. Perhaps the last, but certainly not least, factor was the rigidity of the caste system based on birth, for which the *Manusmṛiti* and a few other *Dharmashastras* were responsible. This is alleged to have alienated the oppressed masses from Hinduism, who gladly joined the Muslim invaders and embraced their religion. These alleged factors need scrutiny as they are half-truths at best.

The first of these points has already been dealt with in Chapter 2. We have to remember here that much more than Shankaracharya's philosophy, it was the worldly philosophy of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which had captivated the mind of the masses. The two epics and the *Puranas* hardly projected the world as an illusion, and there was no question of ignoring the duties in the world. The progress made in Indian Science before the Muslim invasion in the field of medicine and surgery, mathematics and astronomy could not have been possible if the other-worldly attitude was dominant.

About the second point above, no religion in the world has escaped schism, not even religions which have been fanatical about suppressing dissent. Hinduism could hardly avoid different schools of thought; in fact, diversity has been its major strength, which it has encouraged rather than suppressed. The different fruits and flowers in the garden of Hinduism, which bloomed since the Buddhist period, have been an exciting and positive aspect of its dynamics of development. The different schools of thought like Advaita, Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita no doubt created a lot of heat in debates among scholars, and led to the establishment of each school setting up its Mathas (monasteries) each with a Guru parampara of its own to propagate its thoughts. But there was always an explicit awareness that they all were different approaches to the same God, and one could choose an approach that one liked most. Moreover, the different schools did not constitute irreconcilable differences. The 'Samarasa' or the harmony, co-existence and consistency between them has been very well brought out by Gundappa.<sup>18</sup> It is worth giving a summary of his exposition here, since it is not available in English so far, and it is also pertinent in throwing light on the nature of dynamics and diversity of Hinduism. A uniqueness of his exposition is that while other philosophers focused on differences between the major schools of thought, Gundappa focused on how consistent they are with each other, making it possible to conceptualize all of them as simultaneously true, without any notion that if one is true the others must be false. In doing so, Gundappa has thrown light on a special characteristic of Hinduism itself – that of seeing harmony among differences.

The three views – *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita* and *Advaita*, are only different ways of conceptualising the relationship between the self and God, depending on one's inclination to approach the Divine. The sum and substance of three are encapsulated in the following Sanskrit Sutras respectively: '*tasmaiva<sub>h</sub>am*', '*mamaiva<sub>sou</sub>*' and '*sa eva<sub>h</sub>am*'. Gundappa explains them as follows. '*Tasmaiva<sub>h</sub>am*' means complete self surrender to God, where the only feeling is that 'I belong to Him' or 'I am meant for Him'. It represents the height of devotion or Bhakti. Though there is Dvaita in the sense of separateness of self from God, there is at the same time the awareness that the self is His. In '*Mamaiva<sub>sou</sub>*', which represents Vishishtadvaita, the feeling is from the other side. 'He is mine only'. It is the mother's feeling for her child, or the beloved's feeling for her lover. Here again, though there is awareness that the self and God are separate, there is also a dominant consciousness that both are parts of one whole. This is also the height of Bhakti. In '*Advaita*, there is complete identity, '*Sa eva<sub>h</sub>am*' – 'He is me!'. Here any separateness between the self and God is completely submerged under the consciousness of oneness. Intense Bhakti is required in the initial stage to reach this realisation, but once it is achieved, Bhakti is transcended and the person becomes a 'Realised' one, a *Jnani*.

Gundappa terms these three respectively as '*Svatah-samarpana*' (self surrender) in Dvaita, '*Svatah-sahabhaga*' (self as part of God) in Vishishtadvaita, and '*svatah-vilayana*' (self merged or identified with God) in Advaita. Gundappa quotes a popular Sanskrit verse to show how the three views are very close to one another:

*'Dehadrstya tu dasoham, jivadrstya tvadamshakah /  
Atmadrstya tvameva<sub>h</sub>am iti me nischita matihi' //*

It means: 'From the point of my body, I am Your slave. From the point of my jiva, I am a part of Yourself. From the point of Atman, You are myself only'. This is said to be as addressed by Hanuman to Rama. It would be misleading to term these three views and feelings as representing schism. It is unfortunate, that the differences are sometimes viewed as denominational. To explain how the three feelings can change from one to another even in the same person, Gundappa takes the example of a couple devoted to each other deeply. The wife and the husband may perform different duties and to that extent they are separate, with a feeling of Dvaita – dualism. They also have a strong feeling that they belong to each other, which is a feeling of Vishishtadvaita – oneness in difference. When they love each other, and particularly in moments of height of intimacy, they would forget all differences and experience oneness. This is the highest stage of love; it represents Advaita – verily nondualism.

We come now to the third point about the decline of Hinduism on the eve of the Muslim invasion. Even when philosophical crystallisation was taking place in the form of different schools of thought based on the Upanishads, the Brahmasutras and the Gita, and other schools of philosophy like *Sankhya*, *Nyaya* and *Vaisheshika* also developed, the mass of the people was going in the direction of the practice of rites and rituals taking this to be the essence of religion itself. While from the social angle, the *Dharmashastras* took the hold of the society and its functioning; the practice of religion, rites, rituals and magic – some of which were under the auspices of the *Agamas* and the *Tantras* – seemed to have taken hold of the masses. The philosophical subtleties of Hinduism seem thus to have been confined

to the learned elite only. This weakness of Hinduism by which the masses were getting alienated from the main tenets of Hinduism seems to have continued for long, though the Bhakti Sants tried to correct it to a significant extent. Their role will be discussed in the next chapter. Presently, it is necessary to give some attention to the social dimensions of the *Agamas* and the *Tantras*.

The *Agamas* and *Tantras* are linked to Shaivism and Shakti cult, which are as old as Mohenjodaro as seen from archaeological evidence there. Rudra, a Vedic god, was identified with Shiva, but Shaivism and Shakti cult developed separately from the mainstream Vedic religion. They incorporated some Vedic practices like '*homa*' and the Upanishadic concepts of philosophy. '*Homas*' or Vedic sacrifices were made part of the temple worship. When Vedic sacrifices were found to be too elaborate, image worship started, for which evidence is available from the *Dharma Sutras* of the Fifth Century BCE (Sarma 1955: 9-10). To make image worship more serious, rituals developed too – particularly in temples, which the *Agamas* prescribed. Since they too were elaborate, especially in the case of temple rites and rituals, this necessitated priests, and the priests had to train themselves through a study of the *Agamas*. They also had a theology. Shiva as a Supreme God is conceptualised differently from the Brahman of the Upanishads. While Brahman is impersonal and pure consciousness (*Chit*), Shiva is a personal god who is not only *Chit* but also a source of energy and action along with his consort Shakti, both of whom together create the Universe and maintain it. Divinity is emphasised in the aspect of energy more than anything by the *Tantras*. The dissolution of the Universe is done by Kalabhairava, who is an aspect of Shiva. The means of attaining the favour of Shiva and Shakti are devotion. This devotion is not purely a feature of the mind alone, but is also expressed in the form of rites and rituals. Rituals and Bhakti reinforce each other. The *Tantras* developed esoteric practices, some of which are repugnant to the modern mind. These practices sometimes involved ritual sex, animal sacrifice, eating meat and having hard drinks. It may look bizarre to some, but what some of the followers of the *Tantras* (*Tantriks*) did was to spiritualise sexuality. It soon degenerated into licentiousness. However, not all followers of the *Tantras* indulged in debased practices. While the temple rituals and rites were widespread, the esoteric practices of *Tantras* were confined to a small section of practitioners who were hardly popular. Because of their outlandish practices, these practitioners inspired fear and disgust rather than admiration. The *Tantra* cult was no exclusive feature of Hinduism, as it invaded Buddhism too. It was more popular in Bengal, Assam and their neighbourhood, but much less so in the rest of India if at all. An interesting feature of Shaivism, Shakti cult and *tantra* cult was that they had no inhibitions about caste as well. They admitted all castes, and women, into their fold.<sup>19</sup> Shiva was considered accessible to all irrespective of caste and sex. There is a mistaken impression that the *Tantra* cult looked upon women only as objects of sex. On the contrary, they seem to have had a great regard for them as manifestation of Shakti.

However, there did develop a cleavage between elite Hinduism represented by the followers of Vedanta and other philosophical schools of thought on the one hand, and popular Hinduism mired in rites, rituals, animal sacrifice, superstition and magic on the other. This was so in spite of the attempts of elite leaders of religion to preach to the masses simple religion and simple ethics through stories of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. To some extent, the incorporation of the *Tantric* cult and magic into popular Hinduism was the result of absorption of religious practices of various

tribes into Hinduism. Tribal goddesses were elevated to the status of Vedic and Puranic gods and goddesses, but some of the old practices of worship persisted. It is very likely that the rigidity of caste system, particularly the attempt of the upper three castes to keep a distance from the so-called lower castes, resulted in isolating the latter who in turn were tempted by Tantra and magic particularly as its practitioners rejected caste discrimination. However, quite a few from the upper castes also freely participated in what were predominantly the practices of lower castes. It seems that the masses imbibed both mythology and magic, though from different sources. In a situation where there was complete freedom of religion and religious practice, and there was no one recognised authority, which could decide what was genuine and what was not, this was the price Hinduism had to pay. Their weakness was, however, removed greatly by the Bhakti movements both in the Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions of Hinduism, to which we shall turn shortly. A great contribution of Bhakti Movements, which can be noted now itself in anticipation of discussion about them in the next chapter, is that they diverted the masses as much from debased practices as from mindless ritualism, uplifted them spiritually and brought them into an honoured place in the mainstream of Hinduism.

The final and fourth point about the decline of Hinduism need not detain us here, as it has been dealt with above in Chapter 5. There is no basis to conclude that the weaknesses of Hinduism were responsible for the Muslim rule in India. The Bhakti Movements effectively countered the decline in Hinduism and greatly democratised the Hindu religion if not the society. If Hinduism had overwhelming weaknesses, it would have been obliterated by Islam. While Islam could obliterate native religions and culture in other countries like Iran and Central Asia, it could hardly do so in India at least as far as Hinduism was concerned.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. See, Moon (compiled) (1990), Vol.4, *Riddles in Hinduism : An Exposition to Enlighten the Masses*, p.5.
2. As referred to in Kashyap (2001: 7).
3. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (2000: 232-3). She gives a full translation of the hymn – 'The Frogs' (pp.233-4).
4. *Ibid* p.53. The dead were either cremated or buried, or cremated *and* buried, as seen from the archaeological evidence in the Indus-Saraswati Valley as well.
5. Hattangdi (2002: 39-45) has compiled them together with his translation.
6. Taken from *ibid*: 39-40.
7. For a hymn in praise of generosity and charity, see *Rgveda* 10.117, a translation of which is given by Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty (2000:68-70).
8. Hattangdi has compiled and translated many sayings from the *Rgveda*, which extol the path of righteousness, pray for help to tread this path, and clarify that it is only those who tread this path who will be happy and realize their worldly as well spiritual goals. Hattangdi (2002:167-94).
9. A verse in the *Ragveda* (1.80.9) clearly refers to such a community *Yajna*. It says: 'Indra was worshipped by thousands. Twenty priests fully sang his praise. A hundred more priests complimented him .....
10. Translation as in Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty (2000: 66).
11. The verse reads:  
     'So may I speak these blessed words  
     to the people at large (*janebhyah*)  
     to the Brahmans and Kshatriya,  
     to the Shudra and Vaishya,  
     to my own people (*svaya*) and to the foreigner (*aranaya*).'  
     As translated by Bose (1999: 72).
12. The original verse is often quoted: '*samanī va akūtiḥ samāna hrdayanivah / samānamastu vo mano yathā vah susahāsati* //'. It is not to be interpreted as an attempt to suppress discussion and differences in views, as it is only an appeal for mutual understanding and harmony. The translation is based on Majumdar (1996: Vol.I - *The Vedic Age*, p. 357). For details on political institutions during the Vedic Age, see *Ibid* Ch.17, pp.355-62.
13. Ranade observes: 'as we pass from the Vedas to the Upanishads, we pass from prayer to philosophy, from hymnology to reflection, from henotheistic polytheism to monotheistic mysticism,' (1986: 2).
14. This is the sum and substance of a critique in Introduction in Moore (1968:8-14).
15. The dates and places have been taken from Radhakrishnan (1996: I: 291).

16. As translated by Swami Swarupananda (1982:146-7).
17. As quoted in P V Kane (1990: V- II: 1005).
18. D V Gundappa (2001: 565). The presentation of his exposition here is brief and does not do full justice to the original.
19. This account of Shaivism, Agamas and Tantras is based on: Dasgupta (1975: V, Ch.34); Drabu (1990); and Sudhakar Chattopadhyay (1978).



# Bhakti Movements

*“The greatest romance is with the Infinite. You have no idea how beautiful life can be. ...When you suddenly find God everywhere, when He comes and talks to you and guides you, the romance of the divine love has begun.”*

— Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda<sup>1</sup>

## 1. GENERAL FEATURES

The use of the plural in ‘Bhakti Movements,’ is deliberate and meaningful. There was no one movement as such, but many. There was no one founder or source of inspiration for them, there were many. There was no one specific canon for them, there were many. And yet there was a unity amidst this diversity, an identity amidst all the difference, a consensus about the basic essence of religion so unique that one cannot find such agreement either in the Ancient and Classical Phase or in the Modern Phase of Hinduism. The consensus was simply that the essence of religion is Love! Bhakti literally means adoration, derived from the verb ‘*Bhaj*’, – to adore. The Bhakti Movements were all marked by an intense devotional fervour and adoration for God. Ramakrishna Paramahansa used to ask – Did you weep for God? Did you cry out to him with all your heart? The religion of Bhakti movements was quite straightforward and simple; all that was needed was this intense feeling, love for God. No rites and rituals, no caste or creed, no money, but only this spirit of total surrender to Him was needed. Poorest of the poor, lowest of the low could have access to Him. The concept of God here is intensely and essentially personal, not transcendental. The adoration of God did not, however, need denying this world and our duty in it. We have to do our tasks with detachment and also love, and treat it as service to God. Nor was God viewed as external to us. He is in us all and in all over the world – sentient and non-sentient. We can seek him anywhere. We do not have to go to distant places of pilgrimage. We can find Him in the poor, and serve Him by serving the poor. We can find Him in our guests and serve Him by serving them. We can find Him in our Guru. We can find Him in ourselves too. And we can serve Him who is in us by making ourselves pure in heart, clean in mind, generous, helpful to others, free from malice and hatred, truthful and modest. To realise Him, no metaphysical speculation

is necessary, nor any study of the Vedas. All that is necessary is to make the recitation of His Holy Name a part of our breathing, part of our existence. And Bliss will be ours.

The implications and impact of Bhakti movements were revolutionary. They brought the masses of people immediately and directly into the mainstream of Hinduism. They did not have to feel alienated. Such an attempt was made earlier by the two great Epics and Puranas, but they were all in Sanskrit. People needed an intermediary to tell and interpret them. Now, the situation was different. People did not have to learn Sanskrit. Even the unlettered had access to God through Bhakti. This was a revolutionary development for Hinduism. The leaders of Bhakti movements composed their poems, their aphorisms, their preaching – all in the language of people, touching their hearts directly. The rapport they established was immediate and direct. They realised that in this world, created and permeated by God, no one is superior and no one inferior. All were equal. If at all, a person's superiority was established by virtuous living and devotion to God, generosity, kindness and humility. The movements democratised religion and the society as never before. Many leaders of the Bhakti movements like the Siddhas in Tamil Nadu, Shivasharanas in Karnataka and Sants in Maharashtra and elsewhere were also outright rebels against the religious establishment. They challenged Brahminism with subtlety as well as strength. The caste system received its biggest ever jolts from Bhakti movements and the powerful tremors of the jolts were felt all over India and have continued ever since relentlessly.

An important byproduct of the Bhakti movements was the boost they gave to regional or vernacular languages. At best they had the status of spoken dialects earlier, with the exception of Tamil and Kannada, which had already developed as full-fledged literary languages by then. But Bhakti Sants (saint-poets) heralded a literary movement too, enriching and developing these languages. In most of them, compositions of everlasting beauty began only with the Bhakti movements. The history of Marathi literature thus begins with Jnanadev's *Jnaneshwari* in the 13th century. Even the systematisation of Classical Music both in North India and the South is due to the lyrical compositions of the Bhakti saint-poets, which were set to a particular *Raga* and *Tala*. Similarly, Indian Art too received a big boost due the Bhakti movements after a lull following the decline of Buddhism. Thus, the contribution of Bhakti Movements to the development of Indian culture too has been tremendous, apart from their contribution in terms of democratisation of society and religion.

The social background of the leaders of the Bhakti movements also played an important role in their democratising impact. They came from diverse backgrounds including castes supposed to be low and untouchable. This was so both among Shaiva Saints and Vaishnava Saints. As already noted in Chapter 5, Tiruppan Alwar, a Vaishnava Saint, was earlier considered an untouchable; Chokhamela of Maharashtra was also an untouchable. There were so many Bhakti Saints from the untouchable communities that now a book has appeared on their lives and works (Zelliot and Mokashi – Punekar, Eds. 2005). Most of the leaders of the movements had a working class background – weavers, boatmen, blacksmiths, washermen, farmers, labourers, gardeners, pot-makers and so on. This was particularly so among the Siddhas in Tamil Nadu, and in the Veerashaiva movement of Basavanna in Karnataka and also in Maharashtra, and elsewhere too. Kabir was a weaver. There was even a butcher in Veerashaiva movement. Bhakti movements could have been described as the first non-Brahmin movement because of this, except for the fact that Brahmins like Jnanadeva, Ekanath, Samarth Ramadas, Ramananda

and Tulasidas were not excluded from them but contributed to them jointly with their non-Brahmin brethren. They all condemned caste distinctions openly and explicitly. The Bhakti movements engulfed and inundated everything about Hinduism and refreshed it by their invigorating spirit. No school of thought was left out; in fact each contributed to them and benefited from them. Thus Shankaracharya's Advaita made Bhakti a part of its spiritual path, since in the mundane (*Vyavaharika*) world we have to pray to God to realise Him and to have Jnana. Shankaracharya himself composed numerous poems in a beautiful style, which have a high status in Bhakti literature. For Madhvacharya's Dvaita where the God is Master, the Lord, and the self is His servant (*Dasa*), Bhakti came naturally as the most logical feeling. He and his followers too contributed significantly to Bhakti literature. Also for Ramanujacharya's Vishishtadvaita, where the self belongs to God as his part or manifestation, Bhakti came naturally as the urge of a part to unite with the whole and realise itself. He and his followers too made significant contribution to Bhakti movement and literature. Whatever may be the theological or metaphysical difference, Bhakti united all schools of Hinduism in its sweeping, and loving embrace. As we shall see below, other religious leaders like Basavanna, Tukaram, Guru Nanak and Kabir, who preached in the language of the people, played a crucial role in popularising Bhakti among the masses and democratising the society. This was in contrast to the role of the three Acharyas, who continued to keep themselves within the Sanskrit tradition.

The sentiment of Bhakti or Devotion or emotional attachment to God was hardly new. It certainly did not originate in the medieval age after the Muslim invasions. Its origin can be traced to the Rgveda where we find numerous hymns in adoration of different gods and goddesses. It was the *Gita*, which first recognized and popularized Bhakti as one of the three pathways to God-realisation. It contains a special Chapter (12th) devoted exclusively to Bhaktiyoga. The *Gita* provided the ideological basis for the Bhakti Movements for two more reasons, apart from its exposition of *Bhaktiyoga*. One is that it brought the devotee in direct relationship with God, without requiring any intermediary in the form of priests. It also did not require rites and rituals for God realisation. If the devotee herself wanted some rites to express or stimulate Bhakti or to create an environment for Bhakti, it was a different question. She had that freedom, but it was not a formal necessity. The two great Epics and the Puranas also extolled the merits of Bhakti as a pathway to God through numerous parables and tales and also through direct and explicit preaching. The Sutras (Aphorisms) on Bhakti attributed to the renowned Divine Sage Narada, known as the *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, also had become popular long before the medieval age. Narada defined Bhakti as Supreme Love (*parama prema rupa*) (Ch.1., Sutra 2).<sup>2</sup> Following Narada, Bhakti was seen and understood as love, affection or adoration fixed on God. He clarifies that on the attainment of Bhakti, and even for the attainment of it, life in society and social activities are not to be shunned, but the fruits of activities are to be surrendered to God. Such activities have to be righteous and are but an instrument (*Sadhana*) of Bhakti (Ch.4, Sutra 62). The *Gita* particularly, and also the epics and the *Puranas*, popularised Bhakti and explained different ways of expressing or practising Bhakti. They are: *Smarana* (constantly remembering God and God's name), *Japa* (repeating God's chosen name with awareness and love), *Manana* (constantly thinking of God), *Shravana* (hearing God's name, God's praise and God's glory), *nididhyasana* (contemplation), *Darshana* (seeing chosen form or image of God), *Kirtana* (singing God's glory), *Stavana* (praising God or reciting *stotras* i.e., verses

in praise of God), *Puja* (ritual worship), *Prarthana* (prayer), and above all *Prapatti* (total surrender to God's will), the last making all the earlier ways of Bhakti superfluous. We see thus that the basic philosophy of Bhakti movements was already articulated in depth and detail by the classical Hindu canon several centuries before Muslim influence prevailed. Even the basis for the anti-caste stance of Bhakti movements was already laid in classical Hinduism (see ch.5 above). The attempts to reach the masses through regional or local languages had also been undertaken, at least in Tamil Nadu. Apart from Tiruvalluvar's *Tirukkural* (which has been referred to in earlier chapters in this book), there were several *Agamas* and Shaiva *Siddhantas* written in Tamil during the first millennium CE. Some of the works are even now recited in Shaivite temples in Tamil Nadu as Tamil Veda and are considered as cognate literature with the Vedas.

Broadly, the 'New' Bhakti Movements span about eight Centuries from the 11th to the 18th, coinciding with Muslim rule in most parts of India. In Tamil Nadu, at least, they could be considered to have started much earlier as we shall see below. Similarly, several saints in the Bhakti tradition continued to emerge during the modern period too, like Shishunala Sharif Saheb (1819-89), known as the Kabir of Karnataka. Thus, we can say that the high points of the New Bhakti Movements (*i.e.*, Post-classical) were reached between the 11th and the 18th centuries, particularly during the 15th and the 16th centuries, while its beginnings were laid much earlier and it has had no end as such even during the contemporary period. The link of continuity with classical Hinduism was provided for the movements by many including the three eminent Acharyas – Shankara (788-820), Ramanuja (1017-1137) and Madhva (1197-1276) from the South. Jayadeva's celebrated work *Gitagovinda*, influenced Bhakti movements considerably, though in Sanskrit, mainly because of its erotic devotional ardour of *Radhā* for *Kṛṣṇa*, known as *Madhura-bhakti*, and also because of its lyrical poetry and amenability to the classical forms of dance. Poems by Sri Krishna Chaitanya and Jiva Goswami, representing emotional heights of Bhakti, were also in Sanskrit. Besides these well known works, an enormous Stotra literature was composed in Sanskrit during this period in the tradition of classical Hinduism. We find thus that Bhakti movements of the period hardly broke their links with either classical Hinduism or Sanskrit. Sanskrit in fact played an important role in Bhakti movements as a link language in different parts of the country, and created a common denominator for the movements spread all over the country. The unifying influence of particularly the *Bhagavata Purāna* was quite great in the movements.

Nevertheless, the Bhakti Movements of the medieval age can be regarded as a phase separate from the classical Hinduism of the earlier periods. The transformation of Hinduism during the medieval period has been compared by several to that which Christianity witnessed known as Reformation. This was particularly so in the case of Bhakti Movements of Sants who wrote or preached in people's own languages. Thus they gave a tremendous boost to creativity in local or regional languages, and almost all Indian regional languages came into their own and matured as a result. Tamil was the first to undergo this revolution, which started early in the first millennium. Secondly, though there was nothing like a centralised authority of the Pope in classical Hinduism, the Bhakti movements considerably eroded the religious authority of Brahmins. Their place was taken by Sants, many of whom came from lower castes and working classes as noted above. Thirdly, the earlier emphasis on the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutras* and the *Gita* also was watered down, and their place was taken by the poems and sayings of

Sants. However, the influence of the two epics and the *Puranas* continued among the masses. The period witnessed translation of the two epics, especially the *Ramayana* in regional languages. Particularly, the *Ramacharitamansa* of Tulasidas in Hindi, and the *Ramayana* of Kamban in Tamil captivated the minds of people. The *Mahabharata*, though much bigger, was translated by Kumaravyasa in Kannada. It is these works to which the Vedas and the Upanishads yielded place. The *Gita* became popular only when translated in regional languages, as it happened in the case of the *Jnaneshwari* in Marathi: (which is an exposition, more than a translation of the *Gita*). These works were studied and recited daily, not by lower castes alone but also by Brahmins. The study of Sanskrit classics and canon was confined to a small section of experts called Pundits.

Fourthly, the notion that human beings were equal and that service of human beings was like the service of God, though not entirely new, came to the fore as never before. Such a philosophy was necessary to condemn caste distinctions and humanise religion more than in the past. Almost all Bhakti saints including those who came from the Brahmin background were united in rejecting caste distinction in all parts of India. Some of the most trenchant critics of the caste system were the Siddhas of Tamil Nadu and Veerashaiva saints (Sharanas) of Karnataka, whose sayings and vachanas were quite outspoken about it. They did not merely preach but also practised their opposition to casteism by taking into their fold devotees from all castes, inter-dining with them, and even inter-marrying in a few cases. The marriage of the daughter of a Brahmin Sharana with the son of an untouchable sharana with the blessings of Basavanna created, however, a tremendous commotion. This notion of equality was extended to women also, particularly by the Veerashaiva movement. It was explicitly recognised that women were not a subordinate sex and that they had equal access to God. Bhakti Movements had a few very eminent women saints. Andal in Tamil Nadu was perhaps the first woman saint in Bhakti Movement to achieve recognition. Akka Mahadevi, a woman saint (Sharane) of Karnataka, was highly respected for her devotion as well as for forthright views. In the North, Meerabai, became a celebrated poet-saint whose devotional lyrics in Hindi are popular even today among all sections of people. Lalla and Rupa Bhawani in Kashmir also achieved great eminence.

Finally, the Bhakti movements stood out in the nature of religious practices, if not in religious philosophy. They were emphatic on worshipping only one chosen God. You may call Him by any name, Shiva, Rama and Krishna, Ganesha or Skanda, or Shakti, but once chosen, you have to worship the One. It may appear to be due to Muslim influence, but a strong emphasis on only one God – Shiva – by Siddhas and Veerashaiva Sharanas was at a time when Muslim rule and influence had not reached the region or its neighbourhood. Though right from the beginning, Hinduism regarded God as one but worshippable in many forms and names, Bhakti movements generally did not encourage such flexibility. You may make your choice of your God, as in the case of your spouse, but once chosen, you have to be faithful and devoted to Him/Her in that chosen form. This is not because other gods are false but because thereby the mind is not distracted and devotional fervour is firm. They did not reject choice and condemn other names or forms of God, but insisted that once a choice was made we should not be fickle, worshipping several forms and versions or manifestations at the same time. This attitude to monotheism is in line with ancient Hinduism and has to be distinguished from an attitude that considers God of one particular faith alone as true, and condemns persons worshipping Him in other

forms and names as non-believers. For the Bhakti movements, God is One, and only One, irrespective of whether God is viewed as *Nirguna* or as *Saguna* in any form. Kabir *panth*, Ravidas *panth*, Nanak *panth*, Dadu *panth*, and Veerashaivism are prominent movements worshipping *Nirguna* God (Lorenzen 2004: 14). Earlier, *Nirguna* God was supposed to be realised only through contemplation or meditation. These panths, however, emphasised Bhakti or love as the means of realising even the *Nirguna* God. However, mysticism was a major characteristic of their Bhakti. The Srivaishnavas in the South, the Chaitanyas in Bengal, the Vallabhis in the West, Varakaris in Maharashtra and Ramanandis in the North are prominent examples of movements worshipping *Saguna* God. Ironically, the more sophisticated concept of *Nirguna* God had mostly non-Brahmin followers including particularly the untouchables, while the popular concept of *Saguna* God had attracted relatively more Brahmins, with the exception of the Varkaris who were mostly non-Brahmins (Lorenzen 2004: 14). The explanation for this seems to be that *Saguna* God needed idol worship, idol worship required rituals and the rituals in turn required priests. Moreover, the leaders of *Nirguna Bhakti* followers were more forthright in condemning caste system. However, this difference cannot be exaggerated, since, by and large, most Bhakti movements were anti-caste and attracted both non-Brahmins and Brahmins. Though the bulk of *Nirguna bhakti* followers appeared to have been non-Brahmins, the bulk of non-Brahmins continued with *Saguna Bhakti*. Similarly, there was a significant number of Brahmins who followed *Nirguna Bhakti*.

The practice of religion was also made simple in Bhakti with no need for elaborate rituals let alone Vedic sacrifices. This was so even in *Saguna Bhakti* involving idol worship. Singing devotional songs, *bhajans* and *kirtans*, became more popular than rituals. This gave a big boost to both popular and classical music. Both Karnatak (Carnatic) and Hindustani Music took systematic forms and developed during this period. Karnatak Music is even to this day exclusively devotional, though in Hindustani music romantic songs are also popular besides devotional music. Idol worship and rituals, even where they continued, were overshadowed by devotional singing or Bhajans.

Because of the distinctive flavour of the Bhakti movements during the medieval age, a few scholars have attributed it to Christian and Muslim influences, particularly Sufism. Though as noted above, the roots and sustenance of the movements were entirely native in character, which could very well be traced to ancient and classical Hinduism, we do not have to quarrel over the theory of non-Hindu influence. Hinduism has, after all, always shown a tendency to learn from others, to be open to the best in other traditions and to adjust to new circumstances. It did so with Jainism and Buddhism, and it could also have done so with Christianity and Islam. Muslim influence was noteworthy particularly after the 14th Century and the Christian influence after the 17th Century. These influences helped Hinduism to renew itself to meet the challenge of the times, survive and grow. Even now the Sufi Saints are regarded highly by the Hindus and worshipped without any sense of fear of losing one's own religion and identity. Such fears have never been in the character of Hinduism.

To get the flavour of Bhakti movements, it is necessary to take into account how they took place in different regions. This would also show how they shared their common features. The following account is by no means exhaustive; it is only illustrative. Not all regions are covered, nor all movements even within the selected regions. Within each region, we follow a broadly chronological order.

## 2. TAMIL NADU

We begin with Tamil Nadu because the new Bhakti movements with their typical egalitarian, anti-caste, and anti-orthodoxy style started first in Tamil Nadu. **Tiruvalluvar** was probably the first to start this revolution with his celebrated *Tirukkural*, written in Tamil and dated between the 2nd Century BCE and the 2nd Century CE. Some of his verses have already been quoted in earlier chapters here. *Tirukkural* is remarkable both for its universal non-sectarian concept of God and its ethical content, and is in this respect similar to the *Gita*. His critique of caste system is through its reinterpretation, *i.e.*, by rejecting birth as its basis. He says: ‘Call them Brahmins who are virtuous/ And kind to all that live’ (Sundarm 1990: verse 30, p.21). Further, ‘caste is right conduct: its lack makes one an outcaste’ (Ibid: Verse 30, p.32). There is no evidence in the *Tirukkural* of any contempt for the Vedas and Upanishads even indirectly. Its author is said to have come from a low caste, - that of weavers. Interestingly, he devotes many more verses to ethics than to Bhakti or God or metaphysics as such, which was really a revolutionary thing to do at that time.<sup>3</sup> The *Tirukkural* deeply influenced all subsequent Tamil saints and poets – including the Siddhas.

The next most important person in Tamil tradition is **Tirumular**, whose celebrated work is the *Tirumantiram*, consisting of 3,000 verses (or 3,081 verses in some editions). He belonged to the Sixth or the Seventh Century CE. In a context dominated both by caste system and polytheism, he preached: ‘Caste is one and God is one’, conveying that all human beings belong to one family and are equal. According to tradition, he came from Kashmir – known then as the land of Shaivism - and started preaching it in Tamil Nadu. He started the line of **Tamil Siddhas** (referred to by Western scholars as ‘Cittars’ or ‘Sitters’). Tirumular is said to be referred to also as Sundar Nath in some of the Puranas. He condemned bigotry and preached universal love. The Siddha School influenced Tamil Nadu for a long period, not only in the field of religion, but also in medicine. The Siddhas started their school of medicine, known as *Siddhaushadhi*, a school of indigenous Indian medicine like Ayurveda. Over fifty names are associated with the Siddha school of religion and poetry. Some of them like Civavakkiyar and Pambatti Cittar explicitly ridiculed chanting of Vedas, smearing of ashes on the body, and image worship as waste, and were strongly critical of caste system. Though initially there was no difference between the Siddhas and Shaivites, some tension developed between them when the latter became more sanskritised. The mood of the Siddhas is captured in the following lines of Pambatti Cittar:

“We’ll set fire to divisions of caste,  
We’ll debate philosophical questions in the market place,  
We’ll have dealings with despised households,  
We’ll go around in different paths”.<sup>4</sup>

The class base of the Siddhas is indicated in a scholarly study:

“The list of Siddhas describes some of them as being shepherds, temple-drummers, artificers, robbers, potters, fishermen, hunters etc., clearly indicating their social position. They were well below the Brahmins and Vellalas (agriculturists) who along

with Vanigas (merchants) constituted the ruling castes in those times. There were of course a few Brahmans and Vellalas among the Siddhas... It shows the openness of the Siddha School. We must not say that the Siddhas were conscious egalitarians, for that would be pitching it too high. But it must be pointed out that “in direct opposition to Hindu Orth,odoxy, no distinction at all was made with regard to caste” within their fraternity (Kailasapathy 1987: 391-2).<sup>5</sup>

The Siddhas believed in a Divine Abstraction rather than in a personal incarnate God. They used the word ‘Civam’ (or ‘Shivam’, an abstract noun, meaning ‘goodness’ and ‘auspiciousness’ in Sanskrit) rather than ‘Civan’ or ‘Shivan’ (meaning Shiva incarnate). ‘In so believing, they freed themselves from rituals and other observances that swamped the religious life of the average Hindu. If one were to adopt the framework of the three Hindu religious paths for gaining salvation (*jnana*, the way of knowledge; *Karma*, the way of work; and *bhakti*, the way of devotion), the Siddhas would be closer to the path of knowledge. But being eclectic, they never confined themselves to any one path or school and were in practice, followers of the path of devotion and Yoga too.’ (Kailasapathy 1987: 393). In Bhakti, they emphasised love, tenderness and compassion (*Ibid*: 400).

They developed their own colloquial literacy style, but full of symbolism. Here is a sample:

*‘In a park there was a mendicant  
He beseeched the potter for ten long months  
And came away with a water-pot.  
He danced and leaped and dropped it.  
The pot was smashed to pieces’.*

The original by **Kaduvēli Cittar**, is said to be full of music and was sung by illiterate Tamils for its sheer sound effects and is still very popular. The song is a metaphor for ‘the soul (mendicant) longing to be born at the end of pregnancy (ten months) into a human body (water-pot); overjoyed by its existence, it leads a hectic life (dancing and leaping) and throws away a rare opportunity for self-improvement and spiritual progress’.<sup>6</sup>

The Siddha School was so open that at least two of the later Siddhas were said to be Muslim Sufis – Pir Muhammed and Mastan Sahib. ‘The Muslim Siddhas were not differentiated in any way. Rather, they were sometimes respected even more, since they had transcended sectarianism and joined the brotherhood of universal faith’ (*Ibid*: 407).

Alongside Siddhas, there was also an allied tradition – Shaivism, in Tamil Nadu, right from the days of Tiruvalluvar or even earlier. It was more sanskritised than the Siddha school, had more links with Sanskrit literature in Agamas. This was also a part of the Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu, and contributed richly to Bhakti literature in Tamil. They developed the Shaiva Siddhanta work. They were known as **Nayanmar Saints**. The *Periya-Puranam* by **Sekkilar** (11th Century) presents the life history of sixty-three Shaiva Saints, most of whom contributed to Bhakti literature in Tamil. A few of the prominent among them are **Tiru-Jnana Sambandhar** (7th Century), **Tiruvanakkarasu** (7th

Century), **Sundaramurthy** (8th Century), **Nandanar** – a saint from the untouchable community of Pulaiyas (between the 7th and the 9th century) and **Manikkavachakar** (between the 3rd and the 9th Century).<sup>7</sup> The hymns composed in Tamil by these saints are part of the Shaiva canon and are recited in temples along with Sanskrit hymns. A subsequent prominent saint of this school was **Meykantar** (13th Century), who composed *Chivanaṇṇapotam*, which summarised the Sanskrit *Āgamas* in Tamil. He was said to have come from the Vellala caste.

Alwars, who were Vaishnavas, were also a prominent part of the Bhakti movement, and came from diverse caste background. **Andal** was a prominent woman saint in Vaishnava tradition. She is known for bridal Mysticism choosing God as her bridegroom, like Akkamahadevi of Karnataka and Meerabai of North India. These saints were close both to Sanskrit and Tamil. The *Bhagavata Purana* is believed by a few to have been actually composed in Tamil Nadu by the Vaishnava saints in the 10th Century or earlier, which became popular all over India within a short time. Though there was rivalry between Shaivites and Vaishnavites, there was also a growing realisation that conflicts between them were meaningless, thanks to the teachings of eclectic cults like that of the Siddhas. A popular saying in Tamil is:

*‘Hari and Hara are one:*

*Those not realizing this know none’.*<sup>8</sup>

It is some times claimed that Shaivism in Tamil Nadu was a different religion from the Vedic/Upanishadic religion and that it was also anti-Sanskrit. ‘Shiva’ is very much a Sanskrit word, meaning ‘auspiciousness’. His other epithets are also in Sanskrit – ‘Rudra’, mentioned in the *Rgveda*, means ‘awesome’; ‘Shankara’ and ‘Shambhu’ both mean the same thing – benign or beneficent. ‘Mahadeva’, i.e., the ‘Great God’, is again a Sanskrit word. The *Āgamas*, books of rites and rituals for Shiva worship were first in Sanskrit. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* is dedicated to Rudra-Shiva. He was truly non-sectarian God, both Vedic and non-Vedic. Tamilian Shaivites never rejected the Vedas; they only held that the *Vedas*, *Āgamas* and *Shaiva Siddhanta* are all equally venerable. There was nothing exclusively Tamilian about Shaivism. It was popular in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh too, where Srishailam was a major centre of Shaivism. Shivaji in Maharastra was a devotee of Shiva and Amba (Mother, Shiva’s consort). Kashmir was also a home to Shaivism; and if the legend that Tirumular came to the South from Kashmir has some credence, Shaivism started in Kashmir earlier than in Tamil Nadu. No wonder then that Lord Shiva is so deeply associated with the Himalayas. Varanasi too was, and still is, a major centre for Shaivism. It was a Pan-Indian cult, and very much an intrinsic part of both classical and medieval Hinduism.

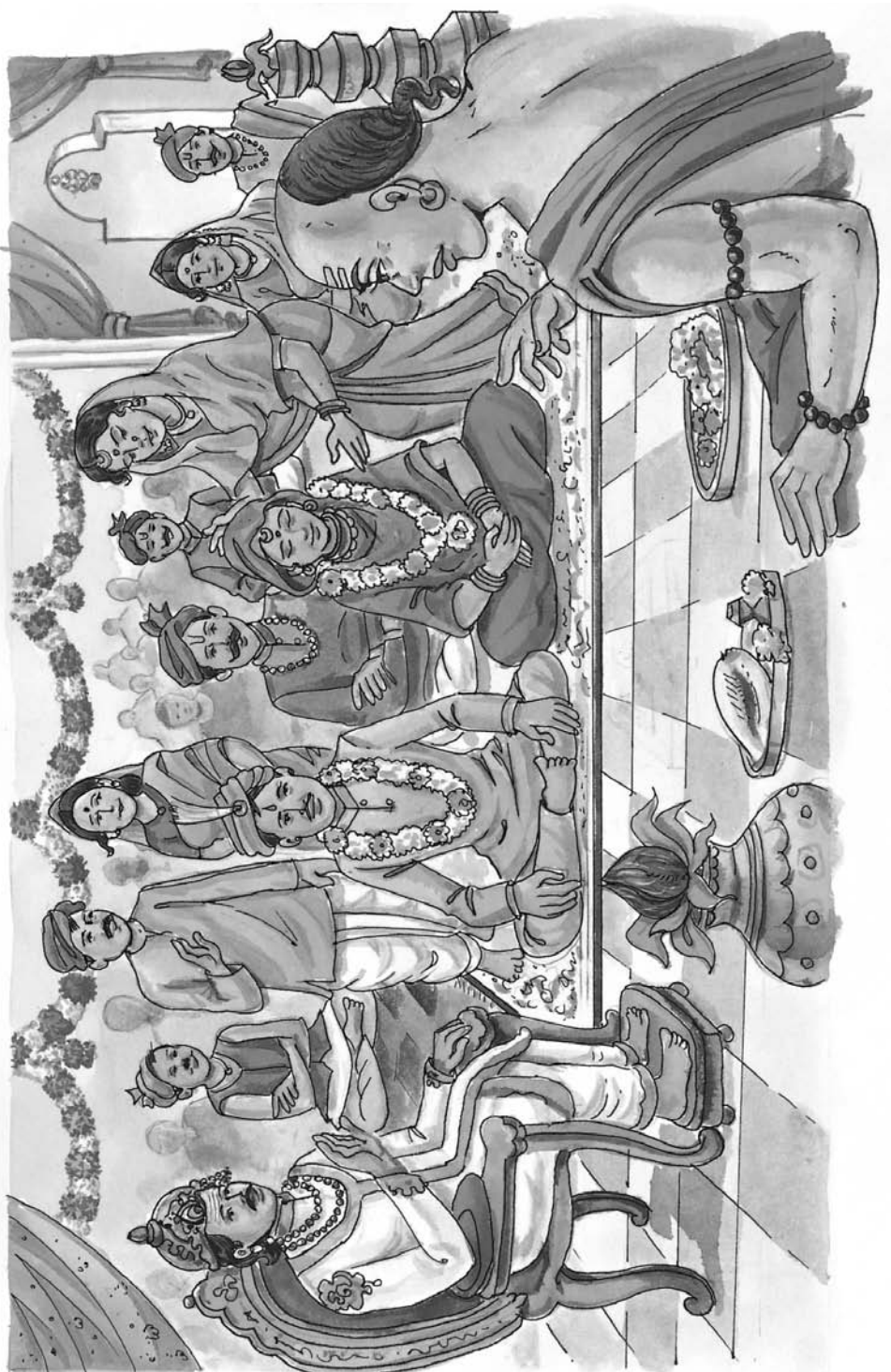
### 3. KARNATAKA

The early history of Karnataka was dominated by Jainism. Most of the early works in Kannada literature were by Jains. Even the early epics in Kannada based on the stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were by Jains. But there were also major Hindu ruling dynasties, which easily interchanged into Jain and *vice versa*. The Kings were very eclectic and tolerant and patronized

Shaivism, Vaishnavism as well as Jainism and Buddhism. Among the four famous cave temples of Badami, one is Shaivite, two are Vaishnavites and one is Jain. They are said to have been constructed in the 6th Century CE. They are all together in one place in fraternal co-existence. In Aihole, a place close to Badami, there are Hindu, Jain as well as Buddhist temples. When Ramanuja had to flee from Tamil Nadu because of religious bigotry, he took shelter in Karnataka at Melkote and continued his work. He had no problems here, though Shankara's Advaita school was already a major influence in Karnataka.

The 'new' Bhakti movements could be said to have been started in Karnataka by Basavanna, also known as **Basaveshwara** (1132-1168 CE). He was based in Kalyana, in the present Gulbarga district. Basavanna rose from the position of an accountant to that of a Prime Minister in the court of King Bijjala. He devoted time to his religious movement of opposing orthodoxy, ritualism and casteism, calling upon people to take to a simple religion of Bhakti to one God, Shiva. Though Bijjala used to be busy in military campaigns against revolts on the periphery of his kingdom, he carried them out mainly with the help of his Generals and seems to have spared Basavanna from such botherations. Bijjala's patronage also deserves credit for Basavanna's success. Bijjala was a Jain and patronised Jainism as well.

Basavanna's movement is called as *Veerashaivism*, the term '*Veera*' signifying 'brave' or 'militant'. (According to a traditional view, *Veera* refers to Veerabhadra, a militant and awesome manifestation of Shiva, of whom earlier Veerashaivas were devotees). Several scholars and saints gathered around Basavanna. They had a very democratic set up of organisation, with equal regard for each other and Basavanna hardly imposed himself on them as a dominant preacher. They had a forum for philosophical discussions known as *Anubhava-mantapa*. The members of his movement, known as *Shiva Sharanas* came from diverse castes, including the lowest caste of untouchables. Though their religion consisted mainly of devotion, love and adoration for Shiva in his abstract form, they did indulge to some extent in metaphysical contemplation. They also believed in the dignity of manual labour. One must earn a living through honest and hard work but keep only what one needs, giving the rest as '*dasoha*'. Accumulation of surplus was discouraged. The principle of '*dasoha*' is not just charity for the poor; it is meeting the needs of the needy, in the most humble and non-arrogant way, with a spirit of 'I am but a servant of God; and by myself, I am nothing'. '*Dasoha*' is derived from '*dasoham*' in Sanskrit, which means 'I am a servant' or a 'slave'. When doing this '*dasoha*', there should not be any trace of contempt for the receiver, but only a regard that the receiver is Shiva himself.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, Basavanna combined all the three main Yogas into one, though he called it as Bhakti. His path emphasised work (Karma or *Kayaka*, the latter being Basavanna's term) and also quest for knowledge (Jnana) as much as devotion (Bhakti). But the dominant mood was that of Bhakti, with work and understanding being only instruments or aids to Bhakti. Bhakti was expressed not merely in terms of adoration of Shiva, but also kindness and compassion for all human beings and animals in the world. His followers, known as Lingayats, are strict vegetarians for the same reason. To assert, however, that their vegetarianism was not Brahminism, they included onion and garlic in a prominent way in their diet, which were shunned by orthodox Brahmins.



Basavanna getting an 'untouchable' devotee's son married to a Brahmin devotee's daughter.

Most of the Shiva *Sharanas* (male) and *Sharanes* (female) were contemplative in nature and put down their thoughts in the form of aphorisms or ‘*Vachanas*’ in Kannada. They were composed in a style, which ordinary people could follow and respect. Though in prose, they are very poetic in spirit. It was poetry in prose. Many of the *Vachanas* are set to music – both Hindusthani and Karnatak, and make great songs, though they do not follow any set rules of metre (*Chhandas*). Some of their *Vachanas* have already been quoted in earlier Chapters here, for example in chapter 4, section 2. This *Vachana* is a fine blend of several emotions and thoughts. It shows the high regard that *Sharanas* had for the human body, which is considered as a temple of God. It also shows a certain sense of contempt for the rich and respect for the way in which the poor devote themselves to God. It also shows a great height of *Bhakti* suggesting that ‘I am all yours; my body is your home!’ One more *vachana* written by *Basavanna* is quoted below, which is a marvel of simplicity, symbolism and poetic symmetry, apart from its eloquent message to keep our mind clean.

*‘The master of the house, is he at home, or isn’t he?*

*Grass on the threshold,*

*Dirt in the house:*

*The master of the house, is he at home, or isn’t he?*

*Lies in the body,*

*Lust in the heart:*

*No, the master of the house is not at home,*

*Our Lord of the Meeting Rivers’.*<sup>10</sup>

**Akka Mahadevi** was one of the most eminent of the leaders of *Veerashaiva* movement, and her work has already been referred to in Chapter 4 (section-4). We may only note here an episode in her life. As a recluse she had shed even clothes. Allama Prabhu (*Prabhudevuru*), a leading recluse and mystic himself, is reported to have teasingly asked her why then she covered her breasts and private parts with her long tresses. She is reported to have replied – ‘so that you or your likes are not mentally disturbed’. Her taunt was not just to Allamaprabhu, but to all male-egoism and sexual oppression of women by men. There were at least 33 women saint-composers in *Veerashaiva* movement then, five of whom had more than 100 *vachanas* to their credit (see Sudha 2002: 22 for a list).

There is an interesting anecdote about the publication of *vachanas* during the early years of the twentieth century. The credit for first collecting and collating the *vachanas* goes to F G Halakatti. After ten years of labour, he approached the Bassel Mission Press of Mangalore in 1918 for the publication of his edited collection, along with a payment of Rs. 500 towards expenses. The Bassel Mission Press is reported to have refused to publish it, and returned the payment. Mr. Halakatti may not have found the reason cited by it very amusing: ‘Due to the affinity of *Vachanas* to the tenets of our religion, we are afraid that the publication would affect our efforts in evangelising our religion’ (Mallapure 1990, as quoted in Sudha 2002:10).

Veerashaivism is not just ethics and reformism. Veerashaivas formulated a school of philosophy too, which they trace to the Vedas, Upanishads and Agamas.<sup>11</sup> This system of philosophy is called *Shakti-Vishishtadvaita* (also known as *Shivadvaita*, *Dvaitadvaita* and *Shatsthala-darshana*), distinguishing it from the three main schools. The principles of this philosophy are expounded in a Sanskrit work called '*Siddhanta Shikhamani*', ascribed to the ninth century (but could well be a little later work), and said to be composed by **Shri Shivayogi Shivacharya** (Ingalalli 1998). This means that the basic philosophy of Veerashaivism was already in place before Basavanna, though of course, Basavanna gave a Reformist orientation to this philosophy.

The *Shunya Sampadane* is another philosophical work of Veerashaivas. It is in Kannada and is a compilation of the dialogues or proceedings of discussions among Sharanas. It also records a few historical events of the time. It was originally compiled and edited by Allama Prabhu (also called reverentially as Prabhudevaru), a mystic contemporary of Basavanna, highly respected for his philosophical knowledge. There are four versions of the work now, as the original work was re-compiled by different persons.<sup>12</sup> This work is not as systematic and focussed as *Siddhanta Shikhamani*, as its main purpose was to record the dialogues and related events involving many Sharanas and Sharanes, as they took place. '*Shunya*' here does not mean 'zero', 'void', or 'nothingness' as per its dictionary meaning, but the ultimate mystic experience of Shiva or Parabrahma in Absolute form. '*Shunya Sampadane*' means attaining this mystic experience.

The philosophy of Veerashaivism, as expounded in the *Siddhanta Shikhamani* (Crest Jewel of Philosophy) is briefly presented here. According to Ingalalli, this work achieves a synthesis between the three principal pathways of God-realization in Hinduism – *Jnana*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*. God is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Truth-Consciousness-Bliss). At the same time He is *Nirguna* – formless and without attributes. Shakti is the principle by which Shiva manifests Himself in the Universe. She is His will for Creative work, and represents the dynamics of the Universe. It is in the manifest World that differences appear. These differences are of six types: between (i) *Shiva* and *Jiva* (soul-in-body), (ii) *Jiva* and *Jiva*, (iii) *Jiva* and *Jada* (matter) (iv) *Jada* and *Jada*, (v) *Shiva* and *Jada*; (vi) *Jiva* and *Ajnana* (Ignorance). The first five constitute *Pancha-bhedas* (Five Differences) in Madhvacharya's *Dvaita Siddhanta* also. It is when we see Shiva, the Absolute, beyond all differences, that there is Jnana or Realisation. This philosophy tries to achieve a synthesis between the three philosophies of Advaita, Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita. It regards the World as real. And so is the human body, through which alone *Jiva* attains God-realisation. The body thus plays an important role. *Jiva* is not body, nor is it the same as mind or even intellect. Mind and intellect can, if wrongly employed, lead to ignorance. That is where the sixth difference above becomes relevant. The soul in body experiencing and overseeing everything within perception is *Jiva*. When the body consciousness is transcended and the consciousness is fixed on and is identified with Shiva, the experiencing *Jiva* is *Atman*. The path of thus transcending goes through six *sthalas* (stages). In the initial *sthal*, there is still a strong consciousness of *Jiva* embedded in body, being different from Shiva. In the final stage, there is complete identification with Shiva. In between, the stages are in ascending order of consciousness and fixation on Shiva, and descending order of ego, ignorance and other weaknesses of mind.<sup>13</sup> It is thus not a pure metaphysical philosophy, but a philosophy of ethics too.

Shrīshailam, in the present Andhra Pradesh, has been a major centre of Shaivism including Veerashaivism, since ancient times. The Chinese Scholar-travellers – Fa Hein and Itsing have referred to the *Mathas* in Shrīshailam (Hiremath 1998:12). Apart from Shrīshailam, there are major Veerashaiva Mathas in four other places (Baḷehonnuru, Kāshi, Ujjaini and Kēdar) with their own Guru-Paramparas. The heads of these five Mathas are called as Jagat-gurus (World-Teachers). Their lineage goes back in history much earlier to Basavanna. They had their own Puranas and other scriptures before Vachanas were composed. Moreover, when Basavanna's movement faced a serious crisis after his early death, it is these and other smaller Veerashaiva Mathas, which owned up this movement and carried it forward. But Veerashavism had to pay a price for this. If Basavanna's movement had continued in its Reformist zeal, it would have absorbed all the so-called low castes and untouchables into its fold. The Mathas, which were more elitist in character, were hardly enthusiastic about it, though they appropriated Basavanna's name and work. It must be said to the credit of these and other smaller *Mathas*, however, that they played a very important role in spreading education among the masses irrespective of social background of students from the early part of the 20th Century. Their role, wherever it was prominent, helped in checking the influence of Christian missionaries in Karnataka.

After Basavanna, the next popular figure in the tradition of Shaivism is **Sarvajna**. Not much is known about his life except that he belonged to the 16th Century and came – according to a legend – from a mixed parentage – a Brahmin father and a potter woman mother. He wrote unique verses, known as *Tripadis*, because they contained three lines only instead of the usual four lines. Even his real name is not known. He is called Sarvajna (Omniscient) only because each verse ends with that term. He was a wandering ascetic, and his verses reflect a deep understanding of life around him and his urge for ethical values. His religion is eclectic and universal, though through some verses we can guess that he was a Veerashiva in his personal faith. Compilations of his verses were brought out between 1922 and 1960 by Chennappa Uttangi. However, his verses had always been in circulation among people much before this. Uttangi published about 2,100 verses. Scholars like L Basavaraju believe that all of these may not be authentic, and people may have added their own in the same style and spirit. Basavaraju brought out his own compilation in 1972 published by Prasaraṅga, Bangalore University, consisting of over 1,000 verses, which according to him were genuinely by Sarvajna.

Sarvajna believed in one non-sectarian God as seen from the following:

*‘Obbanallade jagake ibbarunte matte?’*

*Obba Sarvajna Karta nee jagakella,*

*Obbane daiva Sarvajna’.*

It means: ‘There is only one God for this World, not two or more. There is only one Creator who is Omniscient and Divine’. He is accessible through genuine Bhakti. Bhakti is also empowering (‘Bhaktiyindale Shakti’). He ridicules mindless ritualistic Bhakti, like circumambulating temples without fixing one's mind on God, which is compared to oxen moving round the oil-press. The concerned verse is:

*‘Chittavillade guḍiya suttidade phalavenu?  
 Ettu ganavanu hottu ta nityadee  
 Sutti bandante Sarvajna’.*

Sarvajna also deplored caste distinctions as seen from verses like:

*‘Jati heenara maneya jyoti ta heenave?  
 Jati vijati yenabeda devanolisi-  
 datane jati Sarvajna’*

It means: ‘Is the light in a low caste home in any way inferior? Do not speak about caste and outcaste. The one who has won God’s love is the only high-born, Sarvajna’. In another poem, he asks how we can speak of caste distinctions when everyone has the same type of body and limbs. The verses quoted are only illustrative. There are many which bring out the same sentiments. He also teaches humility, dignity of manual labour, and gives moral guidance for success in day-to-day life.

Karnataka is equally known for another Bhakti tradition, developed by **Haridasas** (Servants of God). As their name suggests, they were in the Vaishnava tradition, being devotees of Hari or Vishnu. They were inspired by the humanist philosophy of **Madhvacharya** (1197-1276), known for the Dvaita School, but they were not sectarian in any sense. Put in simple terms, this philosophy makes human souls the direct and real agents of action. The souls have freedom of choice or free will and are responsible for their action. In this task, they are helped by the compassionate Hari in the form of *Sakshi* or conscience, which enables correct but intuitive perception of what is right and what is wrong. It is up to them to make spiritual progress through a morally right path. Madhvacharya declared that everybody, irrespective of caste, has a right to make spiritual progress. In his commentary (*Bhashya*) on *Brahmasutras*, he says: ‘*Antyajah api ye bhaktah namajnanadhikarinah*’ (Even the low-born have the right to the name and knowledge of God if they are devoted to Him). He also said that service of people is also a tribute to God and is a form of Bhakti.

The important contribution of Haridasas was in interpreting what was originally an abstract and highly technical philosophy for ordinary people of the world, in a language they could understand. But they did not preach it as a sectarian philosophy. Their preaching had a universal appeal. There are a lot of basic commonalities between Veerashaiva and Haridasa tradition. Both emphasised the role of genuine devotion, both deplored mindless rituals and caste distinctions, both emphasised universal ethical values, both affirmed their faith in the reality of the World and doing own duty to it with humility and without ego, and both composed and preached in Kannada. Haridasas were not Sanyasis (monks), who ‘renounced’ the world, but those who very much lived as part of this world and contributed to uplifting the moral and religious consciousness of the masses. What is more, by composing mellifluous songs, they enriched both literature and music. There were several Haridasas – there still are, but only two are presented here for illustration. One is **Purandaradasa** (1480-1564 CE) and another is **Kanakadasa** (1508 – 1606 CE).

**Purandaradasa** was earlier a merchant, supposed to be very calculating and money-minded. According to legend, his wife, a pious and kindhearted lady, was instrumental in changing him and making him a *Haridāsa*. His songs are popular even now, sung in music concerts, temples, schools and bhajan meetings. Some of them are also popular lullabies. He is credited with founding the Karnatak School of classical Music. Each of his song is set to a particular *raga* and *tala*, and makes enjoyable listening. They are supposed to be sung with proper emotion, and not with raga alone. When heard from singers like Bhimsen Joshi, the songs move one literally to tears. Purandaradasa must have been inspired by folk music which is reflected in his songs. Even while observing day-to-day chores of people, he could derive philosophical significance from them, which he conveyed in the same idiom in musical form. In his song, ‘*Musure toḷeya beku...*’ for example, he compares vessels burnt black from cooking with our minds which have been blackened by the fire of desire and need cleansing in the stream of recitation of God’s name. His songs entered the hearts of people instantly, both because of their lyrical quality enabling everyone to sing them, and also because of their simple idiom and imagery with which people were familiar. What is most remarkable about Purandaradasa’s songs is his advocacy of simple Bhakti as a pathway to God, censuring of all forms of hypocrisy and caste distinctions, and insistence on high moral values.

Two verses from one of his popular songs go like this:

*Dasana madiko enna swami,*

*Sasira namada Venkataramana.*

(Make me your slave, My Lord of thousand names!)

*Durbuddhigalanella bidiso,*

*Ninna karune kavachavenna haranakke todiso.*

(Liberate my mind from every malice, Give me the protection of your compassion).

Purandaradasa laughs at the hypocrisy and fuss of people, who count their fingers (doing japa) with no control on lust and other weaknesses of mind (‘*Nageyu barutide nanage, nageyu barutide. Jagadolagiruva manujarella hagaranaṇava kandu ...*’). He ridicules brahminical notions of ‘*Maḍi*’ and ‘*Mailige*’ (*Maḍi* is ritual purity, while *Mailige* is its opposite – pollution or impurity) and insists that the only meaningful purity is purity of mind devoid of malice, hatred and other weaknesses, while pollution is their presence in the mind, irrespective of whatever rituals one may perform. He even uses outright abusive terms in such ridicule, reserved for those who indulge in such hypocritical practices (‘*Maḍi maḍiyendu marmaru haruti, maḍiyelli bantu pikanashi / bikanashi*’). He launches a scathing attack on the caste system and untouchability, and says that the real outcaste (‘*holeya*’) is the one who has no moral values, who is ungrateful, lustful, miser who knows no generosity, a cheat, and a hypocrite (In the song, ‘*Holeya horagihane, oorolagillave?...*’).

During the course of his wandering, he may certainly have faced rough and coarse people using abusive language. One of his poems goes like this:

Revile me, Revile me with all your heart!  
 Revile me well, and make me blessed!  
 I don't feel small;  
 When you revile me,  
 You share my sins -  
 The sin of having killed ants and flies,  
 The sin of criticising others,  
 The sin of polluting may be,  
 The sin of losing temper with my parents-in-law and elders,  
 And the sin of not remembering God at times;  
 Nicely measure out and  
 Distribute among yourselves all these sins,  
 And make me blessed.<sup>14</sup>

We noted while discussing the Law of Karma, that if we ill-treat a person thinking that she deserve it because of past Karma, we lighten her burden of karma taking it on ourselves. But if we help a person in distress and in crisis, we lighten our own Karma. Purandaradasa has brought this lesson of the Law of Karma poignantly. The poor chap, it seems, had difficulties with his in-laws too! He expresses his anguish at ill-treatment but transcends it too.

Both in quality and quantity of his poems, Purandaradasa is perhaps unexcelled. He is said to have composed 475,000 songs! It seems whatever he spoke was poetry. Unfortunately, only a fraction of his prolific literary output is available.<sup>15</sup> With such rich contribution to Kannada and Bhakti Literature, he lived the life of an ascetic, seeking alms, and wandering from place to place, singing his enchanting songs. Thereby he spread his message more effectively.

**Kanakadasa** is another great saint in the Haridāsa tradition. A legend about his life has already been referred in the chapter 5 here. Not much is known about his life, except that he belonged to a so-called low caste, and was a younger contemporary of Purandaradasa. They had a high regard for each other. Like Purandaradasa, his poems – apart from their value as a source of moral guidance, are also very musical and sung to classical tunes. He composed a few epics too like *Hari-bhakti-sāra* and *Nāḷa-charitre* in Kannada. He was also an ascetic, singing his way from place to place into the hearts of people, and seeking alms for his living. One of his poems is well known for the solace it brings to the distressed, helpless people and assures that Keshava, his favourite name for God, takes care of all.

*‘Tallanisu kandyā talu manave /*  
*Ellaranu Salahuvanu idake samshayavilla//*  
*Bettada tudyalli huttida vrkshakke*  
*Katteyanu katti neereredavanu yaro /*

*Huttisida svami ta honegaranada mele,  
Ghattiyagi rakshipanu idake samshayavilla!'*

You see, do not feel disturbed, Oh Mind, wait!  
Do not doubt that He takes care of all of us.  
Who waters the tree that has sprung  
on the top of the hill?  
He has begotten us, He is responsible to us,  
He protects us firmly, do not doubt!

Like Purandaradasa, he too deploras the hypocrisy and meaninglessness of asking for one's family status and caste. He asks in one of his poems, 'Does not a lotus spring from muddy water? Does not milk come from the udder of the cow, which is but flesh? Don't Brahmins consume it? God knows no family and caste' (in his song, '*Kula kula kulavennutihar...*').

#### 4. MAHARASHTRA

Maharashtra was not far behind Karnataka in time in Bhakti Movement. It was started by Jñanadev, also known as Jñaneshwar (1271-96), who in his short life of 25 years earned a permanent place in the history of Bhakti Movements in India. Unlike Tamil Nadu and Karnataka where two separate streams of Bhakti Movements – Shaivite and Vaishnavite – had emerged, they were more or less unified into one movement from the start in Maharashtra centred around god Viṭṭhala's temple in Pandharpur. Purandaradasa was also a devotee of this deity. This deity and his devotees made no distinction between Karnataka and Maharashtra, nor between castes. This loving and compassionate god also allows no distance between Himself and his devotees. Unique among Hindu temples, the image of the deity used to be literally embraced by all the devotees right in the *sanctum sanctorum* irrespective of caste and creed till recently. Devotees visiting the temple hugged the deity, and not just bowed down from a distance.<sup>16</sup> The inspiration of Divine Love – Bhakti, which flowed from this deity swept even ordinary people off their feet not to mention hundreds of poets and saints who emerged from the most ordinary rural folks. This Love, however, was not mere ecstasy, but also reflected the tension between caste-and-ritual ridden society and the Divine Love itself. It simply broke through the barriers, with no malice to any but love and compassion for all. As in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, in Maharashtra too, the Bhakti Movement attracted and took within its loving fold Marathi Saint-poets (Sants) mostly from the lower classes without excluding the untouchables.

The bulk of Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra has been under the auspices of **Varkari Panth** (Pilgrims' Sect). They are staunch devotees of Viṭhoba (or Viṭṭhala) of Pandharpur. A special feature of the expression of their Bhakti is the procession of devotees (*Dindi*) marching towards the temple of Pandharpur. People start in small groups from their respective villages after the sowing season is over, and then slowly start merging into each other like small streams forming a river, which again

joins a bigger river. The Dindis lead ultimately to a sea of humanity on the banks of the sacred river of Chandrabhaga (also called Bheema) close to the temple of their hearts – the Shrine of Vithoba on the holy day of *Ashadha Ekadashi*. They come from every nook and corner of Maharashtra, walking hundreds of miles. People sing and dance with ecstasy in the procession in praise of Vithoba, using the devotional songs – *Abhangs* – of Marathi Sants. Their religion is very simple. It knows no rituals, requires no knowledge of Sanskrit mantras and stotras, and needs no intermediary between them and God. The Abhangs composed in Marathi are their sacred literature, which they sing with joyous love. It is a religion of pure and intense love, without caste barriers, and with brotherly love for all especially fellow Varkaris.

Though Vitthala (Vithoba) is believed to be a form of Vishnu or Narayana, it would be misleading to call his devotees as Vaishnavas, particularly if it is taken to be suggestive of their being different from the Shaivites. As a matter of fact, Vithoba's devotees made no distinction of this kind. For them a distinction between Shiva and Vishnu was meaningless, and they were firmly monotheistic. It is interesting that (subject to rare exceptions) they do not make references in their songs to the legends of Krishna unlike Purandaradasa, who too was a devotee of Vitthala. There is little reference to Krishna's dalliance with Gopis or to stories of stealing butter from their homes. On the other hand, Vithoba's love is for his devotees and nothing else. It is also interesting that the Maharashtrian Sants – even women Sants – did not worship him with romantic love. Vithoba is the *Mauli* (mother) of all Sants, and there is no other relationship. Some of the songs compare the love of Vithoba for his devotees with love of a cow for its calf. A very noteworthy aspect of Bhakti in Maharashtra is the greater emphasis on Vithoba's love for his devotees than on the devotees' love for Vithoba.

The Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra can be said to have started with the composition of *Jnaneshwari* (a popular lyrical version of the *Gita*) in Marathi by **Sant Jnaneshwar**, also known as **Jnanadev**. It was more an appreciative and an elaborative paraphrase than a traditional *Bhashya* (commentary) of the *Gita*, and became a canon in its own right for the people. For the first time (13th Century), people had direct access to the philosophy and preaching of the *Gita*, which set off the devotional movement as well as literary compositions in Marathi. Apart from the *Jnaneshwari*, which could be sung or recited with ease, Jnaneshwar composed many other songs as well conveying his philosophy and ethical values. Though coming from a Brahmin family, he denounced sacrificial rituals and hypocrisy of pompous religious practices and emphasised only sincere love.<sup>17</sup> He seemed to have belonged to the Varkari sect as far as his Bhakti is concerned, but also to a sect of monistic mystics known as the Nath Panth. He was equally at home with people in the Dindi of Varkaris to Pandharapur, and also with mystics who shunned noise and preferred contemplation and penance. In Maharashtra, with ordinary people at least, it is the *Jnaneshwari*, which counts more than the original *Gita*, and is recited daily with reverence by millions. It was through the *Jnaneshwari* that the *Gita* and Hinduism took deep roots among the masses, and shielded them from Islam. The Sants who came later also performed the same role and also made the masses question the authenticity of caste system and the priests. Bhakti served as an excellent vehicle for reformist ideas and practices.

Sant Jnaneshwar also wrote another classic, the *Amṛtanubhava*, again in Marathi instead of Sanskrit, though he knew the latter well. It is highly metaphysical in content and explains his basic

stand that ‘the Absolute has objectified itself, within *itself*, as the manifested universe and the infinite ever-changing phenomena therein’ (Balsekar 1984: iv). The *Amṛtanubhava* (experience of immortality) follows when one surrenders personal ego as a separate entity and unites with the Absolute. In this state all dualities are dissolved. With Jnaneshwar, the objective world is neither an illusion nor merely a projection on the Absolute, but a manifestation of Absolute. In this regard, Jnaneshwar differs from the stand taken by Shankaracharya, though the philosophical standpoints of both can be called as Advaitic or nondualism. A translation of Jnaneshwar’s *Amṛtanubhava*, along with commentary, by Balsekar is available in English (*Ibid*).

The credit for consolidating the Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra goes to Jnaneshwar’s contemporary – **Sant Namdev** (1270-1350).<sup>18</sup> Fortunately he lived longer than Jnaneshwar and could give more time in shaping the Bhakti movement particularly in the Reformist direction. Namdev came from a so-called low caste of tailors, and like Basavanna in Karnataka earlier, gathered around himself several other saint-poets of his time – **Gora Kumbhar** (a potter), **Savata Mali** (a gardener), **Chokhamela** (an untouchable), **Sena** (a barber), **Janabai** (a maid), and **Kanhopatra** (a dancing girl) (Jordens 1975:268). Jnaneshwar too was a part of this fraternal group. They had a high regard for each other, but did not seem to have a formal organisation under any single leader or patron as in the case of Shiva Sharanas of Karnataka. Both Jnanadev and Namadev – particularly the latter, seem to have played an informal but a leading role in organising, networking and developing the Movement. Sant Namadev also travelled widely, visiting Panjab and other areas in the North, and became popular with the saints there.

Like the Shiva Sharanas led by Basavanna, these Saints were not ascetics, but were householders, who believed in the reality of the world in spite of its imperfections and impermanence, and sought God realisation through bhakti, living and doing one’s duty in this world. They believed in being gentle and kind to other human beings and even to the animal world, and doing one’s work with humility and sense of service. With Shiva Sharanas, however, the concept of work (*kayaka*) and service (*dasoha*) were raised to the level of a philosophy in its own right. It was somewhat subdued and remained more or less at the implicit level in the case of Marathi Saints. Their focus was on Divine Love, which even the lowest of the low could experience, irrespective of the status of occupation and community.

Namdev’s Abhangs are remarkable for the intensity and sincerity of love for God, and some of them are included in the sacred canon of Sikhs – the *Adi Granth* or the *Granth Sahib*. His love for Vithoba was so deep that he took the liberty of indulging in mock quarrels with the deity for not being of spiritual help to the extent expected of him. An interesting song in this context which reflects his tension is given here:

I came to your door hearing  
that you raise the fallen.  
But I withdraw, disappointed.  
God, leave aside your pride and prudery.  
Who would call you *Patita-Pavan*, the Emancipator?

.....

Namā says you have nothing to do with me.  
 But keep in my heart my love for you and the  
 Remembrance of your feet ever.<sup>19</sup>

Under the section on the Bhakti-marga in Chapter 4, two songs of Namdev's contemporary, **Chokha** the untouchable, have been quoted where he describes how God participates in the daily chores of his devotees lightening their burden, and another where he expresses his painful dismay over the disparity in the God's world. They are typical of the love and faith reposed in God by these saints, and also the social protest expressed against inequality. About Chokha's poems, Mokashi-Punakar perceptively observes, 'it is not only divine love that empowers him [Chokha], but also more importantly, his devotion that empowers Vithoba' (Mokashi-Punekar 2002: xvi). Another untouchable saint, a woman, **Janabai**, also has left us many beautiful devotional songs. In one of them, she says God left his heavenly abode and came to the earth because he has weakness for the emotional attachment of his devotees.<sup>20</sup> In another, she describes how her Vithu (affectionately shortened form of Vitthal) is a family man with a lot of kids to take care of. She uses the word '*lekura*' (an endearing expression for kids, something like 'darling kids'). It is as follows:

My Vithu is a family man with a lot of kids –  
 Nivṛtti on His shoulders  
 Sopan's hand in His hand,  
 With Jñāneshwar on His front,  
 Followed by pretty Muktai,  
 Gorā the potter on His thigh,  
 Chokha with His Jīva (Soul) itself,  
 Bankā perched on His waist,  
 Namā holding His finger -  
 Celebrate the assembly of your Devotees,  
 Janā says Re! Gopālā!<sup>21</sup>

Another immortal song of hers:

I have captured the Thief of Pandhari,  
 Tying Him with my Love,  
 Making my heart a prison,  
 Kept Him firmly inside!  
 Janā says Oh! Vithala!  
 I shall never free you from there!<sup>22</sup>

Jordens observes: ‘After Namdev two centuries went by without leaving any names of great saints. The coming of the Turks and Islam drove the movement underground as it were. The temple at Pandharpur was razed, but the spirit did not die. It was **Eknath** (1533-99) who revived the inspiration and the tradition’ (1975:269). Eknath too has a permanent place in the history of Bhakti Movements and in Marathi literature. Being a Brahmin, he had a good knowledge of Sanskrit and Sanskrit canon. He brought out the first reliable edition of the *Jnaneshwari* and wrote popular versions of both *Ramayana* and *Bhagavata* in Marathi, giving his own interpretation of the two great epics. The *Eknathi Bhagavat* enjoys even now almost as high a status as the *Jnaneshwari* and it gave a boost to the Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra. Eknath played the same role as Jnaneshwar, providing easy access for ordinary masses to the scriptures in Sanskrit, and thus continuity between the classical phase and the Bhakti Movement. His simple message was: ‘One who can recognise Hari in this mundane world itself, such a person is blessed, for spiritual success and liberation for him is at his door step!’<sup>23</sup>

Here is an example of his devotional song:

For servants of Hari, all ten directions are Hari!

Felt thus, Hari is one.

Sing about Hari, your worries vanish.

For such, there is no re-birth.

.....

All consciousness took the form of Hari,

The feeling of I-and-You merged into Hari.

The form of Hari in meditation,

The form of Hari in mind,

There is but one Janardhan,

Say Hari!<sup>24</sup>

Eknath had another dimension to his creativity springing out of his strong empathy for the poor and downtrodden. Located in the ancient centre of Sanskrit learning – Paithan, which was also on the trade routes between the North and South, West and East, he had the opportunity of observing a wide cross section of people, which he did with a great amount of empathy. He gave expression to his observations through ‘drama-poems’ called *Bharuds*, ‘which actually put the message of bhakti in the mouths of a varied group of low caste, low-status characters. ... A great many of Eknath’s three hundred *bharuds* are in the persons of untouchables, passing Muslim fakirs, acrobats and travelling entertainers, religious personages from unorthodox sects, prostitutes and unhappy women – a wide sweep of the non-Sanskritic world around Eknath. These characters use their own images and symbols, even at times their own language, but speak the message of bhakti. ... He abandons the normal Sant reliance on personal experience to allow his characters to relate their experiences’ (Zelliot 1987:91-92). As Zelliot observes further, ‘the empathy they [*bharuds*] exhibit carries to a dramatic climax the

Maharashtrian bhakti ideals that all the truly devout are equal and that any true bhakta can speak the bhakti message' (*Ibid* : 92).

In her interesting essay 'Eknath's *Bharuds*', Zelliott gives several examples of his eye for detail, empathy and even humour. In one of his *Bharuds* (*Amba satvar pav ge mala*'), a woman pleads to her Goddess Amba for quick deliverance from her in-laws and even the husband, countering the image of a devoted wife! In another (*Johar; Maybap, Johar; mi Suryavamshicha Mahar*), a Mahar (an untouchable) describes the problem of old age in a down-to-earth, even vulgar speech, which is actually a caution that before destiny takes over, one should care for spiritual progress. One more, again through the mouth of a Mahar, (*ka re mahara madamasta*'), gives a dialogue between a Brahmin and Mahar, where the Mahar gives a lesson in politeness and spiritual knowledge to the Brahmin (*Ibid*: 98-108).

Eknath is also noted as the author of a very interesting *Hindu-Turk Samvad* (dialogue, debate), consisting of 66 stanzas, which begins by presenting mutual recriminations between a Hindu and a Turk (Muslim) that may have been typical of the times. But it is significant that the debate ends on a very cordial note, greeting and embracing each other, reaching a consensus that both Hindus and Muslims are God's children (Wagle 1997: 139-41). Promoting such cordiality seems to have been the purpose of Eknath's *Samvad*, apart from answering some of the criticisms levelled against Hinduism by Muslims. It is noteworthy that both the Hindu and the Turk are firm in their respective faiths, even when they become cordial and respectful to each other. It is also obvious from the title of the work that by Eknath's time Hindus self-consciously recognised themselves as Hindus. Hitherto, the word 'Hindu' used to appear only in the accounts of non-Hindus. On record, Eknath appears to be the first to use the word among Hindus.

Then comes **Tukaram** (1598-1650), respected as the greatest of saints in Maharashtra, known for his piety, his passionate compositions yearning for Hari, his prolific contribution to Bhakti and Marathi literature, and the impact he left on Bhakti movement far and wide, including even on Muslims. Even today, his Abhangs are sung with ardour all over Maharashtra. He came from a rural family of grain traders (Jordens 1975: 269), but he broke through caste barriers like other Saints in Maharashtra. Apart from expressing his intensity of love for Vithoba, Tukaram's songs also emphasise virtues of self-control, simple living and avoidance of pomp, freedom from greed, detachment, integrity, kindness and softness of speech. The following poem reflects some of his values:

Pure inward and soft in speech,  
What if his neck sports a garland or not?  
The path of experiencing Atman once chosen,  
What if his head sports matted hair or not?  
Blind to others' wealth and mute to reproach,  
Tuka says he is the real sant.<sup>25</sup>

Another song reflects the intensity of his commitment to the virtue of integrity and truthfulness:  
I would bow to his feet,  
Who acts as he speaks,

I will sweep his courtyard  
 And accept his serfdom  
 Like a slave I would stand  
 With folded hands before him.  
 Tuka says, God! My heart goes to his feet!<sup>26</sup>

Despite Muslim invasions and their rule, there still seems to have been cordial relations between Hindus and Muslims at the grass-roots level. The two religions influenced and even attracted each other during the Bhakti Movement. Monotheism of Bhakti and Bhakti as love of God were common to both Hinduism and Islam, particularly Sufism. Sufism also was a religion of intense love for God. Many common people could not, therefore, find any basic difference between the two. This helped several Sufi saints to win converts from Hinduism to Islam. Interestingly, it attracted several Muslims also to Hinduism, though they may not have formally converted to Hinduism. The Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra can boast of at least three Muslim Sants (as in Tamil Nadu and later in Karnataka) – **Latib Shah** and **Shaikh Mahammad** in 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and Shah-Muni in the 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>27</sup> Latib Shah was a disciple of Eknath and composed his Abhangs in Hindi. Shaikh Mahammad was a contemporary and an admirer of Tukaram. He composed his Abhangs in chaste Marathi itself. One of his Abhangs says about himself touchingly:

This Gopala has done such deeds,  
 There is no scope for prudery.  
 Thorny *Ketaki* plant  
 Gives birth to fragrant *Kevada* flower;  
 Jackfruit of rough exterior  
 Has lumps of nectar within;  
 Tough from outside, the coconut  
 Has sweet water within;  
 Shaik Mahammad is a Muslim,  
 Has Govinda in his heart within.<sup>28</sup>

A remarkable quality of **Shaikh Mahammad's** hymns is that they use a chaste Hindu idiom, metaphor and imagery, and Hindu concepts. There is no record of his conversion either way, but he lived the life of a Marathi Hindu Sant, retaining his Muslim identity. He is known for his *Yogasangrama*, based on the theme of the soul's struggle to realise and experience God. He criticises both the caste system and worshipping many folk gods and goddesses. He emphasizes that Hari and Allah are the same and in a lighter vein, 'comments that if there were (two gods) (Hindu) Hari and (Muslim) Allah, they would have perished fighting each other'. (*Hari Allah jari don aste tari te bhanda bhandon marate*) (Wagle 1997: 142).



Sant Tukaram's compositions which were drowned by jealous priests in Chandrabhaga river were returned to him by the river goddess according to legend.

**Samartha Ramadas** (1608-81) was an unusual Sant. That his favourite deity was Rama, not Viṭṭhala, is not his distinction, though it made him stand somewhat apart. What was unusual about him was his political consciousness and earnestness to raise the moral level as well as the morale of his Marathi speaking people, in addition to Bhakti. That is how he became Guru to Maratha Emperor Shivaji, who was determined to resist Muslim rule. His work '*Dasabodha*' however, reflects his ethical concerns and emphasis on Bhakti rather than political concerns. This work includes two sections on '*Rajakaran*' (Politics), - the fifth *Samās* in the eleventh *Dashak* and the ninth *Samās* in the nineteenth *Dashak*. However, he is concerned here with only providing moral guidance to kings and other leaders of people in matters of administration, emphasising values like fairness and impartiality, concern for the welfare of subjects, need for taking care against crooked advice, guarding against laziness and complacency and so on. It is remarkable that the work is free from any parochial or narrow religious fanaticism. He did not politicise religion, in spite of his being close to the affairs of the state. Samartha Ramadas was firmly within the Bhakti tradition, emphasising humility and passionate devotion to Rama. Though an ascetic himself, he did not preach asceticism to others but taught how God realisation is possible for ordinary people engaged in worldly duties, provided that they are devoted to God and are ethical in conduct. Samartha Ramadas is equally known for his *Manache Shloka* (The Mind's Psalms), recited with reverence by millions in Maharashtra even to this day. Addressed to the Mind, it is a simple and practical guide for those on the spiritual path, but the emphasis is on ethical values and not on metaphysics or contemplation. His summary advice is: "Give up all that is blameworthy; do what is respected and with love."<sup>29</sup> He says – 'Never abandon Truth, never propose falsehood'. He describes who a real Sant is:

Compassionate to the meek  
Tender at heart,  
Affectionate and gracious,  
Protective of the poor,  
How can anger torment him?  
He is a blessed servant of God!<sup>30</sup>

His advice to religious teachers has a ring of relevance even today. 'Do not preach to others, so long as you still have egoism' (160<sup>th</sup> Shloka). It is interesting that his written work does not reflect his political concerns, but only ethical concerns and concerns about spiritual uplift of his fellow human beings. He established several *Matḥas* and started a monastic order for this purpose. In this respect also, he stood apart from other Sants.

**Shah Muni**, a Muslim Sant, came on the scene in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Maratha Rule was well established. Firm in his own faith of Islam, he was equally knowledgeable about Hindu scriptures and tradition and wrote in chaste Marathi. He wrote a monumental work, *Siddhanta Bodha*, completed in 1778. He made an interesting attempt to internalise Muslims, making them appear as part of the Hindu society. For this purpose, he used Purāṇic style mythology, calling Allah as Mahavishṇu but formless,

explaining how Paigambar (Marathi word for Prophet Mohammad) sprang forth from Him to establish Mleccha Dharma (Islam), and how Quran was the Shastra created by Mahavishnu communicated through Paigambar (Wagle 1997: 143-5). He taught Islam to Hindus in their own language, and moved among them like a Hindu Sant without any problem while enjoying the respect due to a Sant. He did not hesitate in criticising the Jati system like other Sants.

The legacy left behind by all these saint-poets has been everlasting, with a lot of following even now. They have, to a large extent, shaped the popular Hinduism of today both among the middle and lower classes. Their influence never excluded any caste right from the beginning – whether Brahmins or the so-called low castes. As never before, Bhakti Movements united different castes even in the practice of religion – devotional singing, and recitation of Divine Name. It made community singing and community participation in other devotional practices such as *Dindi* very popular, cutting across class and caste lines – particularly so in Maharashtra.

The Sants do not seem to have bothered much about finer debates about whether God is *Nirguna* (Attributeless) or *Saguna* (with Attributes), about *Advaita* and *Dvaita*. They transcend such conflicts admirably, considering them to be of little importance. A popular song by the mystic Sant, Jnaneshwar, reflects this attitude very eloquently and has been quoted in full together with a translation in the second chapter (section-1). By shunning metaphysical debates, by simplifying religion, by bringing the essence of classical Hindu canon to the masses in their own language, and by emphasising intense emotional attachment to God which all humans are capable of, the Bhakti movements built bridges between people of different castes and demolished hierarchy at least in religion, if not in society. In this task an untouchable Sant like Chokhamela, a woman Sant like Janabai, and Brahmin Sant like Eknath, – all worked together with one mind. Zelliott suggests that it was this consolidation, which provided the background and the foundation for Shivaji's resistance to Muslim rule and the founding of a Hindu kingdom, surrounded though it was by Muslim rulers. Zelliott observes poignantly that 'the large scale rejection of Hinduism by Mahars in 1936 and the conversion of nearly eighty per cent of the caste to Buddhism in 1956 has almost completely broken the earlier connection of Mahars to the Warkari tradition' (Zelliott 1987: 108-9).

## 5. THE REST OF INDIA<sup>31</sup>

In other parts of India not covered above, eastern India (including Orissa) witnessed the Bhakti movements first. Jayadeva's *Gita-Govinda* (end of 12<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>32</sup> was a landmark not only in Orissa where it originated, but elsewhere too. It stimulated several cults of bhakti, based on adoration of *Radha* and *Krshna*. Its lyricism inspired the development of Classical Music and dance too. Its influence continues unabated today. Eastern India actually witnessed two main streams of the Bhakti Movements, not necessarily exclusive of each other, in the form of devotion to the Divine Mother –*Durgadevi* and *Kali*, and to *Krshna* often along with *Radha*.

There has been a long tradition of the worship of the Divine in feminine forms since ancient times all over India. In eastern India, particularly Bengal and Assam, it had a special flavour and a large following. It was **Chandidas** (14<sup>th</sup> century) who started a major Bhakti movement through his devotional

songs in adoration of Devi, and also of Radha and Kṛṣṇa. Though Durga, slaying the buffalo-demon Mahisha, has been worshipped in India since long, she assumed multiple significance in this region. In what could be considered as pre-modern feminism, Durga represents a reversal of the traditional feminine role. Far from being a victim of aggression from a brute and insensitive male – Mahisha, she overpowers and slays him. She thus inspires confidence in and imparts strength to women, even if vicariously, who are at the receiving end in a male dominated society. Durga is an object of love for another reason too. She has a tender aspect, apart from being considered as a loving Mother for her devotees. Married daughters customarily visit their parental home during the Durga Puja, which becomes an occasion of great happiness and rejoicing. ‘Durga herself is cast in the role of a returning daughter during her great festival and many devotional songs are written to welcome her home and bid her farewell. ...It is a common sight to see them (devotees) weeping as the goddess, their daughter, leaves to return to her husband’s home far away’ (Kinsley 1987: 223-4).

The worship of the Divine Feminine in a rather fierce, even repulsive form of Kālī, is also a prominent feature of Bhakti in eastern India, particularly Assam and Bengal. Kālī represents fierce and gruesome aspects of Nature over which humans have no power. Kālī seems to have started as a goddess among the tribal people, and then among thieves and robbers. She was believed to become pacified and beneficent after blood sacrifices. However, though her iconographic features remained unchanged (naked figure with her long red tongue out, and wearing a necklace of severed human heads), she was brought in to the mainstream of Hinduism, being regarded as Mother Goddess, loving and protective for her children (devotees), guarding them against calamities and evils. The credit for this goes mainly to Ramaprasad Sen (18<sup>th</sup> century), who composed devotional songs in her praise, invoking her love and protection as Mother. Later, Kālī became more famous in the mainstream Hinduism after her devotee Ramakrishna Paramahansa also became famous (see the next chapter). Ramakrishna’s worship of Kālī was totally non-violent with no question of blood sacrifice, consistent with the humane nature of the Bhakti Movements. Interestingly, the process of mainstreaming of Kālī had a lot to do with the process of bringing tribal people into the mainstream of Hinduism.

Eastern India had, however, a fairly strong tradition of *Tantra* and Shakti cult including some of its gruesome forms. Kamakhya temple in Assam had developed into a major centre of Shakti cult involving blood sacrifices. Through spells and incantations, rapacious magic men and mendicants of dubious character duped innocent people. To dispel this darkness surrounding religion, there emerged in Assam a bright Sun in the form of **Sri Shankara Deva** (1449-1569). He lived long enough (120) years to do a truly lifetime work of bringing sanity and humanism into a people, who had gone astray. He preached a religion of love and focussed on Kṛṣṇa, open to all people irrespective of caste or class. His cult is known as *Eka-sharana* (surrender to one God). It needed no rituals or ceremonies, but only chanting the name of God with purity of heart and devotion, and seeking *Satsang* (the assembly of devotees). He deplored violence in the name of religion, particularly blood sacrifice. For preaching his simple religion, he composed songs, wrote plays and acted in them, painted pictures inspiring devotion, and wrote philosophical treatises. He was a versatile genius, and gave a big boost to Assamese art and literature. Assamese literature is said to have found its first major efflorescence through his writings. As he became popular, he also became a threat to the reputation and even the livelihood of established

priesthood. Priests made false allegations to the local king against the saint and complained that as a non-Brahmin, Sri Shankara Deva had no right to preach religion. He was summoned to respond to the allegations. He defended himself by asserting that he drew inspiration and teaching from the *Bhagavata Purana*, to which everyone irrespective of caste had a right of access according to even the Brahmins. He showed that he did not depend on the Vedas or Upanishads, and did not, therefore, violate any Brahminic rules. He further argued that his main teaching, chanting the name of God, is open to everyone irrespective of caste, even according to Brahminic texts. The king was so impressed that he became Sri Shankara Deva's disciple himself. Shankara Deva attracted many Brahmin disciples also, apart from people from other castes and made no distinction between them on the basis of caste. His work was prolific, and some of his songs known as *Bargita* are still popular. Among his major works, *Bhakti-pradipa*, *Kirtana-ghosha* and *Guna-mala* are regarded highly (Neog 1967).

**Chaitanya** (1485-1533)<sup>33</sup> was a younger contemporary of Shankara Deva, though the latter outlived him. There is no record about their meeting or mutual interaction. Vaishnavism, however, got a major boost from Chaitanya not only in Bengal but also elsewhere. Like Shankara Deva, Chaitanya too was liberal regarding caste, permitted all castes into his faith, and made no distinction between them. Both had Muslim disciples as well. Chaitanya taught Madhura Bhakti (sweet or romantic devotion), where the devotee identifies himself or herself with Radha and seeks a blissful and mystical union with Kṛṣṇa. Jayadeva's *Gīta-govinda* (the end of 12<sup>th</sup> century) was a major influence on Chaitanya, as also on others for such type of devotion. There is a unique significance to Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa concept, particularly to the legend that Rādhā was not Kṛṣṇa's wife, but either a maiden or another cowherd's wife. There was a debate over the question, which is the most intense and passionate love one is capable of, if Bhakti is as defined by Nārada – *parama prema rupa* (highest love). A lot of flexibility is allowed in Bhakti about the assumed relationship between the devotee and God. Inspired by the *Gīta-govinda*, it was felt by quite a few that the most passionate love is the one between two unmarried lovers. The legend of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and *Madhura-bhakti* was created and developed out of this notion. Chaitanya often took Rādhā-bhāva (the feeling being Radha) in his ecstatic singing and dancing in adoration of Kṛṣṇa. It may incidentally be noted, however, that in the *Bhagavata*, Kṛṣṇa was only a young lad of about eight and Rādhā was much older, and there was no question of a sensual relationship between Kṛṣṇa and other Gopis including Radha. The attribution of romantic association between them was a much later development particularly after the *Gīta-govinda*.

Radha-Kṛṣṇa concept even when romanticised does not, however, mean that in the name of this concept, licentiousness and debauchery are allowed among human beings. Unfortunately, certain followers of the earlier Tantrik School took it that way in relation to Shiva-Shakti union. Vaishnavism in Bengal, however, did not permit such licentiousness. That would have meant vulgarising the Divine, turning sacred into profane. It would, therefore, be highly misleading to suggest that the Radha-Kṛṣṇa legend allows or inspires immorality. Chaitanya himself distanced himself from such vulgarisation and did not allow transferring licentious sensuality to relationships between human beings in the name of Divine Love. The Radha-Kṛṣṇa concept of both Shankara Deva and Chaitanya was instrumental in removing the licentious implication of the earlier *Sahajiya-Tantric* beliefs,<sup>34</sup> in the name of Shiva-Shakti or Radha-Kṛṣṇa union. The philosophical system of Radha- Kṛṣṇa cult, according to some scholars,

was formed much before Chaitanya by Nimbarka, who belonged to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. He migrated from the present Andhra Pradesh to Varanasi and founded his philosophical school of Bhakti, known as *Dvaitadvaita*. But in Nimbark's system, Radha is Kṛṣṇa's wife.

Kashmir figures significantly in the Bhakti Movements as it had several mystic poets who wrote in Kashmiri, particularly two women – **Lalla**, also known as Lal Ded or Lalla Yogeshwari, in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, and **Rupa Bhavani** in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Lalla precedes Rāmananda (15<sup>th</sup> Century) who pioneered the Bhakti Movement in the Hindi heartland, and also of course Meerabai who was to come at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Lalla is credited to have started the modern trend in Kashmiri literature, not just because of chronology but also because of the quality of her poetry. Lalla did not have a happy married life and turned to spiritual aspirations. She did not get any support or respectable treatment from her husband and mother-in-law. Suspicious of her returning late while fetching water from river, her husband stealthily followed her and found her sitting in meditative posture. He returned home quietly. When Lalla also returned home with a pitcher of water, he hit it with a stick. It is said that the pitcher broke into pieces, but water did not fall. She filled all the vessels at home with the water and threw the leftover water outside the house. It is believed to have created a pond, which was named after her as Laltrag. The legend is considered as a metaphor for her spiritual attainment, which remained intact in spite of battering from an unsympathetic world around her. Finally she made up her mind to renounce her family and – according to legend – even her clothing as a symbol of external attachments and body consciousness (reminding us of Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka mentioned earlier). She took initiation into Shiva Yoga of Kashmir Shaivism by Siddha Shri Neel Kanth.

Her verses, called *Vaakhs*, orally transmitted for centuries from generation to generation, are now available in English translation (Odin 1999).<sup>35</sup> Lalla sums up her philosophy in a verse (Odin 2003:6):

“My guru gave me only one advice –  
From outside transfer the attention within  
That became my initiation  
That is why I began to wander naked”.

For Lalla, ‘the ultimate quest is to transcend her embodied existence, even as it is her embodied self that enables her to reach transcendence’ (Odin 2003: 7). According to Lalla, the real temple is within each individual with Shiva as deity that is one's own true nature and self. She says: ‘Chanting “Om” and maddened with love, I set out in His search. I roamed day and night. My most auspicious moment came when I discovered my Lord ensconced in my own heart’ (Langar 2004). Both Kashmir Shaivism and Vedanta found profound expression in her poetry. She says in one of her verses that she is reading the Bhagavadgītā every moment of her life. Her *Vaakhs* emphasise oneness of all existence, equality, purity of mind and self control (Langar 2004). According to her, a higher spiritual growth can be attained while performing one's duties in the world. Sufism is also said to have influenced her. She had no respect for barriers based on caste and religion and criticised customs like not taking food from lower castes and from Muslims. For her, all religions expressed the same Truth. She said (Odin 2003:8):

‘Shiva is omnipresent  
 Don’t differentiate between Hindus and Muslims  
 If you are clever, you will recognize your true self  
 That is your real acquaintance with the Lord’.

**Rupa Bhawani**, the other mystic poet from Kashmir, was considered as an incarnation of Devi Bhawani by her father, a yogi himself, Pandit Madhojoo Dhar by name. He was also her Guru. He lived in Srinagar, and was well known among spiritual seekers. Rupa’s spiritual inclinations were recognized early, but she was given in marriage nevertheless, which she also accepted like a traditional Hindu girl. Unfortunately, it was not at all a happy marriage. There is thus a lot of similarity between the lives of the two Kashmiri woman poets. In Rupa’s case also, Yogic practices continued after marriage, and she used to go to a temple at night for the purpose. Both her husband and mother-in-law got deeply suspicious. Her husband followed her out from a distance stealthily one night, and when she noticed it, Rupa cordially invited him to join in her practice. But what he saw before him was a deep stream which he could not cross, and he returned home alone. The legends describe this as a miracle, but the stream signified the spiritual distance between the two. Several other miracles also are reported to have happened, but her husband and in-laws continued to harass her. She then decided to renounce family life, told her father of this intention, and went to Wusan, north-east of Srinagar. She did penance for twelve-and a half years there and at other places, creating shrines wherever she went. Several miracles have been attributed to her, for example, restoring the eye-sight of a potter’s son. The purity of her character, her radiance, the charm of her poetry and teachings endeared her to many and she had a large following both among Hindus and Muslims. Even while she was a Yogi in the Hindu tradition, she was also influenced by Sufism which she respected. She insisted on religious tolerance, and on selflessness as a basic requirement for a moral and spiritual life for all, irrespective of religion, and observed that the selfless is a king, no less. On her demise in Srinagar at her father’s house, it is said that her Muslim followers claimed her body for burial according to Muslim rites, as they had accepted her as their own. They even approached the Moghal Governor of Kashmir for support. Her poor father, already shocked by his dear daughter’s death, simply prostrated before her body and prayed for her guidance. Then her voice was heard by all according the legend that that they should all go according to her father’s wishes, and she was cremated.<sup>36</sup>

In the Hindi heartland of north India, the Bhakti Movement was started by **Ramananda** (1400-70). He was a follower of Ramanujacharya’s Shrivaiṣṇava sect when he was in the South in his early days. After returning to Varanasi, he established his own sect, known as the Ramanandis. For him, Rama was the Supreme God, to be worshipped along with Sita and Hanuman. The theology and rituals of the sect followed those of Ramanujacharya. Though a Brahmin, he is known for his opposition to caste restrictions. He threw open his sect to all castes, to women and Muslims as well. Among his main twelve disciples, there was an outcaste and a Muslim. Both his outcaste disciple - **Ravidas**, and Muslim disciple – **Kabir**, became well known for their contribution to Bhakti movements. Their compositions are included in the *Adi Granth*, the Holy Book of Sikhs. Ramananda only followed his

Guru, Ramanuja, who also had thrown open his sect to all castes. But unlike Ramanuja, he used the vernacular rather than Sanskrit. The significance of Ramananda lies in the fact that ‘the Ramanandis stand at the source of important later sects like the Sikhs and the Kabirpanthis, who inherited their social concern’.<sup>37</sup> Ramananda was influenced by the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, a work of the 13th and the 14th century, apart from *Shri Bhashya* of Ramanuja (Sarma 1955:52). He could be said to be the first Sant of North India to have tried to bring religion to the common man in his/her own language.

**Ravidas** was born in the Chamar caste (leatherworkers) and lived in the holy city of Varanasi. In spite of his humble origin, he was highly respected as he attained fame for his devotional poems and singing. He mentions in a poem that even Brahmins came to hear him and bowed before him. Yet he was deeply conscious of his community’s and his own low social position, as reflected in many of his poems (see Hawley and Jurgensmeyer 2004:10). He expressed contempt for people who denigrated others merely because of caste and poverty, and asserted that a true follower of the Lord has no caste or class (*Ibid*: 16-7). A few legends about him have been mentioned in Chapter 5.

**Sant Kabir** (1440-1518), a towering personality in Bhakti Movements was a direct disciple of Ramananda. Ramananda took him as a close disciple though he was a Muslim, and though he was an ordinary weaver belonging to a low caste of Julaha. Kabir was influenced as much by Sufism as by *Vedanta* philosophy, and sought to blend the best in both. He was also a yogi in the Nath school, and his *Dohas* (couplets) reflect the impact of Gorakhnath’s hymns.<sup>38</sup> He was a radical reformer who rejected the authority of any scripture – both the Vedas and the Quran (Sarma 1955:53; Vaudeville 1987:23). He was a proponent of Nirguna bhakti, and looked upon Rama as the Supreme God in his Nirguna form. His Rama was not the legendary Rama of the *Ramayana*, but an Adhyatmik Rama or *Atma-rama*. Interestingly, he preferred the name Rama instead of Allah, though he meant both by that name. He rejected not only idol worship, but also other traditional form of religious practice – rituals, recitation of scriptures and superstitions. He says:

‘There is nothing but water at the holy bathing places;  
and I know that they are useless, for I have bathed in them.  
The images are all lifeless, they cannot speak;  
I know, for I have cried aloud to them.  
The Puranas and the Koran are mere words;  
Lifting up the curtain, I have seen’.<sup>39</sup>

As Jordens (1975:275) observes, ‘to this religious iconoclasm he adds a social iconoclasm that incessantly attacks the injustices of caste, and denounces the pride of brahmans. Humanity to him is brotherhood, and all varieties of human nature are but refractions of the divine.’ Jordens (*Ibid* : 275) quotes Rabindranath Tagore’s translation of a poem by Kabir to illustrate Kabir’s views:

‘It is but folly to ask what the caste of a Saint may be;  
The barber has sought God, the washerwoman, and the carpenter –

Even Raidas was a seeker after God.

The Rishi Svapacha was a tanner by caste.

Hindus and Muslims alike have achieved that End, where  
remains no mark of distinction’.

Kabir instead put emphasis on genuine bhakti and traditional ethical values respected both in Hinduism and Islam, like controlling malice, anger, greed and lust, and keeping the mind *Satvik* and saintly. An important contribution of Kabir is the synthesis he sought to achieve of both Hinduism and Islam by founding Kabirpanth. It developed into independent sect first, but accepted finally as a part of Hinduism, keeping its own identity intact. An illustration of his attempt to bring together Hindus and Muslims is a poem, translated as follows:

Oh, Brother, wherefrom can come a second Master of the Universe,

Tell me who has confused you.

He, the One, has taken the names of Allah and Rama,

Kareem and Keshav, Hari and Hazrat.

Gold is one, turned into ornaments and ornaments;

There is only one feeling (*Bhava*)

But is referred variously –

One calls it Namaz and another Pooja.

Some learn Vedas and others Kutaba

Some are Maulanas and others Pandes

They assume different names

But are the pots of the same clay.

Kabir says both are mistaken,

None has attained (the real) Rama,

Those that are friendly to the cow and those that slaughter it

Have (both) wasted their life in argument.<sup>40</sup>

Kabir, had a profound knowledge of Hinduism including its yogic beliefs and practices, and legends contained in the two great Epics and Puranas. Many of his poems reflect this. His poems also use a lot of Sanskrit words, including technical words of Hindu philosophy and Yoga. He accepted the theory of Reincarnation and the Law of Karma, apart of course from Bhaktimarga, the last being common to both Hinduism and Islam. His ethics also was common to both the religions, including his insistence on keeping one’s mind pure through righteousness, humility and constant remembrance of God. Even his insistence on one *Nirguna* God is common to both religions, since the concept of *Nirguna* Brahman is an ancient Vedantic concept well known to Hinduism for more than two millennia before Kabir.

Kabir's poems are set to *ragas* of classical Hindusthani music and have become favourites of well-known singers. Kabir's indirect contribution to Music is thus quite significant. His compositions are sung also in Sufi-style of music. Some claim, according to Linda Hess, that Kabir sang his poems himself and he knew ragas of Hindusthani Classical Music. Kabir's compositions have been collected in three separate groups, as explained by Hess. The earliest found a place in the *Adi Granth* or *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred book of the Sikhs compiled by Guru Arjun Dev in 1604. The second set found a place in the *Panchavani*, a collection of sayings of five Sant poets compiled by members of the Dadu Panth probably in the late seventeenth century. The third set is known as *Bijak*, the sacred book of the Kabir-Panth, also compiled in the seventeenth century. Since the first two were compiled in the Punjab and Rajasthan respectively, they are known as Western collections, and since the *Bijak* was compiled in eastern UP and / or Bihar, it is known as the Eastern collection. The first two are closer to each other with a lot of similarities, and many poems in common. While the two Western collections are linked to music, the *Bijak* is not. The emphasis on emotional abandon is more in the Western collections, while the emphasis on Nirguna God and realisation of Him is more in the *Bijak*. According to Linda Hess, 'the *Bijak* poems are nearly all post-enlightenment, the utterances of a man who knows, who plunges into discourse with people who are confused but is not confused himself'.<sup>41</sup>

**Guru Nanak** (1469-1538), the founder of Sikhism, was a younger contemporary of Kabir and both played similar roles. Nanak was born in a village to Kshatriya parents, and was exposed to the influence and teachings of his predecessors in the Bhakti Movements – Ramananda, Namdev, Chaitanya and Kabir. He was also monotheistic like Kabir and called his God as Hari. For Nanak, God was *Sat* (Truth, Reality) and Infinite. His famous *Japji* begins with 'There is one God. He is the Supreme Truth' (Singh 1977: 31). He rejected the concept of reincarnation (*Avatar*) since it means that God could die to be reincarnated and the human form was subject to decay and death. He disapproved of the worship of idols because it made people think of idol itself as God, instead of as a mere symbol. Since God is Truth, to speak untruth was ungodly. Like Kabir, Nanak too was against rituals and rigid customs of religion and taught a simple religion of Bhakti or love of God, and opposed caste distinctions. What made him unique was that he demonstrated his rejection of caste by dining along with persons of low castes and organised a free community kitchen, *Langar*, where all ate without distinction of caste or creed. To hurt others by lying or cheating was irreligious. Like Kabir, he tried to bring Hindus and Muslims together. One of his oft repeated saying was 'There is no Hindu, there is no Mussalman' (Singh 1977: 33). His closest associate, Mardana, was a Muslim minstrel (*Ibid*: 31). He travelled widely, visiting famous Hindu places of pilgrimage. But he preached to all – Hindus and Muslims alike and people from a wide cross section were attracted by his discourses. In the *Sangat* (congregation) and *Pangat* (*langar*) all were equal. He stressed hard and honest work to earn one's livelihood, and like Basavanna in Karnataka, accorded dignity to manual work. He condemned asceticism and renunciation of the world. He wanted his disciples to enjoy life, but in a righteous way, and helping others too to do so. His contribution was important in developing a spirit of fellowship and service, equal regard for all, promoting charity with humility, and brotherhood. He taught five principles – (i) *Nam* (singing the name and praise of God), (ii) *Dan* (charity for all, with humility), (iii) *Ashnan* (daily bath and cleanliness), (iv) *Seva* (service of humanity), and (v) *Simran* (constant remembrance of God and Prayer)

(Majumdar 1996: VII: 7:656). In Nanak's religion, love of God also meant love of human beings and their service. This meant equal regard to women too not just implicitly but explicitly too. Nanak asked how women could be treated as inferior when they give birth to great persons. He condemned the practice of *Sati* (self-immolation of women after husband's death) and allowed women to join in the *Sangat* with equal participation. Though Nanak was monotheistic, his God was not *Nirguna*, but *Saguna* – Compassionate, Ocean of Mercy, Cherisher of the poor, Destroyer of sorrow and Healer of sinners, though also Formless (*Nirakar*) – thus not consistent with idol worship. He drew upon the best from both Hinduism and Islam. He accepted the Law of Karma but also believed in the relieving grace of God in lightening the burden of Karma, which required righteous living and faith in *Sat Nam* (True Name), *Sat Kartar* (True creator) and *Sat Sri Akal* (True Timeless One). An important teaching of Guru Nanak, as with several other Bhakti saints, was the emphasis on the role of Guru. With Nanak and also the succeeding Gurus of the Sikh Panth, this emphasis was very much prominent. Nanak, however, accepted for himself the status of a teacher, but not a prophet; Guru, he clarified, was to be respected as a guide but not as God (Ibid: 41). He considered himself as a servant of God, like many other Bhakti Saints. But this in no way reduced the importance of a Guru. The faith in Guru Parampara is prominent in most of the sects of Hinduism. It is with the Grace of Guru that one is led to God and His realisation. It is in the context of importance given to Gurus that the Sikhs are so called, Sikh meaning Shishya, a disciple. *Satsangs* – association with virtuous persons and saints, was also important for Nanak.

In spite of his zeal for reform, Nanak did not condemn scriptures of Hinduism and Islam. He criticised only mechanical reading of the texts, without imbibing the right virtues. He asked: 'what do you gain by mere reading of the Vedas and Puranas? It is like a donkey carrying a load of sandal wood, whose perfume it cannot appreciate'.<sup>42</sup>

It is sometimes claimed that Nanak's concept of Monotheist God, Formless but *Saguna* (compassionate etc), is Islamic and not Hindu, though he used Hindu names for God. All Bhakti Saints were monotheist, not Nanak alone, as intense Bhakti is possible only in monotheism. But Kabir's concept of *Nirguna* God posed difficulty with Bhakti as a means of attaining Him, because Bhakti cannot please a God who is *Nirguna*. *Nirguna* God is attainable only through contemplation or yogic meditation, which is different from Bhakti proper. Bhakti required a *Saguna* God, one who could appreciate and respond to Bhakti. Nanak resolved the tension between *Saguna* and *Nirguna* by considering God as Formless or *Nirakar* but *Saguna* at the same time, capable of appreciating Bhakti and responding to it. Such reconciliation is not new to Hinduism, though idol worship was more popular as it facilitated Bhakti. Jñaneshwar's poem in Chapter-2 precisely tries this reconciliation. Much before Jñaneshwar, the Gita also achieved it. The *Gita's* God is Monotheist and *Saguna* but it does not preach idol worship. Idol worship became significant in Hinduism as a post-Buddhist phenomenon. Basically, as explained in this book earlier, idol is a symbol, not God *per se*, meant only to facilitate Bhakti. The symbol need not necessarily be an icon, it could be a coconut on a pitcher filled with water and a few things signifying auspicious nature, or it could be a block of stone, a *Yantra* (a geometric design signifying the Mystical Supreme), or anything else as per devotee's choice. What is worshipped is not idol or symbol *per se*, but God. No religion could do without symbols, even those believing in formless God.

Sikhism itself, which developed later, could not avoid symbols and adopted the *Adi Granth* (*Guru Granth Sahib*) itself for worship just like an idol. If a devotee cannot feel the intensity of emotion and love for a Formless God, mainstream Hinduism permits her/him the freedom to worship a symbol of God on which the devotee can shower affection and love. The same thing happened in Sikhism too. But even the most intense devotee does not believe that his God does not exist outside the idol. God is always praised and adored as encompassing and transcending the whole Universe, and yet as close to the human being as her/his heart. Thus, Nanak's concept of *Saguna* but Formless God was quite consistent with and familiar to Hinduism.

Moreover, Nanak's teachings as a whole were not unique and different from the teachings of other Sants in the Bhakti Movements. Apart from his close similarity with Kabir in religion and social reform, the teachings of Haridāsa and Basavanna in Karnataka, Siddhas in Tamil Nadu, Sants in Maharashtra too were quite similar to those of Nanak. Nanak was similar even in his main medium – the composition of hymns, which have been set to music and are singers' and listeners' delight as with the hymns of other saints in the Bhakti Movements. Nanak's hymns are compiled and included in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Each Bhakti Movement in India also had its own distinct flavour, colour and idiom, but they had also a lot in common on essential points and were happily a part of the broad religion of Hinduism without losing their distinct identity. Arun Shourie quotes a mellifluous song of Nanak to show how the choice of names like Hari, similies and phrases like '*mandir deep binaa*', and '*jaise pandit Ved viheena*' puts Nanak deeply within the Hindu religious ethos.<sup>43</sup>

**Vallabhacharya** (1479-1531) who promoted Vaishnavism in the North came from what is presently Andhra Pradesh and settled down at Varanasi. He was a contemporary of Chaitanya, who promoted Vaishnavism in Bengal. Vallabhacharya's work is in the Sanskritic tradition of the Acharaya's. He developed his own philosophical doctrine known as Pure Advaita, as he rejected the doctrine of *Māya*, and laid emphasis on pure bhakti and love for God as the means to salvation. His system is also known as *Pushti-marga*, where *Pushti* means Grace of God. Though he wrote in Sanskrit, his followers including **Surdas** (1483-1563) wrote in Brij – the local language. Vallabhacharya also was a monotheist, with *Kṛṣṇa* as the Eternal Brahman, *Rādhā* being his eternal female aspect representing Love. Among his several beautiful compositions, the best known is '*Madhuraśṭakam*' in praise of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. Easy to sing and very rhythmic, it worships God as personification of Beauty, and gladdens the heart of the singer as well as the listener.<sup>44</sup>

**Surdas** was one of the eight main disciples of Vallabhacharya, and was born blind in a Brahmin family. He learnt music and wrote great poems in Hindi, inspired by the Bhagavata Purana. Jordens observes: 'His poetry is suffused with an essential tender *bhakti*, sometimes passionate, yet never too explicitly physical, often full of pathos, and pervaded with a gentle affection for all that lives' (Jordens 1975: 277). His poetry played a major role in spreading Vaisnavism in the North. Apparently sectarian, he was still universal in appeal. His songs are loved by all, irrespective of sect, caste and creed. The main theme of his songs is his love for *Kṛṣṇa*, both as a naughty child in Mathura and also as lover. His melodious song '*Maiyya mori main nahin makhan khayō*' ('oh my mother, I did not eat the butter!') is a favourite of many singers and also with others. Another example of his mellifluous poetry reflecting ardent love for *Kṛṣṇa*, with added poignancy on account of his blindness is given below:

*Akhiyan Hari darasanaki pyasi,  
 Dekhyo chahata kamala nainako,  
 Nisadina rahata udasi  
 Akhiyan Hari darsanaki pyasi /*

Eyes are thirsty for seeing Hari  
 They want to look at the Lotus-eyed one.  
 Forlorn night and day,  
 Eyes are thirsty for seeing Hari.

**Sant Meerabai** (1498-1546) is one of the most distinguished in the Bhakti Movements in entire India, not merely in the North. Her songs are set to both Hindustani and Karnatak Music. They are favourites as much with M S Subbulakshmi as with Lata Mangeshkar and Anup Jalota. Married into the royal family of Sisodias of Mewar, she refused to recognise a mere human as her husband and regarded Kṛṣṇa as her eternal bridegroom. According to tradition, even as a young child she had considered himself as wife of Kṛṣṇa, and parents probably did not take it seriously. She continued her exclusive devotion to Kṛṣṇa and refrained from sexual relations with her formal husband – Raja Bhoj Raj. Nevertheless, she could persuade him to build a temple for Kṛṣṇa within the fort where she could sing and dance. She was widowed at a young age. Not only did she refuse to commit Sati, but she also rejected other prohibitory norms for widows who did not opt for Sati. She did not accept that she was widowed, for her real husband, Hari, was immortal. She continued to sing and dance even in temples in public. She was conscious of the embarrassment caused to the royal family of her in-laws, and she refers in one of her songs that they called her as ‘*Kul-nasi*’ one who besmirched family-honour. In another poem she asserted: ‘People, shyness and family honour – none of these will I care. I will go and lie down on my Beloved’s (Kṛṣṇa’s) bed. Meera will dip in the colours of Hari and dance before Him’.<sup>45</sup> She left the palace and chose a life of freedom to take her own spiritual path, where she respected no differences in caste, creed and gender. She freely mixed with male devotees of Kṛṣṇa. Her life story can thus be interpreted not merely as that of a Sant, but also as ‘a rebellion against conventional restrictive norms that sought to regulate and control women’s lives’ (Jain and Sharma 2002: 4646). There is an interesting legend about her meeting with Jiv Goswami, Chaitanya’s disciple at Vrindavan. Jiv Goswami declined to receive Meera as he had taken a vow that he would never look at a woman lest she may lure him away from his spiritual and devotional concerns. Meera retorted by saying that she had thought that there was only one man in Vrindavan and that was Kṛṣṇa and she was surprised that there was another man. The stinging comment softened Jiv Goswami’s tough posture who hurriedly came to meet Meera. ‘Meera sought to subvert the conventional norms guiding female behaviour even in the realm of asceticism and with this singular statement sought to proclaim that gender divide was irrelevant in the pursuit of *bhakti*’ (*Ibid*: 4649). She reminds us of a similar other woman rebel in the Bhakti Movements – Akkamahadevi of Karnataka of 12<sup>th</sup> Century. But Meera’s case is even more conspicuous as she defied a well-known royal family and she was married. Meera is better known throughout the country as she composed in Hindi dialects, sang her own lyrics,

and travelled more widely. Madhu Kishwar observes how rebellious women saints could break out of social constraints on women through resorting to a life of devotion to God. 'In the name of devotion to Kṛshṇa, she [Meera] acquired the right to go where she pleased, when she pleased, intermixing freely with people of all castes and classes. She sang, she danced and declared herself beyond the restrictive norms of a Rajput queen' (Kishwar 2003: 21). The case of Lal Ded of Kashmir and Akkamahadevi of Karnataka are also similar. 'She [Akkamahadevi] too, like Lal Dad, shed all clothes. Their nudity was an assertion of their refusal to abide by social conventions and norms with regard to a woman's role in society'. (Kishwar 2003: 21). Meera did not go that far, but her defiance of royal constraints imposed in the name of family honour was no less spectacular.

Her fame spread far and wide even in her days among Sants and Sadhus. But 'she resisted all attempts to formally affiliate herself with any established school or sect of bhakti. ...Meera did not accept either institutional or human mediation in her communion with Kṛshṇa. Meera's devotion to Kṛshṇa was an intensely personal experience ...' (Jain and Sharma 2002: 4649-50).

Her poems are marked with intensity of emotion and ardent fervour. She is credited to have composed poems in three dialects of different regions, first in Mewadi or Marwadi, Brij-bhasha and in her later days when she joined devotees at Dwaraka, she blossomed forth into Gujarati too (Majumdar 1994: VII: 569-70). She did not presume to impart instructions in ethical values to others as she was too absorbed in the romantic yearning for Kṛshṇa to do so. As Jorden observes, her focus was on her relationship with Kṛshṇa, not on legends and mythology of Kṛshṇa, and her poems are free from the erotic element and voluptuous imagery, but reach greatest heights in *Viraha*, pining for Kṛshṇa (Jordens 1975: 277). Her poems are not depressing. They depict changing moods of nature with picturesque imagery and rhythmic phrases and alliterative words. Her poem on Holi and its colours played by people with abandon is an example of her poetry based on her observation of people, and her skill in using it as a metaphor for her Bhakti. The poem reflects her joyful love of life and this world.

*Phagun ke din chara re,  
Hori khel manā re /  
Bini karatar pakharaj bajai,  
Anahadaki zanakar re //*

*Phagun has but four days,  
Playing Holi is in mind, Re!  
With no cymbals or drum,  
The Infinite plays rhythms! Re!*

*Bini Sura raga chhatīsun gaven,  
Rom rom rangasara, re /  
Sila santoshaki kesara gholi  
Prema preeti pichakara, re //*

Singing with no tunes or thirty six *ragas*  
 Whole body is filled with its colour, *Re!*  
 Saffron mixture of righteousness and joy,  
 Love and affection as sprinkler, *Re !*

*Udata gulala lala bhayo ambara,*  
*Barasata ranga apara re /*  
*Ghatake saba pata khola diye*  
*Hain loka laja sab dara re //*<sup>46</sup>

With flying gulal, the sky is red;  
 Colours are raining limitless, *Re!*  
 All veils covering the heart are open,  
 With people giving up all their shyness, *Re!*

**Narsi (Narsimha) Mehta** (1500-1580) like Meerabai was influenced by Chaitanya and his Vrindavan School. He enriched Gujarati literature and gave a big impetus to it. He is said to have been spurned and thrown out by his Brahmin community and was left desolate. But his faith in Kṛṣṇa and ethical values remained quite firm. His ethical poem, ‘*Vaishṇava janato tene kahiye ...*’, was a favourite of Gandhiji. Gandhiji remarked about it: ‘That one song is enough to sustain me, even if I forget the *Bhagavad Gita*.’<sup>47</sup> The song is reproduced below with a translation by Charlotte Vaudeville(1987:39-40):

*Vaishṇava jana to tene kahiye, je peeda parai jane re,*  
*Para dukkhe upakara kare toye, mana abhimana na ane re //*

‘Call that one a true Vaishṇava  
 who feels the suffering of others,  
 Who seeks to relieve others’ pain  
 And has no pride in his soul’. (Refrain)

*Sakala lokaman sahune vande, ninda na kare keni re,*  
*Vacha kaccha mana nishala rakhe, dhana dhana janani teni re //*

‘He bows respectfully to the whole world,  
 he talks ill of no one;  
 He remains steadfast in mind, words and actions:  
 Blessed, blessed be his mother!’

*Sama drishṭi ne tr̥shṇa tyagi, para stree jene mātā re,  
Jihva thaki asatya na bole, para dhana nava jhale hātha re //*

‘He is impartial to all, he has renounced all greed,  
he sees another man’s wife as his own mother,  
His tongue speaks no lie,  
He does not touch another man’s property.’

*Moha mayā vyapi nahin jene, dr̥dha vairagya jena manaman re,  
Rama nama shun talin laagi, sakala teeratha tena tanaman re //*

‘He remains unaffected by *Maya* and *Moha*,  
In his soul is total detachment;  
He remains absorbed in meditation on Ram’s name,  
Within his body, all the tirthas are found!’

*Vaṇa lobhine kapata rahita chhe, kama krodha nivaryan re,  
Bhane Narasainyo sain tenu darasana karatan, kula ekotera taryan re //*

‘Without cupidity or guile is he,  
without lust or anger.  
Says Narasaiyo, by the mere view of such a Sant,  
Seventy-two generations find salvation!’

Narsi Mehta not only composed and sang this song, but also lived it. His poems are compiled in ‘*Shrngaramala*’ and ‘*Rasahasra padi*’, largely depicting Kṛṣṇa’s episodes narrated in the Bhagavata. His poems are melodious, rich in vocabulary and emotional depth. They also highlight ethical values without which Bhakti would have no meaning. These values included caring for others’ suffering, not merely personal righteousness. He saw Kṛṣṇa in all humanity, and love of humanity was love of Kṛṣṇa.

**Gosvami Tulsidas** (1532-1623) has been a major influence on account of his Hindi rendering of the Ramayana – *Ramacharitamansa*, and also for his other devotional poems compiled in *Kavitavali*. He is credited with 12 or 14 major and minor works, including the above two major works and a minor work on Kṛṣṇa’s life. He provided a great stimulus to Hindi literature, apart from enriching it himself. The popularity of his works, particularly the *Ramacharitamansa*, cut across all barriers of class, castes and regions, and has been translated in to several Indian languages. It is regarded more as a religious poem than an Epic. Its single purpose was to propagate Rama-bhakti, devotion to Rama. Like some other Vaishnava Saints before him, his Bhakti was that of a servant (dāsa) for his Master, Rama. “His work is totally free of even the slightest hint of sensuality, showing in fact a scrupulous concern

for purity. In this his work contrasts strongly with the Kṛṣṇa literature and his enormous influence carried this over into the whole Rama bhakti literature of the north” (Jordens 1975: 276). Like Kabir, Tulsidas was also a disciple of Rāmananda who promoted Rama-bhakti in the north, but Tulsidas was more orthodox, and narrowed his focus on the ennobling and emancipating role of Bhakti, without bothering explicitly about social issues like caste. Rāma of Tulsidas is not Kabir’s Nirguṇa Rama, not even formless, but Saguna, compassionate and kind, one who emancipates devotees. Monotheism of Tulsidas does not deny freedom to worship other Gods.

The distinctiveness of Tulsidas consists in his interpretation of episodes of Rāmāyana to reflect the compassion, graciousness and divinity of Rama in every incident. The magic touch of Rama transforms the meekest of the meek into noble souls of immense power. Tulsidas sings the praise of Rama:

“Monkey, boatman, bear, bird and demon,  
 Whatever one you cared for,  
 Master that very one  
 At once became of service;  
 The afflicted, orphaned, filthy,  
 Wretched, whoever came for refuge,  
 Each one you made your own -  
 such is your kindly nature”<sup>48</sup>.

Tulsidas says that in Kaliyug, the present age, other than singing the *Charita* (life-story) of Rama and hearing about his adorable qualities, there is no means of realising God – not Yoga, Yajna, Japa, Tapa (penance), Vṛta nor even Pūja. Adore Rama, tells Tulsidas, as Patita-Pāvan (the emancipator of the fallen), without any crookedness of mind, and He saves us all whether sinners, sex-workers, hunters, untouchables or Yavans (Muslims).<sup>49</sup>

Jordens sums up the contribution of Tulsidas thus: ‘Tulsidas’s incalculable influence on Hinduism in North India was threefold. He inspired an intense devotion to Rama that touched upon every aspect of life, and made Gandhi cry “Hey Ram!” as he died under the assassin’s bullet. Tulsidas inculcated a high sense of morality, and of kindness in human relationships. And he proved a great force in strengthening the structures of the *Sanātana Dharma* at a time when both Islam and the many iconoclastic sects were threatening it seriously. In this last, his stature is no smaller than that of the great Sankara himself’ (Jordens 1975: 276-7).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The contribution of Bhakti Movements to the development of Hinduism is not less than that of the classical phase. The Movements tried to remove the dross that emerged during the classical phase itself – caste oppression and marginalisation of the low castes, which actually was not an intrinsic part of Hinduism. The emphasis on equality of all devotees irrespective of caste and class helped many downtrodden and deprived to come into the mainstream of Hinduism outside the framework of caste. The separate sects and cults that emerged during the Bhakti Movements such as that of Chaitanya,



The divine association with Rama transforms even humble beings into super heroes. 'Monkey, boatman, bear, bird and demon whatever one you cared for, Master that very one at once became of service. The afflicted, orphaned, filthy, wretched, whoever, came for refuge, each one you made your own; such is your kindness'. Tulsidas (Tr. by F R Allchin)

Varkari Panth, Kabir Panth and many others were not on caste lines and helped the downtrodden to gain respectable identity outside the humiliating caste names. The simplification of religion and development of Bhakti literature in local languages also helped this broadbasing of Hinduism. The Movements were hardly Brahminical in character. Though several Brahmins also participated in the Movements, they did so not as Brahmins but merely as devotees. Even the classical phase of Hinduism cannot be strictly called as Brahminism, since the Vedas and the Upanishads were composed by sages coming from diverse backgrounds. Only the *Dharma-shastra* literature could be called as Brahminical. The Bhakti movements simply defied the Dharma-shastras, but were in a continuous link with basic teachings of the Vedas and the Upanishads. Similarly, they transcended Sanskrit culture, but did not reject it. A lot of Bhakti literature flowed out of the great epics in Sanskrit, especially the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Ramayana*. Even while being revolutionary in character, the tradition of continuity from the past in basic essentials was not broken.

The contribution of Bhakti Movements in further promoting a sound ethical basis for Hinduism on non-sectarian and non-caste lines is also of great importance. Every Sant put emphasis on integrity and character. This was there in the Upanishads, the Puranas and Epics, and in the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha* too. But the distinctiveness of Bhakti Movements was in transmitting the basic ethical values of Hinduism to people in their own language through songs that reached the heart directly.

The broad-basing and democratisation of Hinduism and reiteration of its basic elements during the Bhakti Movements was also of great help in protecting Hinduism from Islam. Islam did gain a lot of converts from Hinduism but Hinduism also continued and thrived because of the Bhakti Movements. Islam succeeded in wiping out native faiths completely in other countries, but not in India. This was mainly because not only the upper castes, but also the lower castes continued to remain with Hinduism with conviction and confidence. The Bhakti Movements gave a sense of creative participation and a feeling of pride to them within Hinduism, irrespective of whether there was overt Hindu consciousness. A distinctive feature of the leaders of Hinduism through all phases is that they hardly projected Hindu consciousness. Nevertheless, Hinduism was strengthened.

The tension between Hinduism and Islam even during Muslim rule should not be exaggerated. Tension there was to some extent particularly in politics,<sup>50</sup> but even amidst this tension bridges were built between the two by the Bhakti Movements on one side and Sufism on the other. Both shared a significant common feature – religion as love! Common people, therefore, did not feel that they were very different from each other, even if they came from different faiths. They had no difficulty in believing that Ishwar and Allah are not different. It was a part of tradition of Hinduism to call God by different names and yet remember that God is one. The traditional openness of Hinduism worked both ways. It helped Sufi saints to convert many Hindus to Islam, but it also attracted several Muslims to Hinduism, – Dara Shukoh who translated fifty-two Upanishads, Kabir, Shekh Mohammad, Latib Saheb and Shah Muni in Maharashtra, and Shishunal Sharif Sahib in Karnataka. They did not convert to Hinduism, they had no intention to do so, but they played a significant role in promoting amity and understanding between the two faiths. They could do so because they acted as part of the Bhakti Movements, which played essentially the same role on a large scale. With great finesse, Hinduism through the Bhakti Movements separated society from politics to a great extent and did not allow

enmity against Islam among Hindus in spite of Muslim Rule. This was true of even Samarth Ramadas, Shivaji's Guru, and of Shivaji himself. Though Shivaji fought Muslim rule, he never allowed his struggle to degenerate into hatred of, or discrimination against, Muslim people. He is credited to have funded the construction of several Dargas.

Though total syncretism of Hinduism with Islam was not achieved in spite of several attempts, even the attempt by Emperor Akbar being a dismal failure,<sup>51</sup> such attempts did contribute to amity and understanding. Syncretism succeeded much more in other cultural realms, – music, painting, architecture, dress and even food. Several delicious items were added to the Indian cuisine during the medieval period. To depict the medieval period as one of relentless or unrelieved strife between Hinduism and Islam is, therefore, quite misleading and wrong. The problem appeared more during the British rule and in the post-Independence period due to politicisation of religion, which had not occurred during the medieval period.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

1. In a talk in 1938 on 'Have I Found God?', Yogananda (1986: 455-61; the quotation is on p.461).
2. '*Sa tvasmin parama premarupa*'/ It means: It (Bhakti) is verily of the nature of supreme or the highest Love (of God)', Cf. Tyagishananda (tr.) (2000: 1); see also section-4 in chapter 4 above.
3. A Comparable work in Sanskrit which is of this type is Bhartṛhari's *Niti Shataka*, which is smaller in size. According to tradition, Bhartṛhari was the brother of king Vikramāditya in whose honour Vikram Samvat (era) was started around 56 BCE. This seems to be the first work in Sanskrit with a focus on ethics, rather than on ideology or metaphysics. See, Kale (ed.) (1971).
4. As quoted in Kailasapathy (1987: 391). The original translation is by David Buck. Kailasapathy's article gives a fairly comprehensive account of the Siddha movement. Our account of it is based on his article.
5. Inner quotation is from Kamil V Zvelebil (1973:133), *The Poets of Power*, London: Rider& Co.
6. Both the verse and the explanation are from Kailasapathy 1987: 400.
7. For the lives of some of the Tamil Saints, both Shaivite and Vaishnavite, see, Mahadevan (1990).
8. Quoted in *ibid*: 407.
9. The philosophy of 'Dasoha' has been recently crystallized in the form of 'Dasoha Sutras' by Sharana Basavappa Appa of Gulbarga in Kannada, translations of which are available in English, first by Judith Kroll and L. Basavaraju (1988) – *Dasoha Sutra of Poojya Sri Sharana Basavappa Appa*, Gulbarga: Shri Sharana Basaveshwara Book University, and later by M V Kamath with commentary (2006).
10. As translated by Ramanujan (1973: 42). The original is:

*'maneyolage maneyodeyaniddano illavo?*

*hostilalli hullu tumbi*

*maneyolage raja tumbi*

*maneyolage maneyodeyaniddano illavo?*

*tanuvolage husi tumbi*

*manadolage vishaya tumbi*

*maneyolage maneyodeyanilla,*

*Kudalasangamdeva.*

11. See, Hiremath (ed) (1998). This book contains several articles by renowned scholars who establish with documentary evidence that Veerashaivism dates back to the Vedic period.
12. Two versions may be mentioned: One by Golura Siddaviranna of the 15th Century – '*Prabhudevvara Shunya Sampadane*' edited by S.S. Bhusanurmath, (1958), Ravoor: Siddhalingeswara Sansthanamatha; and the second, *Halageyaryana Shunya Sampadane* (16<sup>th</sup> Century), edited by S. Vidyashankar and G.S. Siddhalingaiah, 1998, Bangalore: Priyadarshini Prakashana.
13. Based on Ingalalli (1998), and also Dr Chandrashekhara Shivacharya Mahaswamigalu (2000) *Shri Siddhanta Shikhamani Pravachana Prabhe* (Kannada), Bangalore: Shri Jagadguru Panchacharya Manavadharma Sansthe, Volumes I & II (Lectures on *Shri Siddhanta Shikhamani*). The philosophical account by me is too brief to do full justice to the originals cited.
14. The original song is:

*Baiyyiro Baiyyiro! Manamutti baiyyiro / Channagi baidenna dhanyana madiro // Avaru ivaru baidaremba heenabuddhi nanagilla / Na madidastu papavannu aledu haki hanchi kolliro //1// Iruve nona konda papa/*

*paranindeya madida papa/ holeyapapa kelavuntu aledu haki hanchi kolliro// 2 // Atte mavana baida papa matte hiriya nūdida papa / Karti Shri Purandara Viṭhalana chittadalli neneyada papa // 3 // Baiyyiro ...*

15. Of the 475,000 songs, 1,530 have been compiled and edited with Introduction and Life sketch of Purandaradāsa, by Aralummallige Parthasarathy (2000) in two volumes - *Songs of Purandaradāsa* (Vol. I), and, *Analysis of Purandaradāsa's Life and Works* (Vol. II), both in Kannada. This number, 475,000 is referred to by Purandaradāsa himself in one of his songs, and also by another Haridaṣa, Vijayadāsa, in one of his songs, both of which are cited by Parthasarathy, *ibid*, Vol. II, p.40. There have also been several edited compilations. For a list of such compilations, see *ibid* Vol.II, pp.72-77, and the same author's (2002:64-65).
16. The temple authorities have recently (in the 1990s) broken the centuries old tradition by raising a structure in front of the idol so that devotees cannot any longer closely embrace the idol but can only touch both sides of its waist by both arms. Originally, untouchables were not allowed inside the temple, but after Sane Guruji went on a fast till death taking up their cause, the ban was lifted in 1947. Thanks are due to Prof. Sadhana Kamat for this information.
17. He wrote: '*Yoga yaga vidhi yene nahin siddhi / Vayasi Upadhi dambha dharma // bhaven vina deva na kalen nihssandeha ....*' It means : There can be no spiritual success through sacrificial rituals. Hypocrisy of pompous religion is an utter waste. Without doubt, no God Realization is possible without sincere emotional attachment.
18. The dates of Marathi Saint-poets are taken from Jordens (1975: 266-80).
19. This is a translation of the original:  
*Patita-Pavana nama eikuni alon meen dvāra / Patita-Pavana na hoti mhanuni jato maghara // Sodhi deva breetha atan na hosi abhimani / Patita-pavana nama tuzala thevialen konin // ... // Nama mhanen deva tumachen nalage maza kahin / prema ason dya hridayin tumacha athavina paya //* as taken from Raikar (ed). (1971:212).
20. The original is '*Deva bhavacha lampata / soduni ala Vaikuntha //*' *ibid*, p.206.
21. 'Family man' is a poor equivalent for the original '*lekuravala*', which means a man with a lot of endearing kids to take care of. The poem is of historical significance as Janābai mentions in it most of her prominent contemporary saint poets including Jñāneshwar and his three siblings who too were respected as saints. She also charmingly conveys how in the eyes of God all devotees are siblings and other things like caste are irrelevant. Translated from the original ('*Vitho maza lekuravala*') in Raikar (1971:207).
22. Chor (for thief) in Marathi is an endearing term, used to address loved ones who are naughty. Translated from the original '*Dharila Pandharicha Chora...*' in Raikar (ed). (1971:207).
23. The original line is '*Olakhila Hari dhanya to Sansarin / Moksha tyache gharin Siddhisahita //*', cf. Raikar ed.(1971:267).
24. Translated from the Marathi original ("*Harichiya dasa Hari dahi disha...*") in Raikar (ed). (1971:236-7).
25. Translated from the original Marathi song, '*Antarin nirmala vachecha rasala*' in Raikar (ed). (1971:202).
26. Translated from the original Marathi song, '*Bole tasa chalen ...*', *ibid*, p.202.
27. For a sketchy account of the life of the first two, see Khanolkar (1990 :173-5); about Shaikh Mahammad and Shah Muni, see Wagle (1997: 141-5).
28. Translated from Marathi original '*Eisen Kelen Ya Gopalane / Nahin Sovalen Ovalen // ....*', in Raikar (ed) (1971:211). The poet uses the Marathi word 'Avindha' for 'Muslim'.

29. The original Marathi lines are: '*Janin nindya ten sarva soduni dyaven / Janin vandya ten sarva bhaven karaven //*' (2<sup>nd</sup> Shloka).
30. Translated from Marathi: '*Dinancha dayalu manacha mavalu / Snehalu krpalu jagin dasapalu // Taya antarin krpdha santapa kaincha / Jagin dhanya to dāsa Sarvottamacha //*' (56<sup>th</sup> Shloka).
31. It has not been possible to give a region-by-region account of the Bhakti Movements in the Rest of India. But essential features are captured and the main figures are covered.
32. The date of *Gīta- Gvinda* is taken from JTF Jordens (1975:271).
33. The dates of Saint poets here are taken from Jordens (1975) and Majumdar (ed) (1994 – 3<sup>rd</sup> edn..) Vol. 7 – *The Mughal Empire*.
34. For details on Sahajiya cult, see Shashibhushan Dasgupta (1969: xxxiii).
35. The brief account of her life and teachings and verses quoted here are taken from Odin (2003) and Langar (2004).
36. This account of Rupa Bhawani is based on four articles from the website: <http://www.koausa.org/Saints/RupaBhawani/articles1-4.html>, downloaded 14 Dec.2012. For more details , see T N Dhar (1977).
37. The account here about Ramananda is based mainly on Jordens (1975). The quotation is on p.274 of Jordens (1975).
38. Schomer (1987: 70-71) gives several examples of Kabir closely following Gorakhnath's hymns.
39. As translated by Rabindranath Tagore, (1962) *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, London, Poem No.XLII, as quoted in Jordens (1975:275).
40. The original is:

*Bhai re, dui Jagadeesh kahan te aya,  
 Kahu Koune bouraya /  
 Allah Rama Kareema Keshava  
 Hari Hazrat naama dharaya //  
 Gahana eka Kanaka te gahana,  
 Yame bhava na duja /  
 Kahana sunana ko dui kara thape,  
 Eka namaža eka pooja//  
 Veda kiteba padhe vai kutaba,  
 Vai Molana vai pande /  
 Begara Begara naama dharaye,  
 Eka mittike bhande //  
 Kahahin Kabira vai dunon bhule  
 Ramahi kinahu na paya /  
 Ye sakhi vai gaya kataven,  
 Badihin janma gamaya //*

41. See Linda Hess (1987: 128). The paragraph above is a summary of this article by Hess.

42. The account of Nanak's teachings here closely follows a more detailed account in Majumdar (1988-96: VII: 655-62).
43. The concerned song is '*Simaran Kar le mere manaa / Tere beete jaat umar Harinaam binaa ....*' ('Remember the name of God, O Mind! Your life has gone by and you have not paid heed to the name of Hari'). For the full text of the song along with its translation, see Shourie (1997: 11-12).
44. The original song beginning with '*Adharam madhuram vadanam madhuram*' and ending with '*Madhuradhipaterakhilam madhuram*' is included in Bhakti-Sudha (a compilation of devotional songs printed in Kannada) published by Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Bangalore, 2003, pp.14-15.
45. The original is: '*Loka laj kulaki maryada, ye main eka na rakhungi / Pivake palanga ja poudhungi, Meera Hari ranga rakhungi / Shri Giridhara age nachungi //*', in Chopra (ed) (2002: 38).
46. The original poem is in Chopra (ed) (2002: 50).
47. As quoted in Majumdar (ed) (1988-96: VII: 570). The account of Narsi Mehta here is based on this source, pp.569-70.
48. Tulsidas, *Kavitavyali*, trans. with a critical Introduction by F.R. Allchin, London, 1964, pp.116-7; as quoted in Jordens (1975:276).
49. See, Goswami Tulsidas, *Ramacharitamānas*, edited by Shyamasundardas with Introduction and Hindi translation, Prayag: Indian Press, 1940, *Uttara Kanda*, Saptama Sopan, pp.1119-20.
50. Tension between the followers of the two faiths should not be exaggerated even in the politics of the medieval age. Hindu rulers fought against Hindu rulers and Muslim rulers also fought equally or more bitterly against Muslim rulers. Shivaji had trusted Muslims in his army, and so too did Aurangzeb have Hindu commanders. The chief of Shivaji's cannon division was Ibrahim Gardi, and Aurangzeb had alliance with Raja Jaisingh in his fight with Shivaji. There are many such examples in medieval History. For a compilation of some of them, see Punyani (2003: 43-64).
51. Apart from Kabir in the 15th century and Emperor Akbar in the 16<sup>th</sup>, several others tried to bring the two faiths together, even integrate them. A courtier of Akbar brought out the *Allah Upanishad*; Pran-nath wrote the *Mahitarial*, quoting texts from the Quran and the Vedas side by side to prove that they are not basically different. Jagjivandas, Shiv Narayan and Garibdas and several others founded synthetic sects. But they all ended up as part of Hinduism, some retaining their identity as sects. See Majumdar (1988-96: VIII: 718-22).

## Modern and Contemporary Phase

*“If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them, which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant – I should point to India.”*

— F. Max Müller (1883)

*“The Vedanta recognizes no sin; it only recognizes error. And the greatest error, says Vedanta, is to say that you are weak, that you are a sinner, a miserable creature, and that you have no power to do this and that.”*

— Swami Vivekananda (1896)<sup>1</sup>

*“It is an insult to starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics”*

— Swami Vivekananda (1893)<sup>2</sup>

### 1. MANY MOODS OF MODERN PHASE

The quotations above reflect some of the prominent moods of modern phase of Hinduism succinctly and also eloquently. During the modern phase, the Great Reformation of Hinduism which had gained prominence with the Bhakti movements during the medieval period, accelerated further. It was marked by a high degree of introspection about the state of the Hindu society at least on the part of the leaders of what is sometimes called as the Renaissance Hinduism. These leaders, brief accounts of whose roles are given in what follows, were the makers of modern India, not of Hinduism alone. In one of the most insightful commentaries on the modern phase, Sardar K M Panikkar has remarked that “India’s Independence and emergence in the modern world would hardly have been possible without the slow but radical adjustments that had taken place within the fold of Hinduism for a period of last 100 years” (Panikkar 1953: 319).

Subjugation of India to British rule had created an inferiority complex and loss of self-confidence in general, which needed correctives. The hordes of Christian Missionaries who also invaded India on a large scale lost no time in launching an offensive against Hinduism often in slanderous terms, and made this mood of despondency even worse. A corrective came at an intellectual level from an unexpected quarter – from the white men themselves though India yielded to their colonialism. Europeans did have some disdain for the contemporary Indians, but they were broad minded enough to have a great scholarly interest in India's past history, culture, its heritage, its literature and its religions. Some of the European scholars, particularly missionaries, were interested in studying Indian religious texts mainly with a view to rubbishing them and use the criticism to proselytize. Some were interested mainly to establish Western superiority and hegemony over Indian culture as a justification for the 'Whiteman's burden' and rule (Said 2003, 1994). But quite a bit of European interest was also genuine. This led to translation of great works, which went into several editions. **F. Max Müller** (1823-1900) was a leading scholar who contributed to this revival of interest in the old texts, and his work of editing and translating India's ancient texts was truly monumental. His translation of the *R̥gveda*, forty-nine volumes of the *Sacred Books of the East*, and other works on philology and comparative religion established him as the leader among Indologists. It was through his works that not only the West, but even the English-educated Indians came to know of India's past heritage. It also created a much needed sense of pride, restoring some self confidence among Indians. The quotation above is from a book consisting of 'a course of lectures specially intended for the candidates for the Indian Civil Service', delivered at Cambridge University. These lectures in particular, and his work on India in general, amounted to a rejection of Macaulay's contemptuous observation on India's literature and heritage.

Max Müller was not alone in this task. Basham has given a brief account of several scholars who contributed to 'the discovery of ancient India' beginning from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century itself (Basham 1985: 4-8). Among them **Sir William Jones** (1746-94) was a leading Indologist who is termed as an orientalist in outlook because of his respectful scholarly interest in India's heritage, particularly in Sanskrit. He introduced the study of Sanskrit and comparative philology in the modern education system, as distinguished from the traditional Sanskrit studies in Varanasi and other places. His work brought out the close affinity between Sanskrit and some of the European languages. Sir Edwin Arnold's translations of the *Bhagavadgita* (*The Song Celestial*) and of *Dhammapada* (*The Light of Asia*) in verse form proved to be very popular both in India and the West. They went into many editions and were also translated into several European languages. Philosophers like Schopenhauer and poets like Goethe were also deeply attracted to India's literature, the former being known particularly for his interest in the Upanishads.

**Annie Besant** (1847-1933) and her Theosophical Society have also to be remembered for the contribution made in boosting the morale of India and restoring pride and confidence in Hinduism. Born an English woman, she adopted India as her motherland. She came to India in 1892 to attend the Theosophical conference but stayed on, toured the country and exhorted Hindus to have pride in their religion and Hindu ideals. She started the Central Hindu College at Benaras to promote modern education that did not reject Hinduism. She gifted the College to Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1946) and it became the nucleus for Benaras Hindu University that he founded



**Mahatma Gandhi**



**Annie Besant**



**Swami Vivekananda**



**Raja Rammohan Roy**



**Sri Aurobindo**



**Dr. S Radhakrishnan**



**Shri Narayana Guru**



**Paramahansa Yogananda**



**Swami Dayanand Saraswati**



**Ramakrishna Paramahansa**



**Sri Swaminaryan**



**A C Bhaktivedanta Swami**



**Sri Sri Ravishankar**



**Maharishi Mahesh Yogi**



**Shri Sathya Sai Baba**



**Swami Chinmayananda**



**Mata Amritanandamayi**



**Shri Ramana Maharshi**

(Sarma 1955: 119). To popularise Hinduism, Annie Besant translated the *Gita* and brought out lucid and enjoyable summary versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and text-books on Hindu religion and ethics. She embarrassed the British by advocating ‘Home Rule’, and was imprisoned in 1917 for it. She gave great support to the Indian National Congress and became its President in 1917. Gandhiji complimented her work when he observed. “As long as India lives, the memory of the magnificent services rendered by her will also live. She endeared herself to India by making it her country of adoption and dedicated her all to it” (as quoted in Sarma 1955: 124).

**Sister Nivedita** (1867-1911), an Irish lady whose original name was Margaret Elizabeth Nobel, became a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and lived in India for 12 years. She was a prolific writer on Indian subjects, particularly Hinduism, and both through her writings and lectures, she contributed in restoring India’s pride in its heritage, especially religious. Her two books – *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* and *The Web of Indian Life* became particularly popular.

The above mentioned account of the Western contribution to the revival of Hinduism is by no means exhaustive. What is more, Western interest in Hinduism continues unabated. Several western and other foreign scholars have made valuable contribution to the further understanding of Hinduism not only in the world outside but even among Indians. Some of their work is referred to in this book in almost all chapters. This interest is no longer confined to Britain, but also covers the USA, Canada, Europe, and also Japan. Several Universities in these countries have Centers and Departments for the study of religions, and Hinduism is prominently covered. It is not necessary to list all these hundreds of scholars here, but some of them along with their works are cited in this book. Interest of the West in Hinduism during the modern phase is not confined only to scholarly works. “Dominant figures in popular culture – pop stars such as Beatles and poets such as Alan Ginsberg – promoted Hindu ideas and gurus” (Flood 2004: 271). Many modern gurus have been promoting deep interest in Hinduism in many parts of the world – not only in the western countries but in other countries too, making Hinduism a world religion in its own right.

The contribution of **Swami Vivekananda** (1863-1902) in countering the mood of despondence and loss of self-esteem among Hindus stands unparalleled. Vivekananda claimed that while Christianity accepted only itself as the truth, Hinduism was pluralistic and accepted not only different paths to truth within itself but also the validity of all religions. Flood has observed: “Vivekananda might be regarded as first to clearly articulate the idea of Hinduism as a world religion, taking its place alongside Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism” (Flood 2004: 259). In a short life span of only 39 years, what Vivekananda achieved was monumental. He came to lime light with his famous Chicago Address at the Parliament of Religions on September 11, 1893. His address was a landmark for Hindus in restoring their pride in their ancient religion. He was not a mere scholar. Using Karl Marx’s well-known phrases, we can say that he not only interpreted the world of Hinduism in a modern perspective, but he also contributed to changing Hindus, making them more modern, rational and humanistic. He worked relentlessly for this goal particularly during the last ten years of his short life, set up a proper institutional structure for realising his dreams, and left behind an astoundingly inspiring literature, which continues to influence the young and old alike even to this day. The essence of his message is in the two quotations from him given at the beginning of this chapter. Restoring self-esteem was not enough. He also wanted to make Hinduism humanistic, and put his finger on the most needed tasks of ending poverty and illiteracy. Vivekananda drew inspiration from Advaita philosophy according to which there

is divinity in every human, which meant that all have to be treated as equals and with dignity. He, therefore, condemned the caste system, particularly untouchability. He could see that widespread poverty hindered spiritual progress. According to Hindu tradition itself, no dharma is possible in conditions of poverty. On the contrary, as the Mahabharata says, dharma flows out of wealth and prosperity like a river from the mountain.<sup>3</sup> VKRV Rao has called Vivekananda as the Prophet of Vedantic Socialism (Rao 1979). Ramakrishna Mission, started by Swami Vivekananda, has been active in social service too with exemplary zeal, apart from carrying on spiritual teaching and publications.

The work of reforming Hinduism during the modern phase was started even earlier by **Raja Rammohan Roy** (1774-1833). He felt deeply hurt by the proselytisation drive and propaganda against Hinduism by Christian Missionaries. He criticised them, but they also provoked him to rid Hinduism of its social evils. He laid the roadmap for the modernisation of both Hinduism and India. He could see the advantages of Indians taking up scientific education on modern western lines in English, in contrast to the traditional learning, and gave great support to the British government in promoting it. He is also remembered in connection with his efforts to finally abolish *Sati*. He started agitation for its abolition, drawing support for his position from Hindu scriptures themselves, particularly the *Gita*. He also fought against idol worship and superstition, again drawing support from Hindu scriptures. Similarly, he fought against polygamy and child marriage. He founded the Brahmo Samaj for carrying on the task of reforming Hinduism and making its practice more rational. The stimulus he gave to reform created a powerful mood for reform and continued well after his death. His disdain for Pauranic Hinduism and its mythology, and emphasis mainly on the Upanishads and the *Gita* contributed to intellectualising modern Hinduism, which influenced the successive leaders in the modern phase. Rammohan's intention was to lift popular Hinduism to the higher level of Vedanta, – a task which was later taken up by Swami Vivekananda also. Sardar Panikkar remarks: "The Brahmo tradition has become so much a part of the Indian way of life now, that one is inclined to overlook its distinctive contribution. It does not lie primarily in the fact that it enabled Hinduism to withstand the onslaught of the missionaries, but in that it introduced the modern approach to Indian problems....in that sense Rammohan is the forerunner of new India" (Panikkar 1953:321-2).

**Sahajananda Swami** (1781-1830), worshiped later as Swaminarayan, belonged to a transitional phase of India's history, particularly in Gujarat – the grey phase, which was the end of medieval age and the beginning of the modern phase. He was a younger contemporary of Rammohan Roy but died three years before Roy. Even after the death of Sahajananda Swami, his work has been continued by his followers with great zeal. The situation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gujarat was anarchical. Hit by frequent famines, the misery of people was further compounded by widespread plunder, exactions by robbers and oppression by all sorts of local despots. The growth of British political rule and the rising popularity of Sahajananda Swami developed almost together during the first half of the 19th century, and both the British regime and the Swami shared a common concern for restoring social order and harmony. They were thus sympathetic to each other. The Swami's way, however, was not through extending and exercising the power of the state but through moral and spiritual persuasion, which was found to be no less effective. The Swami worked for stopping the practice of female infanticide and Sati, and required his followers to take five principal vows: '(1) not to steal; (2) not to commit adultery; (3) not to eat meat; (4) not to drink intoxicants, and (5) not to receive food from persons belonging to a caste lower than one's own.' (Williams 2001: 20). The last vow does seem objectionable



Swami Vivekananda delivering his famous Chicago address at the Parliament of Religions in 1893.

from the point of the present age, and even from the point of the Bhakti movements in the past. It was given up later by his followers. Even earlier, people of all castes were admitted to his Satsangs or religious meetings and also to the temples started by him and started later in his name. The ascetics were admitted without caste considerations. They had also to work for social welfare in addition to observing their strict vows, restoring moral order among people. The Swami also ordained that his ascetic disciplines should not avoid manual work, and ordered them to dig wells and reservoirs for water and repair old ones which had fallen into disuse. His ascetics also actively helped in the repair and construction of roads and temples, and even residences. The Swami also joined them in such works, which was unusual in India at least then for a spiritual Guru (*ibid*: 23). According to a contemporary report in *Asiatic Journal* in 1823, the Swami's preaching had produced great effect in improving the morals of the people, and as per the then British observers, in the areas of the Swami's influence, social order and stability were much better than in other areas (*ibid*: 21). The Swaminarayan Movement has continued today both in India and abroad, with several magnificent temples established in several parts of the world including the USA, England and Africa. It is a little odd, however, that though its moral appeal is universal in nature, the movement is mostly confined to Gujaratis even abroad. But the movement has contributed to maintaining the pride and identity of Gujaratis, though not all the Gujaratis are followers of Swaminarayan.

The emphasis on social reform including emancipation of women found a powerful echo in Maharashtra, initially inspired by the visit of Keshab Chandra Sen of Brahmo Samaj to Bombay in 1864 and then led by R G Bhandarkar, M G Ranade and D K Karve. This was in the form of starting Prarthana Samaj with the declared objectives of rejecting caste, introducing widow remarriage, promoting women's education and abolition of child marriage. Unlike the Brahmo Samaj, which was a denominational sect in its own right, Prarthana Samaj did not claim to be a separate sect. On the contrary, it stressed continuity within the best tradition of Hinduism, particularly the Bhakti Movements of Maharashtra. **Mahadev Govind Ranade** (1842-1901) who was the main force behind Prarthana Samaj termed the Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra as a Protestant Movement within Hinduism and observed that the activity and goal of Prarthana Samaj represented a continuation of the same movement. Unlike Protestant Christianity, which separated itself from the Catholic Church, Ranade observed that Bhakti movement did not separate itself from Hinduism and continued to be a part of it; it was also not iconoclastic and did worship personal gods. But its essence was rejection of caste and untouchability and emphasis on social equity, which is what Prarthana Samaj aimed at (Sarma 1955: 83-91; Majumdar 1991: X-II: 256-9). Though not associated with Prarthana Samaj as such, **Mahatma Jyotiba Phule** (1827-90) also independently launched a struggle against caste, Brahmin domination, untouchability and oppression of women, even earlier to Prarthana Samaj. Maharashtra is as much proud of his radicalism as it is of **Dr B R Ambedkar** (1891-1956) who succeeded him in the radical movement.

**Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati** (1824-83) founded the Arya Samaj to reform the practice of Hinduism, making it more rational and acceptable to the modern man. Like the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj also provided an early alternative to those opposed to superstition and inequality in the Hindu society but wanted to remain with the real and noble side of Hinduism. While the former two could not spread much beyond the regions of their origin and have barely survived over a century, the Arya Samaj became a much greater success. This was probably because Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati provided a foundational scripture, a viable and clear philosophical base and even

a minimal ritual with recitations from the Vedas. The Arya Samaj gave scope to convert to Hinduism though ‘*shuddhi*’ without having to accept the caste system. Like the previous reformers, Maharshi Dayananda opposed caste distinctions along with untouchability, prohibition of widow remarriage, as also idol worship, and tried to rid Hinduism of superstition and animal sacrifices. He considered these evils to be later accretions that had no sanction of the Vedas, and, therefore, gave a call of ‘Back to the Vedas!’ Maharshi Dayananda also made no hesitation in launching counter-attacks on Islam and Christianity, showing their loopholes and weaknesses in his *Satyārtha Prakāśh*, and brought out the positive features of Hinduism and explained his philosophy. The Arya Samaj thus became more aggressive than the Brahmos and the Prarthana Samaj.

Lest this should go too far, a corrective was provided by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Mahatma Gandhi. Though the modern phase is marked by many moods, dichotomies and possibilities of excesses were contained well on time by moderate voices, and a balance was obtained. That is how, India has still continued and will continue as a multi-faith secular democracy. **Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa** (1836-1886) was an embodiment of the best in India’s culture and religion, particularly the best of Hinduism. As Swami Tejasananda observed, “He opened the eyes of Indians to the beauty, grandeur and strength of Hinduism at a time when their faith in it had greatly slackened” (1977:2). The spiritual heights attained by Sri Ramakrishna attracted many devotees and monastic disciples, the most famous among them being Swami Vivekananda. But there were several others too, who received Sri Ramakrishna’s highest wisdom and attained self-realisation under his personal guidance, some of them being Swami Adbhutananda (also known affectionately as Latu Maharaj), Swami Brahmananda, Swami Advaitananda, Swami Shivananda, Swami Premananda, Swami Turiyananda and Swami Trigunatitananda (ibid:78-84). They took care of Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission, particularly after Swami Vivekananda’s early demise, and developed them greatly both in India and abroad. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda formed one of the most distinguished Guru-Shishya combine ever. As a pair of Guru and Shishya, they were ‘made for each other’. They complemented each other in an astoundingly effective way. Though not a formally educated man, Ramakrishna attracted the most intelligent and dynamic of Calcutta’s youth. Narendranath Datta (Naren) who later became Swami Vivekananda was one of them. Naren asked Ramakrishna quite directly – ‘Have you seen God’? To his surprise, the latter did not dodge the question. He simply replied: ‘Yes, I have seen Him. I see Him now too, only more clearly and intensely than I see you. Not only that, I can also help you see Him.’<sup>4</sup> The God that Ramakrishna saw was not a Hindu God, a Muslim God or a Christian God. His God was common to the whole universe. He realised the unity of God and taught it. He also experimented. He wanted to have a firsthand experience of the feeling that, when honestly practised, all religions lead one to the ultimate realisation of the same God. He had already practised as a devout Hindu and had realized God. As Swami Vivekananda narrates, his Master ‘found a Mohmmedan Saint and placed himself under him; he underwent the disciplines prescribed by him, and to his astonishment found that when faithfully carried out, these devotional methods led him to the same goal he had already attained. He gathered similar experience from following the religion of Jesus the Christ. He went to all the sects he could find, and whatever he took up he went into with his whole heart. He did exactly as he was told, and in every instance he arrived at the same result. Thus, from actual experience, he came to know that the goal of every religion is the same...’ (Vivekananda 1990: 40). As Swami Vivekananda observes, the quarrel over religions arises because of selfishness and egoism, because “they were not

anxious about the truth but about ‘my name’ and ‘your name’” (*Ibid*: 41). Ramakrishna Mission which Swami Vivekananda founded has, therefore, avoided all narrow parochialism and preaches Hinduism in its universal essence. Teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda yield no scope for any hatred for ‘other’ religions, which, in fact, is true of Hinduism as a whole. Other Hindu saints and spiritual leaders both during Bhakti Movements and in the Modern phase also adopted the same approach to other religions.

A valuable contribution of Sri Ramakrishna lies in reconciling the apparent conflict between Nirguṇa and Saguṇa views of God, and in asserting that the Saguṇa view is no less true, and no less spiritually rewarding. Though it was Totapuri, his Guru, who initiated Sri Ramakrishna into experiencing the inscrutable Nirguṇa Brahman, Tatapuri himself learnt from Ramakrishna, the significance of Kali, ‘the Great fact of the relative world and of *māyā*, Her indescribable Power’ (Nikhilananda 1942, 2012 reprint, p. 31). For Ramakrishna, the world was a glorious manifestation of the Divine Mother, and the act of this manifestation was *māyā*. What underlies the world, Prakṛti is the Brahman. Thus Nirguṇa and Saguṇa are different aspects of the same Brahman or the same Shakti. The Practical implication of this view for Sādhana is that love or yearning for the Divine as personal God is also an equally valid path, and in fact, more promising for the Sādhaka (seeker) than the dry path of Jñāna, Swami Vivekananda and Gandhiji took it also to mean that the service of human beings, particularly of the weak and the deprived, is itself a sādhanā, a path to God realisation.

Gandhiji (**Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi**, 1869-1948) imbibed the same eclectic and liberal view of God and religion as Sri Ramakrishna. Gandhi’s opposition to religious conversions had more to do with this view than with any parochial love of Hinduism, since such conversions only strengthened the barriers between religions instead of promoting mutual understanding. He advised the Missionaries to do their work selflessly in the true humanitarian spirit, without ulterior motives of proselytisation. He said: “If instead of confining themselves purely to humanitarian work such as education, medical services to the poor and the like, they would use these activities of theirs for the purpose of proselytizing, I would certainly like them to withdraw. ... Certainly the great faiths held by the people of India are adequate for the people. India stands in no need of conversion from one faith to another.” (CWMG 1971:vol.46: 28). He went to the extent of saying: “If I had the power and would legislate, should certainly stop all proselytizing. It is the cause of much avoidable conflict”. (CWMG 1971: vol.61: 46). Gandhi asserted without hesitation that he was a Hindu, a Sanatani Hindu at that! But he also clarified: “The Hinduism of my conception is no narrow creed. It is a grand evolutionary process as ancient as time, and embraces the teachings of Zoroaster, Moses, Christ, Mohammed, Nanak and other prophets that I could name”. (CWMG 1971: vol.76: 375). Even while he condemned the methods used by the missionaries to slander Hinduism, he was also unsparing in his criticism of parochial tendencies within Hinduism, including *Shuddhi* Movement of the Arya Samaj which encouraged non-Hindus to get back in to Hinduism. His strategy was to first reform the Hindu society, particularly to abolish untouchability, to care for the poor and treat them with dignity, respect, and love. This love was to be extended to followers of other religions too. He worked ceaselessly for Hindu-Muslim unity and taught the famous prayer – ‘... *Ishwara Allah Tero naam, Sabako Sanmati de Bhagavan.*’ In his daily prayer meetings, recitations of both the Quran and the Bible were mandatory along with that of the *Gita*. When the whole nation was celebrating Independence on August 15, 1947, he was not present

in Delhi to participate in it. Deeply bruised and disappointed at the communal frenzy, he was in Calcutta to bring peace and calm to people affected by communal riots. Ultimately, he gave his life in the cause of communal amity and fell a martyr to the bullet of a militant Hindu. Two unforgettable ironies of Gandhiji's life are: first that a man who like no one else was responsible for bringing India its Independence was completely detached from its celebration and instead devoted himself to another cause dear to him, that of establishing communal amity; and second that a man who declared himself a Sanatani and staunch Hindu, who again like no one else defended Hinduism against slander and proselytisation, himself fell a victim to militant Hinduism. A man of peace, love and non-violence was himself felled by violence and became an unforgettable martyr. There is unity in the two ironies of his life – a unity arising out of his concern for communal amity. Ultimately, that was his priority, more than achieving India's Independence.

As Flood observed, "Gandhiji's is an ethical Hinduism, one in which ritual and deities are subordinated to a vision of tolerance, peace and truth" (2004: 261). Gandhiji took care to show that his interpretation of ethical Hinduism is very much derived from its own scriptures and traditions, yet having universal relevance. He also imparted this ethics to the sphere of politics, without in any way imposing Hinduism on it. He wanted both theoretical economic analysis and the actual Indian economy also to be based on the same principles of truth and nonviolence, which he applied to personal conduct as well as to politics. For his ethical inspiration he gave as much credit to the *Sermon on the Mount* as to the Gita. The more important point about his ethics is that for him, even in politics and economics, the means were as sacred as the ends.<sup>5</sup> He rejected the idea that colonialism was justified by its civilisational mission. To end colonialism also, he employed means and methods, which were moral. Even after Independence, he continued to insist on the means being moral. It was ultimately the moral strength of the means as much as the moral justification of the end, which ensured victory, according to him. He provided a living example of practising and proving the Upanishadic adage – 'Satyameva Jayate' (Truth alone triumphs), which became a part of the National emblem of India precisely because Gandhiji lived it and India became free because of it.

It is said of Gandhiji that 'he represented what every Hindu admired and tried to be, but could not achieve' (Sarma 1955:190). His greatest contribution to Hinduism was - he showed that even in the modern age and even while being actively engaged in the mundane world, and that too in politics, it is possible to put into practice what he regarded as the great principles of Hinduism – relentless pursuit of truth, nonviolence, self-knowledge, selfless service of others with unreserved willingness to use manual labour for the purpose, tolerance, compassion for all, self control and absolute honesty. Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda says about Gandhiji's Autobiography- *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*: 'Many autobiographies replete with famous names and colourful events are almost completely silent on any phase of inner analysis or development. One lays down each of these books with a certain dissatisfaction, as though saying: "Here is a man who knew many notable persons, but who never knew himself." This reaction is impossible with Gandhi's autobiography; he exposes his faults and subterfuges with an impersonal devotion to truth rare in the annals of any age.' (Yogananda 1975: 434 fn).

Another significance of Gandhiji from the point of the present book lies in his representing continuity from the past and yet being modern to the core. Committed to classical values of Truth and

Non-violence, using the method of the Bhakti Sants and deriving inspiration from their humanism, he responded to the problems of modern age with unrivalled effectiveness, and left an enduring impact. He was a 'modern Sant' (Juergensmeyer 1987: 329), not only preaching like them but also lived like them with all honesty.

Gandhiji's valuable contribution to Hinduism also consists in his liberal and dynamic interpretation of it. He could see that Hinduism is both *sanātān* with certain eternal values, and also dynamic which abhorred stagnation. He saw no contradiction in this. That is how he found Hinduism incompatible with untouchability and unequal caste system, and also with intolerance towards other religions, peoples and cultures. He wanted Hinduism to assimilate what is best in others, without at the same time sacrificing its basic and eternal values. He said that he did not want his house to be walled in from all sides but also he did not want to be blown off by any wind that came. In spite of tremendous pressure on his time, he found time to prove the validity of his interpretations with support from Hindu scriptures.

He always insisted upon cultivating inner strength and moral courage. He clarified many times that his principle of non-violence was a weapon of the brave, and not of the timid. As rightly observed, 'to stand up against an armed tyrant with a heart free from malice and calmly face his sword or gun rather than submit to his will requires extraordinary spiritual strength' (Sarma 1955: 206). What is great about him is that not only he had this strength, but he also spared no pains to impart it to millions of his people. It is no wonder that they loved him for it beyond measure, just as he loved them.

**Rabindranath Tagore** (1861-1941) is among those prominent few who eloquently conveyed that even if India was poor and was not politically independent it has still a lot to give to the world in terms of its spiritualism and even humanism. He did it with great refinement and sophistication, earning the respect of the world. His earning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for the *Gitanjali* gave a tremendous boost to India's morale. Sarma (1955) includes Tagore among the leaders and spokesmen of Renaissance Hinduism and calls him a modern Rishi. Only, he expressed himself in Bengali instead of Sanskrit. He was a Rishi inspired both by Upanishadic mysticism and Humanism of the West. At the same time 'he fiercely denounced the aggressive nationalism of the West as a crime against humanity' (Sarma 1955: 169) and emphasised the divinity of man as the measure of all things in the true Upanishadic tradition. 'Tagore's love of humanity is the outcome of his spirituality. His love of man is only the obverse of his love of God' (*Ibid*: 170). Mysticism of Tagore's poetry reflects 'a lively consciousness of the presence of God behind all things in the world and behind all experiences in man' in the true Upanishadic tradition (*Ibid*: 177). The inspiration he drew from Nature was also related to this mysticism. Tagore was influenced both by Vaishnavite poet-singers of Bengal according to whom the loving nature of God found its completeness in human response to it, and by Bauls of Bengal – mystics 'who dispense with all temples, rituals, scriptures and caste regulations and sing of God simply as a Lover' (*Ibid*: 178). In spite of this influence of the past heritage of Bengal and of Upanishads and other Hindu texts, Tagore was above any narrow parochialism and was free from sectarian orthodoxy. His classic work '*Religion of Man*' shows its universal appeal. He stresses 'the idea of the humanity of our God or the divinity of Man the Eternal' (Tagore 1961:17, as quoted in Tuck 1991:378). Religion to Tagore is 'the creative principle of unity, the divine mystery of existence,' and is 'manifested through personality and suggests to the human intellect, imagination, feeling and experience of our intuitive vision of a unified whole' (Tuck 1991: 378). This is exactly what the

Upanishads preached. But Tagore creatively interpreted the Upanishadic philosophy for the modern age, also integrating it with the later Vaishnavism. For Tagore, the relationship of *Jīva* with God is one of love, and *Prema* is both the means and the end of Bhakti culminating in experiencing a union with the Divine, which is also an experience of freedom (Tuck 1991: 388-9). As Tagore himself said, his was a poet's religion above all. Tagore is also to be remembered for the stimulus he gave to a distinct school of music - Rabindra Sangeet. His Bengali songs are usually set to this music.

Even before Tagore, there was a resurgence of Bhakti movement in the modern phase. As in the Bhakti movements of the medieval age, the Bhakti movements in the modern phase too were combined with resurgence of music. A glorious case of this is **Thyagaraja** (1767-1847), also called as Thyagaraya. Originally coming from Andhra Pradesh, Thyagaraja's forefathers had settled in Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century in India was not exactly a dark age. It created a brilliant luminary in the form of Thyagaraja. Chronologically after Purandaradasa, he is one of the most prominent names in Karnatak (Carnatic) music, which he developed and systematised. He was known equally as a Bhakti saint, and music was only a means, a *Sādhanā*. It is said that he was first interested mainly in music and that the divine sage Narada appeared before him and gave him a classic, *Narayanīyam*. This incident changed him. He became primarily a Bhakta and secondly a music composer. He composed many devotional songs and set them to music. His favourite deity was Rama, but he also composed songs in praise of Venkateshwara of Tirupati, Varadaraja of Kanchi, and even Shiva, Parvati and Kumāraswami. Thyagaraja's melodious songs stir the heart deeply. Listening to his music is a thrilling experience that gives a feel of the divine. A distinct feature of his music is that in music concerts when Thyagaraja Keertanas are sung, it is a community singing. The whole audience, including women, joins singing and becomes rapturous. Apart from Thyagaraja, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century produced Shyama Shastri and Muthuswami Dikshitar, who are also very eminent in Karnatak music.<sup>6</sup>

Another eminent representation of the continuation of Bhakti School with music is **Shishunul Sharief Saheb** (1819-1889). Born to a Muslim couple, he was named as Mohammed Sharief at birth, in a village called Shishunul in Dharwad district of Karnataka. Both because of his Muslim parentage and his songs – mostly composed in Kannada and a few in Urdu, he is also called as Kabir of Karnataka. Starting life as a village schoolteacher, he was open-minded from the beginning and was of religious temperament. He had started composing songs early in life. He was restless till he found his Guru in Govinda Bhatta, a *Smarta* Brahmin learned in scriptures and philosophy. Sharief's life reflected syncretism of the best in both Hindu and Muslim traditions. Govinda Bhatta was also equally broadminded, and going against the tradition of purity and pollution then, both stayed in the same house and ate together without any reservation. Both faced taunts and abusive criticism from their respective co-religionists, but the two did not bother. Sharief's syncretism included the Lingayat sect too. He highly respected the Shiva Sharanas of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. His songs reflect their influence. He demonstrated with his own life that formal religious differences do not matter for a person on the spiritual path, and what mattered was a pure heart and pure character. Unlike Kabir, he did not stress worshipping only an impersonal, formless god, but left it to the inclination of each person. He himself showed respect both to personal forms of God in temples and homes, as well as to the Nirguṇa God. He became ecstatic either way and also in music, spontaneously coming forth with mystical songs.

Several of his songs are in praise of personal deities of the region. His close friends, especially a potter, Mudukappa, jotted down most of his songs. His songs are generally set to Hindustani music. He was in touch with several spiritual leaders of the time, like the reputed Siddharudha Swami (1836-1929) of Hubli. Chidambara Dikshit, Mahanta Shivayogi and others who all held Sharief Saheb in high regard, ignoring his Muslim parentage.<sup>7</sup>

Though not a poet like Shishunal Sharief, **Shirdi Sai Baba** (1838-1918) is a mystic of highest popularity in the modern phase. Temples dedicated to him as a deity dot even small cities and towns particularly in Maharashtra and Karnataka. Like Shishunal Sharif, he also represents a syncretic Hinduism of modern phase, a continuation of Kabir's tradition. It is not known who his parents were, but he was orphaned early in life and was looked after by a Muslim fakir. He imbibed Muslim ways of worship and appeared to have learnt the *Qur'an* from him. After the fakir died, he was taken care of by a Hindu Guru, whom Sai Baba has affectionately called as Venkusa. Sai Baba's original name is not known. When as a boy he came to Shirdi, he was simply called as '*Sai*' (a popular Persian word for fakir) with 'Baba' added affectionately. And since he settled in Shirdi of Maharashtra, he came to be known as Shirdi Sai Baba. His popularity spread like wild fire because of his 'flamboyant' miracles, as Osborne calls them (Osborne 2002: 15). Apart from his unique miracles like burning lamps with water instead of oil which was first refused by villagers, he also healed people and solved their personal problems. There was a purpose in his miracles. He used to say: 'I give my devotees what they want so that they will begin to want what I want to give them' (*Ibid*: 15). Though not formally learned, he had good knowledge of both Muslim and Hindu traditions and main Hindu texts including the *Gita*. Some of his followers who took for granted that he did not know the *Gita*, were astounded at the depth of his explanation of some of its verses. He was profound, yet odd, even bizarre

Baba did not give formal initiation to any one or give *Upadesha* as Gurus usually do. Nor did he give any *mantra*. He never wanted his followers to give up family life and mundane activities for the sake of pursuing a spiritual path. He taught a simple path of devotion to Guru, seeing God in Guru, and approved *japa* of his name when devotees asked if they could do so (*Ibid*: 84). What was very important, he insisted, was that the devotee should give up his ego – *Ahamkāra*, be chaste, simple and upright, so as to be fit to receive Guru's Grace. The chief sources for Baba's life and teachings are *Shri Sai Charitamrta* in Marathi by Hemad Pant, and *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings* in English by B V Narasimhaswami (quoted in Heehs 2002: 450 & 454). As Heehs observes:

"No matter how celebrated Sai Baba became, he never changed his life style: begging for his food, which he always shared with others; walking in a garden that he cultivated himself; performing secret rites that only he understood; and giving advice and blessings to those who came to see him. Many have noted that being in Baba's presence was enough to give them contentment" (Heehs 2002 : 450).

Saints like Thyagaraja, Shishunal Sharief and Sai Baba are timeless. It matters little whether they are counted as belonging to the medieval or modern age. The modern phase of Hinduism was, however, mainly a reaction or adjustment both to Christianity and even more so to western values and western materialism. There is seemingly some ambivalence in this mood – an assertion of India's spiritual heritage as against the materialism of the West, and an accommodation and re-search of western

values and materialism within India's heritage. While the West and the East were supposed to have contrasting world-views, it was also equally realised that no people could retain their freedom, identity and self-respect, let alone progress, in a competitive world without ensuring a strong material basis for survival. The ambivalence arose essentially from an attempt to marry the ideal with the practical. The modern phase of Hinduism has succeeded in this seemingly impossible task with amazing skill and finesse. For example, Swami Vivekananda found no difficulty in this. Even while he projected India's spiritual heritage to the West, to the Indian audiences he stressed the need to end India's poverty, inequity, casteism and the superstition and superficiality of regarding rules of purity and pollution as religion. The social reforms that were advocated and initiated by several leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy, M.G. Ranade, D.K. Karve, Mahatma Phule and many others gathered momentum during the nineteenth century itself. They covered a wide range of issues like eradication of poverty and illiteracy, emancipation of women including encouragement to women's education and widow remarriage, ending female infanticide and child marriage, doing away with casteism, and promoting social equity. The social reforms covered the whole country, including far down south.

While a majority of social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century belonged to the elite class, a few also came from the grassroots, directly from the deprived castes. Apart from Narayan Guru referred in Chapter 5, another example of a lotus blooming from a muddy pool is that of **Sant Gadagebaba** (1876-1956) from Maharashtra. His earlier name was Debuji Zingraj Janorkar, born in Parit or Dhobi (Washer-men) community in a remote village called Shendgaon in Amaravati district of Vidarbha region. Practically illiterate, his community was steeped in extravagant superstition. In every major event in a family, goats, chicken and liquor had to be offered to village goddesses and the villagers had to be fed with the offerings in a grand feast, whether the family could afford it or not. If the poor had no money for it, they had to take loans to do it. Most of the families were debt-ridden. Debuji's father was not initially a poor man, but became poor because of this extravagance and died early due to addiction to liquor. Penniless, Debuji's mother took shelter in her brother's house along with kids. The brother and his wife initially had contempt for the family as poor relatives, and did not provide schooling to the kids. Debuji had to take his uncle's cattle to the forests and graze them, and help in farm work. He also learnt to sing Marathi *Abhangs*, and on occasions participated in devotional singing in the village. Thus, he became popular and even his uncle and aunt began to like him. In course of time, he married and a child was born. Setting aside the village tradition, he did not offer meat and liquor to village goddess, his neighbours and relatives. Instead, he offered only *laddus* (a sweet meat) and avoided taking loans from money-lenders.

Responding to an inner urge to take to social reform and rid the society of social evils like drinking, extravagance, caste discrimination and superstition, he set out from his home and took to a wandering life. He did not take formal *Sannyas*, but renounced his family and home for a selfless path of social work. He would go from village to village, clean the roads and surroundings of temples, take some food in return for this work, and then in the evenings call a meeting of villagers where he would sing devotional songs and teach them to be clean, to avoid extravagance and indebtedness to money lenders, to shun caste differences and liquor. He also taught that none should seek free food or other things but should earn it through work. Thereby he tried to bring dignity into the lives of the poor. Deeply religious in temperament, he regarded service to fellow humans and even animals as service to

God, and condemned animal sacrifice as sinful. He lived an extremely simple life. His robe had many patches, and his only belonging was a begging bowl (called as *Gadage*, after which he was named). “Begging” bowl would be a misnomer in his case, since he did not believe in begging for himself, and gave to villagers more through his work than what he got from them. He did not compose much by way of his own songs, but his famous song was:

*Gopala Gopala ,Devaki-nandan Gopala*  
*Sambhali hi tuzi lekare, Punya samazati papala.*

(Gopala, Son of Devaki, take care of these kids of yours who mistake a sinful act for a pious one!)

Gadagebaba is also known for the *Dharmashalas* (free dormitories) he established for deprived castes, particularly for the untouchables in several towns particularly in centres of pilgrimage. There were no shelters at all for them earlier, and they had to sleep in the open, whether it was winter, summer or rainy season. He started his first Dharmashala for the deprived in Pandharpur. He also started Vrddhashrams (Home for the Aged) for the destitute elderly people. He encouraged the kids of deprived castes to take to schooling and helped them whenever possible with schemes of combining earning with learning, and established hostels for students.<sup>8</sup>

**Rashtra Sant Tukadoji Maharaj** (1909-1968) was a younger spiritual sibling of Gadagebaba. Like him, Tukadoji was also born in a so-called low caste, included now among backward castes. He also came from the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. He was named as *Manik* by his parents, both of whom were devoted Varkaris. *Manik*, even as a child, was also spiritually inclined and in his youth, he spent time in penance and meditation in the company of Sadhus and Sants. He came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and that is when he turned to social reform and rural development. He participated in the Freedom Struggle and was imprisoned for four months during the 1942 Movement. He roamed all over Maharashtra with his Khanjira (a musical instrument) singing bhajans (devotional songs), most of which he composed himself both in Marathi and Hindi. He was a great reformer who fought superstition, social evils like dowry and child marriage and caste mentality. He taught cleanliness, rational thinking in religion, patriotism, and concern for others. His religion was universal that respected all faiths and prophets, but cautioned people against imposters posing as Sadhus (saints). He is known for several books and compositions, though he had little formal schooling. His well-known *Grama-Gita* offered a *Gita* tailored for villagers (*Grama*). Without going into metaphysics or mysticism, the *Grama-Gita* told villagers the value of rural reconstruction, hygiene and sanitation, education, tolerance, respect and consideration for others, humanism and patriotism. It was *Gita* for rural development. He attended an all-religions conference in Japan in 1954 and sang with his powerful voice to the beat of his Khanjira a composition of his own in Hindi:

*Har deshameṇ tu har veshameṇ tu*  
*Tere nama anek, tu eka hi hai /*  
*Tere ranga bhumi, yeh Vishwa bana*  
*Sab khelamen, melamen tu hi to hai //*

It means: ‘You pervade every land. You are in every guise. Your names are many, but you are just one. The whole universe is your stage. You are there in every play, in every congregation.’ His message of universal spiritualism conveyed through deeply devotional music was applauded by all. He set up an Ashram called as Gurukunj in Amaravati district of Maharashtra, which included facilities for schooling and informal instruction in rural reconstruction. He explained the meaning of his assumed name, which reflected his utter humility: he was but a piece (*Tukda*) of the *bhakar* (*roti* or Indian bread) left over by his Guru. Both the reformers Gadagebaba and Tukadoji – made a deep impact on Maharashtra, particularly on the rural masses.<sup>9</sup>

We have one more example of an initiative from the deprived classes for social and religious reform, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century itself. This is ***Mahima Dharma*** movement, started by **Mahima Gosvami**, also known as Mahima Gosain. According to legend, he came from the Himalayas after penance there and lived among the tribal people in Orissa forests. He started his religious reform movement in 1826, termed as a ‘transformation of a subaltern religiosity’ into ‘an institutionalized religious order’ (as quoted by Guzy, 2003: 212, attributed to Dube 2001: 149-78). His movement rejected caste, and accepted ‘a conception of God that lies between henotheism and monotheism’ (Guzy 2003: 211), worshipping *Mahima Alakh* (the Highest or the Greatest Unwritten) conceived to be *Sunya* – the void – all or nothing (ibid: 211). God can be realised only through meditation, austerities, and a ritual based on fire, but not idol worship. The followers of *Mahima Dharma* accepted Gosvami himself as incarnation of Mahima Alakh. The main institutional feature of the movement was the importance given to ascetics, who gave spiritual guidance. The householders were their patrons, who also were supposed to lead a simple austere life. *Mahima Dharma* got a boost through the poetry of **Bheema Bhoi**, who was a tribal himself and a direct and main disciple of Gosvami. However, Bhoi was a householder, not an ascetic. He was reported to have had four wives, including one spiritual consort, with whom he had no conjugal relations. Bhoi turned out to be an important poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Orissa, making him even more distinguished because of his subaltern origin (see, Beltz 2003). It appears from the accounts of the movement available, that though subaltern in origin and nature, it did not attain the stature of Narayan Guru’s movement in Kerala. Its emphasis on asceticism helped the tribal people to feel proud that they too could be as spiritual, possibly, more spiritual than the elite or high caste Hindus. This was an important achievement, but did not help much in improving the levels of education and material welfare of the tribal people, – a task in which Narayan Guru succeeded. The *Mahima Dharma* movement can profitably learn from Narayan Guru’s work and achievements.

An important western value to which Hinduism had to respond was Nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore had rejected this value as irrelevant for human progress. Though a small fraction of Hindus may entertain the idea of Hindus as a nation, it is fortunately rejected by the majority, and the western concept of nationalism on a secular and territorial basis is accepted. The Hindu tradition of tolerance came in handy to serve this goal, which Gandhiji and others held up and promoted further. Though quite a few eminent interpreters of Hinduism in the modern phase were also nationalists and fought for India’s freedom, they took care also to avoid parochialism.

**Bal Gangadhar Tilak** (1856-1920), who was given the title of *Lokmanya* (Respected by people) by his admirers, saw no conflict between nationalism and his ardent love of Hinduism. He was a

predecessor of Gandhiji in this respect. Tilak played a prominent role in Freedom struggle and was considered a radical, compared to Gopal Krishna Gokhale and M G Ranade, who were moderates. Tilak suffered imprisonment thrice, including deportation to Mandalay for six years. He was a radical in demanding Independence, but a moderate in social reform. This was because he felt that social reforms needed persuasion and had to be slow while political freedom could not be obtained by persuasion; it needed coercion (Sarma 1955: 110). Tilak wanted social reform in terms of an Indian ethos instead of copying western models. He interpreted the *Gita* primarily as an exposition of *Karmayoga*, path of works, and this included nationalist struggle for Independence. He converted Hindu festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi into public functions, using the occasion to organise cultural programmes and lectures to advocate freedom struggle. It was Tilak who first advocated Non Co-operation as a weapon in the fight for freedom, an idea which was taken up by Gandhiji subsequently (Sarma 1955: 110-1). Tilak was the author of the famous slogan of freedom struggle: ‘Swaraj is my birth right and I will have it’. Though in his work Tilak combined his freedom struggle with his exposition of Hinduism and even used Hindu festivals for the purpose, there is no evidence to show that he was parochial or that he saw the Hindus as a nation excluding followers of other religions or that he wanted non-Hindus as secondary citizens in his free India. As a true scholar of Hinduism he could not have contributed to such a view.

A case of tension between nationalism and spirituality is reflected well in the life and work of **Aurobindo Ghose** (1872-1950), popularly known as Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo became a highly respected spiritual leader only after he transcended nationalism and started looking at the problems of humanity as a whole. He saw no conflict between the spiritual and the practical, and recognized the need to reconcile spiritual progress with material progress. Growing up in a highly anglicised culture and groomed for entering into the Indian Civil Service, he passed the examination but neglected horse riding without which he could not be selected for it. Returning to India and taking up administrator’s work in the princely state of Baroda, he turned to revolutionary politics and was jailed for his radicalism and allegations of being associated with even terrorist activity against the British rule. That was when a miraculous turn to a spiritual career took place in which he distinguished himself worldwide. He was a revolutionary politician, social analyst, philosopher, visionary poet and mystic all rolled into one.<sup>10</sup> In his later years particularly after Mirra, called by Aurobindo and his disciples as Mother, joined him at Pondicherry in 1920, he spent his life in seclusion and meditation, and writing poetry.

Sri Aurobindo based his philosophy of Integral Yoga essentially on Hindu texts. His translation and commentary on the Vedas, Upanishads and the *Gita* are modern classics,<sup>11</sup> to be ranked with the commentary of the three celebrated Acharyas – Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. He rejected Shankara’s Advaita philosophy as illusionistic and negative and offered his ‘Realistic’ version of Advaita which accepts the existence and the value of the world. In yogic experience, he saw the universe as a manifestation of the Absolute Unity or the Brahman, which in non-yogic experience is seen as diverse multiplicity. He does not relegate the latter to a lower level of reality. Reality is both one and many. The apparent contradiction between yogic experience and non-yogic is termed as *Māya* by him; *Māya* is not a part of the experience, but a postulate which Vedanta demands to account for the contradiction between Unity and Diversity (Minor 1991a: 398). Sri Aurobindo’s concept of yoga

is based on this philosophical position. For him yoga ‘aims not at a departure from out of the world and life into Heaven and Nirvana, but at a change of life and existence. ... The object sought after is not an individual achievement of divine realisation for the sake of the individual, but something to be gained for the earth consciousness... The thing to be gained also is bringing in of the power of consciousness (for Supramental)...’<sup>12</sup> The method taught by Sri Aurobindo for this purpose is Integral Yoga. Though based on older yoga systems as he himself observed, it does not require renunciation. The paths of yoga recommended traditionally – that of knowledge (Jnana), works (Karma), Devotion (Bhakti), self-perfection through meditation (Rajayoga) are all parts of his Integral yoga, but it does not mean that an individual has to practice each of these Yogas separately. The method takes hold of the whole human nature, and is not for the sake of the individual but for the sake of the evolutionary process of all human beings, and all life. The central process of the yoga needs an ‘inner surrender to the working of the divine Shakti’, ‘an opening of the inner mind, vital, physical to the inmost part of us, the psychic and opening upwards to what is above the mind’ (quoted in Heehs 1999: xxviii). Aurobindo had firm faith in the continuation of the evolutionary process of all life towards a spiritual destiny. It is an evolution not in physical terms, but especially in spiritual terms, under which human beings will be more organised, more complete, more free, and with heightened consciousness of unity of life and the divine. The coming age was the Spiritual Age, according to him. His *The Life Divine*, first published in 1939-40, gives a full exposition of his philosophy of spiritual destiny of humanity. His epic poem *Savitri* is a metaphorical and poetic counterpart of *The Life Divine*.

Another prominent mystic of the modern phase of Hinduism is **Ramana Maharshi** (1879-1950), known as Venkataramana when he was a teenager. When he was only a sixteen years old school boy in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, he suddenly underwent a mystical experience of the imperishable nature of his self, and its being unrelated to his body, the mind and the personality. Though many in India have gone through such an experience, it used to be purely temporary, but in Venkataraman’s case the experience remained ‘permanent and irreversible’ (Godman 1992: 1). This experience was with him to the very end. After he was diagnosed with cancer and it had progressed, he was asked if it pained. He replied that his body experienced pain like anyone else’s, but his mind was not on it and was in a state of bliss (Osborne 1954: 181). Being a *Jeevan Mukta* (liberated even while living), he was always in a state of bliss, compassion and tenderness, and what is more he could impart peace of mind and solace to his visitors through his mere glance and silent communication. His devotees believe that his Ashram at Tiruvannamalai has the power to impart this peace of mind and solace even now, after his death. He wrote very little and his teachings were in the form of dialogues which have been preserved by his devotees, and published by Sri Ramanashram, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu. His silence was more articulate in conveying his subtle philosophy and teaching than words, as experienced by his devotees. They called him as *Jnani* (one who knows) and *Bhagavan* (Divine/God). But he was eloquent and effective even when he communicated in words. For example, he explained: “The body is like a banana leaf on which all kinds of delicious food have been served. After we have eaten the food from it do we take the leaf and preserve it?” (quoted by Osborne 1954: 184). He also used parables to explain subtle points of philosophy. His famous parable is that of the ten fools crossing a river. On reaching the other side, they counted themselves to ensure that all of them reached the shore. But each

one counted all except himself, reaching the conclusion that only nine reached safely and one was drowned. This was the result of a completely extrovert awareness that excluded the self. He used the parable as a prelude to his teaching the path of self-enquiry.

Ramana Maharshi taught a simple and direct form of Advaita (non-dualism), which was the basis for the path to liberation that he recommended. The path consists of shedding the false sense of ego and identification with body and mind, and starting a self-enquiry into 'Who am I?' Then it leads to non-personal and all-inclusive awareness of 'Self' or 'God' (Godman 1992: 8-9). The experience of this Self is the attainment of Jnana or knowledge, which is also Bliss. Misery in the world arises because of false consciousness of ego. Moksha or liberation according to him is 'getting rid of non-existent misery and attaining the bliss which is always there' (Osborne 1954: 185). 'Mukti [or Moksha] is not to be gained in the future. It is there for even here and now' (quoted in Godman 1992: 19). For those finding the path of Self-Enquiry difficult, he recommends unreserved surrender to God (in a personal concept). In either path renouncing the World is not necessary according to him. He actively participated in Ashram work along with devotees and took personal care of the Ashram guests. He had a great sense of equality. He made no difference between VIP guests and others. All were treated alike with respect and compassion. This was Advaita in practice. He used to say that a Jnani treats others with equality, has compassion for all and forgiveness for the wicked, quoting from Patanjali's Yogasutras (1:37) (Godman 1992: 40). Ramana Maharshi was not a 'Reformer' in a historical sense of the term, but was indeed a 'Reformer' in the sense that he helped his devotees to reform themselves by shedding their ego and becoming kind and compassionate to all. He represented and reflected continuity and enduring essence of Hinduism that is both ancient and modern.

Another example of this continuity is **Swami Ramdas** (1884-1963). He was a modern mystic who could convey his thoughts and teaching in chaste and lucid English as well as in Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada and Konkani (his mother tongue). He wrote, however, only in English. He was born as Padukone Vitthal Rao in Kanhangad, then a part of South Kanara, presently in Kasargod district of North Kerala. He got a diploma in textile manufacture, worked in mills, ran his business, but he had no sense of satisfaction from these activities. His father, Balakrishna, whom Swami Ramdas regarded as Guru, gave him the mantra for all his life – 'Om Sri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram'. Chanting it ecstatically and musically, he found relief and great sense of joy. The inner call became irresistible in 1921 and he set off literally 'In Quest of God', which eventually was to become the title of his first work. Going to Srirangam, he bathed in the Kaveri, cast off his clothes, covered himself with orange robes, and took three vows: (a) I am no more Vitthal Rao; (b) this body is servant of Ram, and shall always be in the service of Ram; (c) all women are mothers to me. He started calling himself in the third person as Ramdas (servant of Ram). He then went to Ramana Maharshi and received his Grace. The Maharshi told him through his 'dr̥shṭi' (glance) – 'be filled with joy', and he was. A smiling, benign and compassionate expression never left Ramdas since then. He stayed there for 21 days and under the guidance of Ramana Maharshi, he realised the Universal Reality of Ram, and basic Unity of Reality. He went to many places and met Yogis and Sadhaks. At the bidding of Siddharudha Swami of Hubli who had a great reputation then, he came to Mangalore, but did not stay with his relatives. He went to Kadiri Hills near Mangalore, stayed in a cave there performing severe austerities. It was

here he wrote his first work - *In Quest of God*. Later, he wrote three more books – *In the Vision of God*, *God Experience*, and *Swami Ramdas on Himself*, all published by Anandashram at Kanhangad. Anandashram (translated as a spiritual centre of bliss) was started by him in 1931 with the help of Mother Krishnabai (1903-1989) and other devotees. It has continued to be a renowned centre for disseminating the message of peace, love and compassion, combined with social service. Swami Ramdas said Ram is everywhere and serving humanity was serving Ram. For him, Ram was not the king of Ayodhya as such. He was the same Rama to whom Kabir and Gandhiji were devoted, - formless, Nirguna, and yet compassionate. Constant chanting of Ram-naam or the Rama mantra, with total egoless surrender, was the way of realising God or Ram. A God-realised person sees the unity of Godhead behind all diversities, enjoys bliss and extends it to all others with love, compassion, pure heart and with no ego at all. Swami Ramdas was an illustration of this ancient truth.<sup>13</sup>

No account of Swami Ramdas would be complete without referring to the role of **Mother Krishnabai** (1903-89). She had a religious bent of mind from childhood and was married off as a teen. Widowed at the tender age of 20, she decided to go to Swami Ramdas at Kanhangad, whom she regarded as her spiritual father and Guru, and called him as Papa. He gave her the mantra of Raam-naam and allowed her to stay with him, though with hesitation because of her young age. She in turn took good care of him and did all the household chores as spiritual service to God himself, attended Papa's discourses and collective chanting of Raam-naam. Papa was impressed with her purity of heart and spirituality and guided her in attaining the highest stage of Yogic ascent of connecting to the all-encompassing Consciousness, the Sat-Chit-Ananda. Even after her spiritual realisation, she remained busy with taking care of Papa, and household chores. She shares the credit for starting Anandashram equally with Papa and played the important role in looking after the guests of the Ashram. That is how she became the Mother too. She was an embodiment of love, compassion, generosity and humility. Being very unassuming by nature, she refused to be regarded as Guru even after Papa passed away. She would urge followers to listen to the taped chanting of Raam-naam by Papa and take it as initiation to a path of spirituality. Neither Mother Krishnabai nor her Papa (and Guru) initiated anyone into *Sanyasa*. She used to discourage it by urging aspirants not to give up household and worldly responsibilities. She also made it clear that she did not have any separate teachings of her own and what she said was Papa's teaching. But several intellectuals including foreign scholars used to interact with her on matters of high philosophy and return with satisfaction. (Satchidananda 1991).

**Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj** (1897-1981) is an interesting example of a mystic who came from a socially unenviable background, and yet attracted several elite in spiritual search including seekers from abroad. In terms of his teachings and philosophy he comes close to Ramana Maharishi though he did not set up any ashram of his own nor did he get as much renown. Heehs includes him in his list of twelve prominent mystics of modern India, and gives a sketch of his life and extracts from his teachings (Heehs 2002: 549-63). Maharaj did not write any book and he did not know English. He spoke only in Marathi, but his teachings are available in English translated from the recorded talks and dialogues. A compilation of his teachings was brought out by Maurice Frydman in 1973, revised, enlarged and edited later by Sudhakar Dikshit in 1976, which has gone into further editions and reprints (Frydman and Dikshit, 1984). This was followed by some more books on the teachings of Maharaj (Balsekar & Dikshit 1987; Balsekar 1984; Dunn 1994).

By the time Maharaj's fame as a mystic spread and attracted admirers and devotees, his consciousness was identified so firmly with the Divine that the details of his earlier life were known only from relatives and friends who knew him before. His earlier name was Maruti. He was born in a poor peasant's family in rural Maharashtra. Unable to eke out living, his father came to Mumbai (then Bombay) to work as a domestic servant and went back to a village in Ratnagiri district to work as a petty farmer. Maruti was not given any formal education, and assisted his father in farm work, tending cattle and doing odd jobs. He received some informal religious education from a Brahmin friend of his father in the village. His father died when he was only eighteen, leaving behind his widow, four sons and two daughters. Unable to support himself and the family in the village, he followed his elder brother to Bombay and took to petty trading, selling *bidis* (poor man's hand made cigarettes) and such small things. He earned enough in this business to have his own family.

Till then he was like any other lower middle class man, though he kept alive his interest in spiritual search through daily worship. The break came when he was introduced by a friend to Sri Siddheshwar Maharaj, a Guru in the Inchageri lineage of *Nath Sampradaya* (to which philosopher Dr R D Ranade also belonged). The Guru gave him a *mantra* and instructions on meditation on the self and 'within three years, he was liberated from his ego-personality and united with the *atman* or Self' (Heehs 2002: 549). Recalling what his Guru said to him, Maharaj observed later: 'My Guru before he died told me: "Believe me, you are the Supreme Reality. Don't doubt my words, don't disbelieve me. I am telling you the truth – act on it." I could not forget his words and by not forgetting – I have realized' (quoted in Heehs 2002: 550-1). Even after his realisation of the Self, he continued his normal life, plied his trade, looked after his family and wore the same simple Indian outfit of a householder as before (and not of an ascetic). By the end of 1950s his fame as an unusual holy man spread and visitors came to speak to him and listen to him. He constructed only a small loft above his room – not an Ashram, to receive and talk to them. Though regarded as a great Advaita Vedantin, he knew neither Sanskrit nor English. He did not quote from the *Gita* and the Upanishads. He did not think much of book knowledge for spiritual achievements, and laid stress on self-effort, striving for personal spiritual experience of realising the Self. His teachings have thus the mark of authenticity based on personal realisation of the self. A person of little formal education explaining high metaphysics is unthinkable except in terms of his authentic spiritual experience.

His basic teaching is: 'All I can say truly is: "I am", all else is inference. But the inference has become a habit. ... The sense "I am" is the manifestation of a deeper cause, which you may call Self, God, Reality or by any other name' (quoted in Frydman and Dikshit 1984: 199). To a question 'What am I?', he replied: 'It is enough to know what you are not. You need not know what you are. ... You cannot meaningfully say "this is what I am". ... Yet, without you there can be neither perception nor imagination. ... Let go your attachment to the unreal, and real will swiftly and smoothly step into its own. Stop imagining yourself being or doing this and that and the realisation that you are the source and heart of all will dawn upon you. With this will come great love which is not the choice or predilection, nor attachment, but a power which makes all things love-worthy and lovable' (*ibid*: 2-3).

**Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** (1888-1975), though not a mystic like Sri Aurobindo or Raman Maharshi, was a philosopher *par excellence* and made a valuable contribution by interpreting Hinduism

and defending it against unreasonable criticism. He was educated in a Christian institution in India and ‘felt a continual criticism of Hinduism as a religion by his teachers and Christian missionaries’. (Minor 1991b: 422). The criticism was two-fold, he reflected; that Hinduism was intellectually incoherent and ethically unsound. On the other hand, Swami Vivekananda’s works ‘gave him the confidence that ‘the Hindu religion’ was essentially other than which was portrayed in the criticisms of his teachers’ (Minor 1991-b: 422-3). He showed that Hinduism was essentially rationalistic, humanistic and ethically oriented. Not only did he make his defence intellectually convincing, but he also did more. In the process he gave an interpretation that reflected a synthesis of social concerns of Gandhiji and Swami Vivekananda, on the one hand and Sri Aurobindo’s Vedanta, on the other. He did this, drawing from the rich tradition of Indian philosophy as contained in the Vedas, Upanishads and the *Gita*. He will be remembered for this contribution much more than for the fact that he was the second President of India during 1962-67, an uneasy and critical period when India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) passed away.

Like Sri Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan interpreted Vedanta in a way that did not involve rejection of the phenomenal world. But unlike the former, he did not reject Shankara’s version of Advaita; he only interpreted it in a positive way instead of considering it as a negation of the phenomenal world. This also meant that Vedanta was able to solve ethical problems, and could not be interpreted as amoral. Radhakrishnan affirmed Advaita Vedanta because in its view all humanity shared the divine manifestation, which provided a basis for social equity. For him, Vedanta was ‘not a mystical flight into other-worldly experience, but a rational system of thought deserving the name “philosophy” ’ (Minor 1991–b: 424).

Radhakrishnan’s *An Idealist View of Life* based on lectures given in England during 1929-30, and published in 1932 has some similarity in its substance with Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine*, first published serially in *Arya* during 1914-19 and published with some additions in 1939-40. As in *The Life Divine*, *An Idealist view of Life* also shows a confidence in the spiritual destiny of humanity to an ideal end of realizing the ultimate nature of reality. However, there is a difference in treatment, reflecting a difference in approach. *The Life Divine* is based on a mystical understanding of the author, while *An Idealist view of Life* is based on analysis, logic and perception of a philosopher. It may be more helpful to first go through Radhakrishnan’s work, before going through Sri Aurobindo’s.

While Radhakrishnan explained through logic and convincing interpretation how Hinduism is consistent with an ethical system, some great modern religious leaders demonstrated how in practice Hinduism is basically ethical and has the power to change the character of persons to a higher moral level which can help them to reach their spiritual goals. Among them are Gandhiji, Swaminarayan (both discussed above already), Srila Prabhupada and Brahmakumaris.

**A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami** (1896-1977), known later as Srila Prabhupada, was born as Abhay Charan De in Calcutta.<sup>14</sup> Being religious in temperament, he studied scriptures in depth and was attracted to Vaishnava Philosophy of Chaitanya. He edited a magazine, *Back to Godhead*, devoted to spreading Krishna Consciousness. The pharmaceutical market in Allahabad was a source of livelihood for his family but he did not seem to be doing well in it. The break with his family came when his wife sold

his copy of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* for biscuits! ‘Abhay was shocked... In a mood of stark determination, he left his family and business’ (Goswami 2002: xxvii) and devoted all his time to religious work thereafter. He took Sanyasa at Vrindavan, taking the new name of Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami. His Guru Srila Bhaktisiddhanta asked him to go abroad and spread Krishna consciousness there. It was thus that he left for New York in 1965 at the age of 69. What he achieved thereafter in his last 22 years of his life was monumental both literally and metaphorically.

Bhaktivedanta Swami struggled almost alone for quite some time. He started his work at a storefront in New York chanting Krishna’s name. His mantra to everyone till the end was simply – ‘*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare; Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare*’. His musical chanting and dancing with complete abandon and ecstasy attracted derelicts and others too. Soon he gathered a fairly large following. The remarkable feature of this was that a bulk of his following consisted of those who were addicted to drugs, had lost the meaning and purpose of their life and were desperately seeking an alternative. Krishna Consciousness worked like magic on them and led to a complete transformation of their lives. While Swaminarayan worked for the moral awakening of people in Gujarat, India, Bhaktivedanta Swami worked for the uplift of derelicts in the West, some of whom were rejected by their own society including their parents and the Church. There were occasions when parents and even policemen brought drug addicts to the Swami on whom he used his simple mantra and transformed their lives. Simultaneously with this work, he edited and translated *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, publishing it in 18 volumes, *Bhagavadgita As It Is*, and *Sri Chaitanya Charitamritam* (9 volumes), apart from many other works too both in English and Bengali. What is more, with the help of his followers, he built 108 temples all over the world, which were magnificent monuments to his remarkable energy and devotion for his cause. These temples have turned out to be centres of not only imparting Krishna consciousness, but also of rendering social service. International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded in 1966 in New York – within a year of his reaching the USA and was developed with care by him till his very end. ISKCON is continuing his work now with the same zeal as when he was alive, imparting both religious education and social service. For example, ISKCON temple in Bangalore which was providing midday meals to over 50,000 students in the city (as in April 2004), is now (December 2012) covering over 1.3 million school children across nine Indian states in 19 locations through an NGO sponsored by it (Akshyapatra Foundation). This has induced many poor families to send their children for schooling and has improved school attendance.

A prominent instance of authentic continuation of the Bhakti Movements of the medieval age, but in a modern setting, is the *Sant Mat* of **Radha Soami Satsang**. They teach a simple philosophy of love to God and to fellow human beings and, a method of realising God which any sincere seeker can follow. They deplore caste distinctions and ritualism and emphasise dignity of manual labour. They do not encourage renunciation and asceticism, but stress that one has to fly to God using both wings – involvement in worldly activity *and* spiritualism. They place a great emphasis on *Naam* or *Shabd* or sacred sound, which energises the soul and leads it to union with the Lord. They stress the importance of a living Guru for guidance, who can initiate a disciple with *naam* for *japa*. Apart from *Naam-japa*, the followers believe in compassion and service to others through manual work (*Karseva*). Satsang has played an important role in moral awakening, and its followers are models of politeness, culture

and compassion. The leaders of the movement came from the peasant communities and not from the priestly caste and the followers encompass all castes and communities. Initially gaining dominance in North India, particularly UP, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, it has spread to other parts of India and many other countries too. It is one of the eminent institutions of 'export' of Indian spiritualism. The sect was founded by **Seth Shiv Dayal Singh** (1818-78), born in Agra. He took to the study of scriptures – Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, early in his life and started practising meditation. By 1861, he developed a method that could be practised by Sadhus as well as householders by which they could reunite the soul with the Lord, and called his teachings as *Sant Mat*. It also became known as *Rādha* (Soul) Soami (Lord) path. A great mystic, he became known simply as Swami Ji. Though the movement split into several branches subsequently, its common elements are summarised by Juergensmeyer (1987: 338-44): belief in Nirguna God, interior path of spirituality (shunning rituals and sacrifices), necessity of a Guru, and 'Fellowship of the true' or *Satsang*. None of these elements is incompatible with Hinduism of any phase. On the contrary, it has included them all in every phase. Only, Hinduism did not make them mandatory for all but left choice to the followers.

A similar work of moral and spiritual awakening is being carried out by the **Brahmakumaris** too, women ascetics of an international organisation, with headquarters in Mt. Abu, Gujarat, and branches all over India and many countries of the world. It is an unusual organisation, as it is led by women-saints. The full title of the organisation is a mouthful – Prajapita Brahmakumaris Ishwariya Vishwavidyalaya, suggesting it is basically an educational institution. But it is mainly spiritual and moral education which they impart, both directly and through other educational institutions including Universities. It was started by **Dada Lekhraj** (1876-1969), who hailed from Sindh, Pakistan. The institution had to move to India after the Partition. Though they initially tried to remain there, there was no alternative but to move in 1950.

The Brahmakumaris are a remarkable instance of empowered women, working for moral and spiritual uplift of people. They do not cater only to the elite, but also reach out to the underdog. They visit prisons to work for the moral awakening of the prison inmates, and teach them meditation and human values. They reach slum-dwellers, truck drivers, autorikshaw (three-wheeler cabs of India) drivers and others, and help them also in a similar manner. They believe in the power of Raja Yoga for spiritual uplift of humankind. They start by showing how Raja Yoga is effective even in mundane activities through relaxation and improving concentration and efficiency, and then work for spiritual awakening. They regularly observe *Rakhi* or *Rakshabandhan* day (when a sister ties a colourful and decorated thread – Rakhi - around the wrist of her brother, who in turn gives her a present and his protection). The Brahmakumaris tie the Rakhi around the wrist of 'brothers', who may range from slum dwellers to Babus in government offices and students, and ask for a present in the form of giving up all vices – drinking, drugs, smoking, taking bribes etc. It is the sisters who offer their brothers sweets at the end of the ceremony. This is only one of the ways – a popular way of their activities of moral awakening.<sup>15</sup>

The ancient ascetic order has continued into the modern phase, covering both men and women. The modern ascetics are, however, as much outward looking as inward looking and are outside the frame work of caste based *Mathas*. They stand for abolition of caste discrimination and for equality. While

they renounce a personal family life, they actively – not just conceptually – adopt the world itself as their family in the tradition of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. The modern ascetics of Hinduism have set up branches not only in India but also in many other countries, and some of them are as much popular abroad as in India. The trend that began with Swami Vivekananda has only gathered momentum and shows no signs of slowing down.

Another eminent ascetic is **Swami Sivananda** (1887-1963), his full name being Swami Sivananda Saraswati. Born as Kuppuswamy Iyer near Pattamadai near the southern tip of India in Tamil Nadu, he is known to have descended from the family of Appayya Dikshitar, a great Sanskrit scholar of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. A bright scholar and a devotee of Siva since his childhood, Kuppuswamy enjoyed chanting *bhajans* and *keertans*. He also flouted caste rules with impunity and befriended the then untouchables. He accepted one of them as a Guru from whom he learnt fencing! He graduated from a college in Trichinapally in 1905. He then studied medicine at Tanjore. Defying caste norms against crossing the seas and facing family opposition, he left for Malaysia in 1913 to practise medicine. He enjoyed the job of relieving human suffering and did it with dedication and sympathy. He became popular as a hard working, kind and selfless doctor. He even gave food and money to poor patients. His cook there became his close disciple at Rishikesh when he set up his Ashram there. He treated all people with equality and respect even before becoming an ascetic. Even while he was busy and became affluent, his inner urge was for a spiritual life. He studied the Upanishads and the *Gita*. His inner call made him leave Malaysia and his practice there, come back to India, and become ‘a wandering mendicant’. It was in Rishikesh in 1924 that he was initiated into *Sanyasa* by Paramahansa Viswananda Saraswati, and became Swami Sivananda Saraswati. He opened a free dispensary at Rishikesh particularly for the poor, integrating his spiritual path with path of service to humanity. He also did some travelling.

By 1929, he began giving lectures and also writing on spiritual matters. During the next 34 years of his life, he wrote some 340 books and pamphlets. His first book was *The Practice of Yoga* (1929). He wrote mostly in English. Aghananda Bharati has criticised modern Hindu Gurus for writing in English rather than in Indian languages (quoted in Miller 1991: 93 & 111). But Swami Sivananda felt that English has now replaced Sanskrit as a pan-Indian language, and that what is written in English will eventually percolate down to most people. By 1933, he became well known and gathered a lot of disciples and followers.

He started the **Divine Life Society** in 1936 to publish books and magazines, conduct seminars and conferences and spread spiritual education. Apart from his exhaustive commentaries on the *Gita*, he wrote *Mind: Its Mysteries and Control*, a detailed commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, all of which are regarded as very scholarly and insightful works. His works also taught tolerance and fellowship with other religions, quoting a Bahai metaphor: ‘a garden displaying a richly ordered variety of plants is far more enjoyable than a garden consisting of one type of flower’ (Miller 1991: 97). Within Hinduism also, he avoided narrow sectarianism, emphasising that Hinduism has a place for rich diversity and there can be no comparison to decide which sect is inferior or superior. He extended this liberalism to other religions too.

He did not ignore social service in spite of his busy spiritual activities. He upgraded the medical facilities in the Ashram, improved its infrastructure and enlarged the manpower to cater to a larger

number of patients. The Sivananda Ashram not only treats lepers but also rehabilitates them. It has started three 'model' villages for lepers, who are taught to weave cloth for export markets (Miller 1991: 98). In 1948, he started the College of Yoga and Vedanta, which later became a Yoga -Vedanta Forest Academy, an unusual university where the graduates become 'potent instruments for good wherever they go ... [and] competent to establish similar spiritual centres in different parts of the world ...' (Miller 1991: 98). Basically, it was meant to train ascetic disciples of any sect in Hinduism and related religions in different branches like theoretical studies in religion, practical paths of God realization like Yoga, and research. The theoretical studies cover not only classical Hindu philosophy, but also comparative religion and ethics. There is no caste discrimination in admissions. The only qualification is aptitude for a spiritual path. Miller observes: "Swami Sivananda drew to him many dynamic and talented young men who were later to become gurus in their own right..." (*Ibid*: 101). They included women too, one of whom Dr Chellamma, MBBS, DO, became one of his close ascetic disciples (*Ibid*: 102 -3). He gathered many lay (non-ascetic) disciples too who were also helpful in running many branches of the Divine Life Society in many parts of India and the world.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of his tremendous achievements, Swami Sivananda was humble and discouraged his followers from calling him as 'Avatar', 'Satguru' or 'Bhagavan'. With all his spirituality, he was an extrovert balancing social activities with his inward realisation. He focussed on developing a strong organisational basis for properly training ascetics, so that they are 'professional' in a good sense of the term in the world of spirituality, which was much needed for Hinduism. This contribution was, of course, in addition to his monumental scholastic output in interpreting Hinduism in the modern context.

An important feature of the modern phase of Hinduism is the 'export' of its spiritual wisdom, particularly to the West. The trend began with Max Müller and Swami Vivekananda, whose work has been mentioned earlier in this chapter. Next spiritual leader was **Swami Ram Tirtha** (1873-1906) from Punjab. Though born in a poor family, he came up through his brilliance as a scholar and became a professor of mathematics. An inner urge led him to become an ascetic, renouncing a lucrative academic career. After a phase of severe penance in the Himalayas, he took to teaching religion and philosophy. He was a profound scholar both in Sanskrit and Persian, apart, of course, in English. He lectured in USA, Egypt and Japan. A collection of his speeches is published under the title of '*In the Woods of God Realisation*' in seven volumes. He gave a practical interpretation of Advaita Vedanta, which became popular both in India and USA. He taught that man is master of his own destiny and there could be nothing like eternal damnation. Like Swami Vivekananda, he was an inspiring orator, but died even younger at the age of only 33 before he could realize his dreams. Like other teachers of modern Hinduism, he too preached a religion of love and service, and taught respect for other religions.

A very eminent name in exporting spiritual wisdom and Yoga of India is that of **Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda** (1893-1952), who became a celebrity by bringing together the peoples of India and the USA like perhaps no one else. Unlike the Swaminarayana movement which confined itself mainly to Indians, that too Gujaratis, Yoganand's movement covered mainly the Americans themselves, like Srila Prabhupad's ISKCON movement which was to follow later. Yogananda preached Kriya Yoga and Advaita Vedanta. Born in Gorakhpur in a Bengali family, Yogananda's original name was Mukunda Lal Ghosh. Right from childhood he was spiritually inclined and was accepted as a disciple of Swami Sri Yukteshar Giri, who taught him Kriya Yoga. Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* has turned out

to be the most popular autobiography, next only to that of Mahatma Gandhi. Originally published in 1946, it has gone into many prints and has never been out of print. Reading it, one wonders whether in the twentieth century India, there could have been so many astounding yogis, for Yogananda has narrated his spiritual encounters with many of them and their miracles. Yogananda himself, however, was not inclined to be 'flamboyant' like Shirdi Sai Baba in showing his power for miracles. But he proved his power of Yoga in death. He had declared that he would not die in bed, but with his boots on and while being active as ever. He died after giving his speech at a banquet in honour of Indian ambassador B.R.Sen in 1952.

His first trip to the USA was in 1920 mainly at the instance of his Guru. To carry on the work of imparting spiritual education and the knowledge of Yoga, he established Yogoda Satsang Society of India at Ranchi in India and Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles in the USA (in 1935). They have since branched out all over India and the world. Yogananda claims that though there are several paths to have God-Consciousness and enjoy Bliss, Kriya Yoga is the easiest and quickest. 'In contrast to the slow, uncertain "bullock cart" theological path to God, Kriya Yoga may justly be called the "airplane" route' (Yogananda 1975: 242). However, Yogananda also insists that Yoga is not a question of mere technique. Real Yoga is one where all selfish desires are consumed in the fuel of love divine (*ibid*: 245). All humans are engaged in an eternal quest for God, whether they are conscious of it or not, says Yogananda. There is restlessness till there is fulfillment of that quest. What he did was to teach practical ways, which a busy human in modern age also can follow and find inner place. The inner peace also goes with outer peace, because such a person has nothing but compassion and love for everyone else.

**Swami Chinmayananda** (1916-93) (Swamiji here) could perceive that the emergence of an English speaking middle class and intelligentsia was a positive phenomenon in terms of its role in breaking down caste barriers and the old narrow and superficial view of religion confined to laws of purity and pollution, and its support to a more scientific outlook to life based on reason. He also could see that it had a darker side too, which needed correction. On the one hand, it was getting alienated from its cultural roots and tending to be even amoral; on the other hand, it was also getting more and more selfish or at least self-centred to the neglect of its social responsibilities particularly towards the deprived and disadvantaged. Swamiji, therefore, decided to devote his life to the moral and spiritual education of this middleclass consciously, and felt that if it is kept on the right path, the whole country also would be on the right path. He performed this role tirelessly, effectively and with love till the end both in India and abroad. Though 'export' of spiritualism was not a goal of his, he contributed to it nevertheless, incidentally and naturally.

Swamiji was born in an influential and affluent family as P. Balakrishnan Menon in Ernakulam, Kerala. It was also a religious family, observing various Hindu rituals, and also devoted to a yogi called Chettambi Swamigal (1853-1924). Chettambi Swamigal was venerated by all. An interesting incident of his life reveals the moral fervour of the sage. A tax collector known for dishonesty, invited Swamigal at his house for lunch seeking his blessings (perhaps as expiation for sins). Swamigal agreed but he said he would have to bring some of his disciples also. On the agreed day, Swamigal came alone, and told the official that his disciples would come a little later, and the plates be made ready. When the

plates (banana leaves) were filled with rice, curries, vegetables and other delicacies, the Swamigal went out for a while and shouted for his 'disciples' to come in. To the host's surprise, a pack of stray dogs came in, each taking a seat in front of a plate, and started eating quietly. The Swamigal explained to the shocked official that the dogs were tax collectors in their previous life, and due to their dishonest Karma and greed, were reborn as dogs! The wages of dishonesty had to be paid without fail, he added (see, Patchen 2003: 112-3). It is not known if the official learnt a lesson, but it is known that Swami Chinmayananda imbibed the same moral fervour and impish humour.

As a youth, Balakrishnan joined the Lucknow University for education, but left it to join freedom movement in 1942. He was jailed and when down with typhoid, was dumped on a roadside in Delhi (to avert death in prison). An Indian Christian lady picked him up though he was a stranger and nursed him. He later became a journalist, returned to Lucknow University and completed his MA in English Literature with Honours. As a journalist, he was a firebrand socialist and an agnostic. He started writing under the pseudonym of *Mochi* – Street Cobbler, to express a poor man's point of view, bitterly criticising the Establishment for neglecting the interests of the poor. Till about 1947, he showed no interest in religion and spiritualism. The Divine Life Society of Swami Sivananda at Rishikesh aroused Balakrishnan's curiosity as a journalist. He wanted to find out for himself what this spiritualism was about, and do a 'story' for his periodical, - if possible, 'an inside story' calling the bluff. He initially planned to spend only a day or two, but extended it by a week, and then a month. He did not find Swami Sivananda a hermit sitting in meditative seclusion. He was terribly active, writing, preaching, chanting bhajans, carrying tea or food to guests, and taking care of patients in his hospital. No task was too humble for him. Soon Swami Sivananda's teachings began to inspire him, and he started helping in Ashram's activities and functions, ultimately the process culminated in Balakrishnan requesting the senior Swami to accept him as a disciple and initiate him as a sanyasi! Swami Sivananda was not in a hurry. He asked Balakrishnan to continue his work as a journalist and make up his mind and consult his parents. At last at the age of 33, Balakrishnan Menon became Swami Chinmayananda, initiated by Swami Sivananda.<sup>17</sup>

Swamiji considered his mission to be one of converting Hindus to Hinduism! He felt that the educated Hindus had lost their roots, and the religion was falsely identified with superficial rules. He regretted that the priestly class hardly played a helpful role, mechanically chanting mantras and performing rituals without explaining their significance to people. He wanted to give back the rich tradition of Vedanta to the people. Swami Sivananda heartily approved of his plan and told him – 'Go, roar like Vivekananda' (Patchen 2003: 157). And that is what he did.

Unlike Swami Dayananda Saraswati (of Arya Samaj) who emphasised only the Vedas, Swami Chinmayananda put more emphasis on the teachings of the Upanishads, the *Gita*, the *Brahmasutras* and also Stotras (Sanskrit poems in praise of God). He started organising what he called *Jnana Yajnas*, - series of lectures on a particular theme, extending to several weeks. The inspiring lectures of Swamiji attracted tens of thousands of people who sat silently to listen to him. What attracted them most was his lucid exposition of even intricate ideas, ability to actively illustrate to explain a difficult point, and what is more, apply the ancient philosophy to solve problems of day-to-day life. He said with humility that he had no original ideas, and he only explained what the Upanishads and the *Gita* said, or what

the great Shankara said. More than anyone else perhaps, he popularised Shankara's numerous writings, known for depth as well as sheer poetry. Like several other gurus, Swamiji has also a detailed insightful commentary and translation of the *Gita – The Holy Geeta*, published by Chinmaya Mission, which has gone into many reprints, and has never been out of print. He brought out parallels between the teaching of the *Gita* and the teaching of other religions. He explained how the *Gita* made a revolutionary breakthrough by interpreting *Yajnas*, not as rituals, but as spiritual endeavour. He emphasised how the *Gita* gave importance to the welfare of people through the concept of *Lokasangraha*, and how serving humanity was itself a great spiritual work, a great Yajna. Similarly, he applied the concepts of Vedanta to contemporary problems of self-improvement and showed how moral, material and spiritual progress were closely linked to each other (in his *Vedanta: The Science of Life* in three volumes, 1979-82). Swamiji was also a great researcher; he brought out from near oblivion several publications in Sanskrit like the *Ashtavakra Geeta*, *Shri Rama Geeta* and *Kapila Geeta*.

Swami Chinmayananda did not believe in the caste system and ridiculed attempts to view religion in such superficial terms. Nor did he believe in any instant techniques of salvation and bliss. Once on an American tour, he was asked what his 'technique' was. He replied, it was to stand on his nose and meditate, but that he did it only in private! Then he turned to them seriously and said: 'If you are looking for short cuts to spirituality and instant psychedelic happenings, you have made a mistake ...', and asked them not to come to him! (Patchen 2003: 237). He similarly ridiculed the tendency to regard spiritual power in terms of capacity to turn out miracles. For him spirituality meant a lifetime effort to be morally upright, compassionate, ego-less and helpful to others.

Inspired by Swamiji's ideals and philosophy, his disciples started a Society in 1953 which subsequently became the Chinmaya Mission. Its aim was to reach the message of Swamiji to all corners of the country and even the World, and even more importantly to provide training to spiritual or religious leaders and to do social service. It has now become a worldwide organisation with hundreds of centres, and is doing excellent work. The Karnataka Chinmaya Seva Trust, for example, is doing exemplary work not only by explaining Vedanta to laymen in different parts of the state through a decentralized network of sub-centres and starting centres for children's moral and personality growth, but also by running full-fledged schools and a large sophisticated hospital in Bangalore providing free medical care to the poor. The Trust also provides professional training to priests, irrespective of caste. It is not the aim of the Mission to convert non-Hindus to Hinduism. When some Non-Hindus approached Swami Chinmayananda offering to embrace Hinduism, he told them that the values of Vedanta are universal and one does not have to convert to Hinduism to follow them (Thapan 2005: xv). In taking such a stand, the Swamiji was not alone – several other modern leaders of Hinduism were approached similarly – Swami Sivananda, Ramana Maharshi, Sri Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi to name only a few. If they wanted, they could have converted hundreds of thousands to Hinduism. But that would have been inconsistent with the basic preaching of Hinduism that every religion has the potential to provide spiritual solace and can also be open to learn from others. This was not because Hinduism was an exclusive closed door club.

Among the eminent people inspired by the Swamiji and his philosophy of service is **Swami Dayananda Saraswati** (to be distinguished from the founder of the Arya Samaj of the same name).

This Swami is from the South, born as Natarajan in Tamil Nadu on August 15, 1930. He started as a journalist for a religious magazine, as he had inclination towards religion and philosophy from childhood. Later he joined the Indian Air Force to train as a pilot, but his religious inclination prevailed and he is said to have left the Air Force within six months. Soon he was attracted by Swami Chinmayanada's lectures and started working for the Chinmaya Mission. He was initiated in to *sanyasa* by the Swamiji in 1962. After a stint of editing the Mission's magazine, *Tapovan Prasad* at Mumbai, he left for Rishikesh in 1963 to study Vedanta and for advanced spiritual *sādhana*. He lived there for three years. After this, he started working on his own, travelling widely and giving discourses. He established four centres for the teaching of the Vedanta philosophy, *Arsha Vidya Gurukulams*, – at Coimbatore, Nagpur, Rishikesh, and Saylorsburg in Pennsylvania (USA). He believes that Vedanta is a *Pramana*, a means of knowledge and not a given or fixed system of thought. The significance of so treating Vedanta is the freedom to give up rigidities in thought and to apply Vedanta to new situations and problems. That is how he has emerged as one of the most creative interpreters of Vedanta, as reflected in about 67 books by him. He is a prolific writer and a deep, analytical as well as holistic thinker. He also believes in religious freedom but this freedom also includes freedom to resist deceptive or aggressive attempts to supplant a religion. The Supreme is One of course, but it does not mean that there has to be only one religion in the world. There is scope and need for diversity, and for enriching mutual understanding between religions. Swami Dayananda has taken several important steps in this direction. He organised the first Hindu-Jewish Meet at Delhi in 2007. The second such meet at Jerusalem in 2008 declared that the Hindus worship One Supreme Being and that theirs is not idolatrous worship. This has helped a better understanding about Hinduism among Semitic religions. Swami Dayananda has been supporting and participating similar joint Meets of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Even more distinctive contribution by Swami Dayananda consists in his starting All-India Movement for Seva (AIM for Seva) in 2000. The aim of this Movement is to reach out to underprivileged sections of people particularly those in far-flung areas in the forests and backward regions, by providing them health care and advice, and what is more, education for their children. At present, the organization has 96 Free Student Homes across 14 states of India, where the children of the poor are housed, fed, clothed and educated with care and affection. AIM for Seva claims that compared to the national average of 62 per cent drop-out rate, the drop-out rate in their schools is below one per cent, and the percentage of passing in the Board Examinations is 100 percent. This is remarkable because these schools/Student Homes are mostly in villages on the fringes of forest areas. In addition to providing free general or secular education to the poor, Swami Dayananda has also started separate *Veda Patha-shalas* for training in the study and recitation of the Veda and Agama mantras, so that this precious oral heritage from the ancient times is preserved intact.<sup>18</sup>

A very prominent name among those who took India's traditional spiritual wisdom all over the world, not confined to the West, is **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi** (1918-2008). In less than two decades of his entry on the world spiritual scene, his technique of Transcendental Meditation (known also in its short form as TM) became almost a household word. A Canadian study of 1975 showed that 71 per cent of people of Canada had heard of TM and 21 per cent were attracted.<sup>19</sup> Before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Maharsihi established 1200 centres covering 108 countries of the world, with 40,000

trained teachers to teach TM. According to the information from the web page on Maharishi, about 5 million people have been actively practising TM till date.

Maharishi graduated from Allahabad University with a degree in physics, after which he spent thirteen years with Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, an eminent authority on the Vedic science of consciousness. After this, Maharishi spent two years in the Himalayas to perfect himself as a Yogi. It was only after this long and rigorous preparation, he stepped into the role of a spiritual teacher, a Guru, in 1957, and founded the Transcendental Meditation Movement. In the same year, he also began his first of many tours abroad to teach TM all over the world. He has written several books, which include among others *Bhagavadgita: A New Translation and Commentary with Sanskrit Text*, *The Science of Being and Art of Living*, and *Love and God*.<sup>20</sup>

Maharishi describes TM as ‘a simple, natural programme for the mind, a spontaneous, effortless march of the mind to its own unbounded essence. Through TM, the mind unfolds its potential for unlimited awareness. ... It is not a set of beliefs, a philosophy, a life style, and a religion. It is an experience, a natural technique one practises everyday for fifteen or twenty minutes’ (Juline 1993). The popularity of TM is due both to its extreme simplicity, and also its demonstrated impact. Maharishi says that TM reduces stress, improves health, enriches mental functioning, enhances personal relationships, and increases job productivity and job satisfaction (*ibid*). TM has been an object of scientific research for over thirty years and its beneficial effects have been well documented (*ibid*). It is no surprise that many universities and corporate offices provide for a session to practise TM to enhance the performance as well as the mental well-being of students and employees in many countries of the world. TM has no barriers of religion. It can be practised by any one, irrespective of one’s religion.

According to Maharishi, ‘Expansion of happiness is the purpose of creation and we are all here to enjoy and radiate happiness everywhere’. He has declared that his technique if practised by many more can establish heaven on earth. It can be a major factor in altering attitudes of people to each other and promoting peace, mutual help, accommodation and love. He had reportedly advised President Bush against attacking Iraq, and offered help in making the USA a major influence of peace, progress and amity in the world (*Ibid*). The Maharishi has established Maharishi University of Management in the USA, Japan, and Russia and has introduced a Corporate Revitalisation Program. He has also established – a chain of Vedic universities and centres of Vedic learning to impart ancient wisdom of the Vedas in a modern perspective.

Though not as well known as the Maharishi and his TM, a similar movement focussed on meditation, was started by **Shri Ramachandra Mission**. As with TM, the method of meditation developed by the Mission is open to all, irrespective of caste, creed or gender. It is nonsectarian in nature and universal in appeal. It calls its method as *Sahaja Marga* derived from Raja Yoga, and insists that liberation can be attained in one’s life itself. Meditation awakens one’s dormant spiritual forces and helps the person to transcend time and feel eternity. It makes no sense to search for God outward, for He is within us (Rajagopalachari 2000: esp. 157-75). The Mission insists on a living Guru or at least a Preceptor who has to initiate a person into the method of meditation. It expects utmost devotion on the part of the initiated to the Master (Shri Ramachandraji). However, it permits no ritualistic worship of either the Master or any deity. It has a simple philosophy, - that of love and compassion to all. The Mission was started in 1945 by **Shri Ramachandraji** (1899-1983) of Shahjahanpur in Uttar Pradesh. Being

a householder himself, he did not encourage renunciation or asceticism on the part his followers. He went abroad several times on lecture tours, particularly to Europe. The Mission is now led by his direct disciple, Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari, with headquarters in Chennai. It has centres in many parts of India and abroad too.

The modern phase has thrown up some unconventional Gurus too, the most controversial of whom, carrying the image of an incorrigible rebel, is **Acharya Rajneesh** (1931-1991)(Rajneesh Chandra Mohan), later known as Bhagavan Rajneesh, and then as Osho. He was extremely well read and informed. He tried to put into practice unorthodox ideas which appealed to him in spite of their controversial nature. Very un-Gandhian in some specific respects like views on sex and marriage, he could nevertheless be considered a Gandhian in his fearless pursuit of Truth in his own way. Born to a Jain businessman in Madhya Pradesh, he studied in Jabalpur, and then taught philosophy in two colleges from 1957 to 1967. He soon launched an offensive against all orthodoxies including socialism, which was very much in vogue as a slogan then in India's politics and economy. He attacked Jainism too as masochism, and mocked all dietary prohibitions. He did not spare Mahatma Gandhi either. According to Rajneesh, 'India's whole attitude towards sex, from arranged marriages to the suppression of sexuality in adolescence, to the clandestine affairs of adulterous men, was life denying and perverted'(Mehta 1993:83). He was influenced by the ancient Tantra cult common both to Buddhism and Hinduism, by Vedanta, by Zen Buddhism, and also by modern psychology. Mehta mentions that P D Ouspensky's stress on the kinship between sexual and mystical had a far reaching influence on Rajneesh (*ibid*: 85). Osho authored many books, which are actually compilations of his recorded discourses edited by disciples. The books include several on Vedanta, Zen Buddhism, Bauls, on philosophy in general and his ideas on human problems. They are highly readable, and as much marked by wit and humour as by his rebellious intellect.

The philosophy of Rajneesh is not entirely original, perhaps, not even his practice. According to him, behind all multiplicity in the world, there is only one reality, - void, emptiness, which he also calls as Brahman. He rejects duality between creator and creation. He also accepts the Hindu concepts like transmigration of soul, rebirth and the law of Karma. Like others, particularly Ramana Maharshi, he also thinks that the individual soul remains only so long as there is individualised personal God, that is, until there is self-realisation. Man's problems, according to Rajneesh, are due to ignorance about his true nature, and ignorance of his freedom. Orthodoxy in religions has not at all been very helpful to man in self-realisation. In particular, by condemning sex, religion has made man only more obsessed with sex (*Ibid*: 86-87). It should be remembered, however, that no religion has totally condemned and rejected sex but has only limited it in moral bounds.

While many of the modern Gurus of Hinduism revived and popularised Yoga, Rajneesh did so with Tantra. He explains the difference between Yoga and Tantra. While both aim at union with the Divine, Yoga is a path of struggle and austerity, while Tantra is a path of surrender. Yoga produces pride, while Tantra teaches one to be humble, gentle and loving. Tantra is not concerned with any philosophic quest, but with life, and sex is pre-supposition with life. Thus, sexuality and spirituality are two aspects of one energy. He even compared the sex act with meditation, explaining it in terms of losing one self, surrender. Tantra, he said, is amoral. He hated orthodox morality as he felt it created hypocrisy (Mehta 1993: 88).

Rajneesh also designed several meditation techniques, applicable according to the nature and aptitude of people. He insisted that meditation is not possible until people undid the ‘knots of negativity’ in their bodies, minds and emotions (*ibid*: 90). He employed unconventional methods to undo ‘the knots of negativity’. It was an unwritten rule during his meetings that a disciple narrated a joke at the beginning of the session, followed by an uproar of laughter from all and release of pent up stress. What made Rajneesh controversial and even hated was his alleged advocacy of sex as a means to divine transcendence. The Ashrams he set up in Pune in India and Oregon in the USA became controversial due to the same fear. Probably, he has been very much misunderstood in this. What he attacked was hypocrisy about sex, but he emphasised love more than the physical act of sex. He even said that a couple in deep love does not need sex (Osho 2001: 60). Love may not reject sex, but transcends it. It is love which is nourishing, not sex. He pointed out that what distinguishes humans from animals is not sex, but love (*ibid*: 52). He seemed as much against obsession with sex as hypocrisy about sex. His ideas on family and marriage were also found highly objectionable by the orthodox, as he had observed that family had outgrown its utility. He declared that marriage is a false substitute for love (Osho 2001: 93). Family, he said, even encouraged aggression, competitiveness and possessiveness; jealousy and conflict were the creation of family (Mehta 1993: 101-2). That is why he experimented with doing away with the idea of traditional family and established a ‘commune’ in Oregon. It is not that he was not concerned with ethics. Only he did not see ethics in restraining love between willing partners and in encouraging hypocrisy. He was not unaware that ethics is not dictated by the ideas of individual freedom alone, but also by the ideas of retaining social stability. But he deplored the hegemony of the society and state, which make individuals slaves and breed violence. He was a visionary far ahead of the times.

**Jiddu Krishnamurti** (1895-1986) was also a very unconventional and unorthodox Guru, but he never had to face problems that Rajneesh faced, as the two were different. Both agnostics and believers have a profound respect for Krishnamurti and his teachings. He spurned the role of a Guru, and told his followers that ‘Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect’ (quoted in Jayakar 1986: 78). Like the Buddha and Ramana Maharishi, Krishnamurti too insisted on the primary importance of self-inquiry, and seekers’ own *Sadhana*. For this, a Guru was not indispensable according to him. They also need not have any set of established beliefs, dogmas or even an organisation. The individual is on his own, and one has to seek one’s own liberation in one’s own way. Acceptance of an outward authority for own spiritual progress may even be a hindrance. He deliberately avoided reading spiritual texts, which he saw as ‘so many cages for the imprisonment of consciousness’ (Heehs 2002: 517). Yet, he did not condemn “religion” itself, for “if there is no religion then the culture dies, civilization goes to pieces” (quoted in *Ibid*: 517). According to him, ‘true religion was the search for God, and truth, and whatever one might like to name it – and not the mere acceptance of belief and dogma’ (quoted in Heehs 2002: 517). He observed: “The Western world, the Christian world, had a religious core that rested on faith. In India at the heart of religion was the denial of everything but ‘that’.” (quoted in Jayakar 1986: 398). In Hinduism too, quite a few would insist on faith and total surrender at least as a source of comfort and for freedom from stress and also ultimately to qualify for Grace. For Krishnamurti, however, doubt was the essence of religious

enquiry, since religion was pursuit of Truth, which is not possible without doubt and enquiry and this alone could ensure liberation or freedom. He asserted that ‘a man who has belief is a frightened man’ (Krishnamurti 1991: 140).

J. Krishnamurti was born in Madanapalle in Andhra Pradesh, and was adopted by Annie Besant, President of Theosophical Society. Leadbeater, a prominent Theosophist, had predicted that Krishnamurti would become a world teacher. An organisation, the Order of the Star, was founded in 1911 with Krishnamurti as its head when he was only sixteen. While in California in 1922, he underwent a profound spiritual experience and exclaimed, “I have drunk at the fountain of Joy and eternal Beauty. I am God–intoxicated” (quoted in Heehs 2002: 516). At the age of thirty-five, he dissolved the organisation that he was supposed to head since he was sixteen, and observed that a belief cannot be organised; and if organised, it becomes dead. His followers, however, established later the Krishnamurti Foundation, for publishing and propagating his ideas. The Foundation has also established colleges and schools imparting education where there is emphasis on human freedom, self-inquiry, honest search for Truth, compassion, on building personal relationships that transcend conflicts, and on self-confidence.

J. Krishnamurti cannot be seen as merely a philosopher of religion. His keen observations cover life and pursuit of truth in general. Heehs includes him among prominent mystics (Heehs 2002: 516–32). His teachings are mainly in the form of transcripts from talks and dialogues. They are known for their precision, probing nature, depth of wisdom and convincing logic. His talks and dialogues have Socrates-like quality. He asks candidly what it is that we call living. Is it ‘dissipating own energies in various forms, dissipating by specialised professions?’ Is it ‘earning money, going to office from nine to five? And you have endless conflict, fear, anxiety, loneliness, despair, depression. ... This enormous travail of man, his endless conflict, deception, corruption – is that living?’ Krishnamurti says that it is ‘a serious question that one must ask oneself. Another [person] cannot answer this question’ (Krishnamurti 1991: 210). Human beings are weighed down by fear. There is fear of death, fear of disorder, of insecurity and what not. It mars life. Krishnamurti observes that ‘where there is fear, man inevitably seeks something that will protect him, that will hold him in a sense of security. And out of that fear we invent gods. Out of that fear we invest all rituals, all the circus that goes on in the name of religion’. (*ibid*: 214). But he says this is not real and genuine religion. He asks: ‘Can you put that aside to find out what is the nature of religion, what is the mind, the brain, that holds the quality of religious living? Can you as a human being who is frightened not invent, not create illusion, *but face fear*? Fear can completely disappear psychologically when you remain with it, not escape from it, but give your whole attention to it. It is like a light being thrown on fear, a great flashing light, and then that fear disappears completely. And when there is no fear, there is no god; there is no ritual; all that becomes unnecessary, stupid”. (*ibid*: 214–5) (emphasis added).

The way to meditation is not through any deliberate and contrived process, according to Krishnamurti. He says, ‘meditation is something that is not contrived, organised. Meditation *is*. It begins with the first step, which is to be free of all your psychological hurts, to be free of all your accumulated fears, anxiety, loneliness, despair, sorrow. That is the foundation, that is the first step, and the first step is the last step. If you take the first step, it is over.’ (*Ibid*: 217; emphasis as in original). According to him, when sorrow ends, love begins, compassion emerges. One appreciates beauty around us selflessly,

without possessive feelings. He observes that a truly religious life begins where there is no conflict, when there is sense of love not given to only one person and therefore restricted. It is this which brings its own benediction, which no temple, mosque or church can give (*ibid*: 217–8)

Krishnamurti was an agnostic in the sense that God is not knowable for the human mind, and the god that human mind creates cannot be the real God. He observed: ‘The mind is the product of the past, it is the result of yesterday; and can such a mind be open to the unknown? It can only project an image, but the projection is not real; so your god is not God, it is an image of your own making, an image of your own gratification’ (quoted in Weeraperuma 1996, 182<sup>nd</sup> Saying, p.80). He also said, reminding one of Ramana Maharshi’s thoughts: ‘So long as there is “me” who wants to experience, there can be no experiencing of reality. That is why the experience – the entity who is seeking god, who believes in God, who prays to God – must totally cease. Only then can that immeasurable reality come into being’ (*ibid*, 185th Saying, p.81). Many Gurus – both modern and ancient – have emphasised the need to first destroy the empirical ego-sense to know God. But if, as Krishnamurti says, the ego is destroyed to the point where the experience totally ceases, who can experience God? It is here that the dualism between the self and God ceases as per Ramana Maharshi. But Krishnamurti does not seem to take this stand and prefers not to talk about God the unknowable, the immeasurable. It is in this sense that his agnosticism was like that of the Buddha rather than that of Charvaka, since Krishnamurti also very much stressed the importance of right conduct, love and compassion, and not self-indulgence. But he did not call himself a Buddhist either, since any established religion was anathema to him.

Truly, without the frank, fresh, precise and in-depth thoughts contributed by Jiddu Krishnamurti, the modern phase of Hinduism would have had a felt gap. Though unconventional, he is accepted as an important Guru in modern Hindu thought. He is a testimony to the capacity of Hinduism to continuously provide space for rebels, for free thinkers. A dose of his scepticism and agnosticism can contribute in reducing the risk of over-religiosity leading either to sectarianism and strife or to other-worldliness that ignores one’s duties in the world. Pupul Jayakar, his eminent biographer has rightly observed: ‘His name and teachings are known throughout the country, amongst *ashrams* in the Himalayas as much as amongst academics. The Buddhists in India still speak of him as a great teacher in the Nagarjuna tradition; the Hindu gurus and *sadhus* speak of him as a great liberated being in the Advaita or nondual tradition. They accept him as a profound teacher of the age.’ (Jayakar 1986:494)

The concept of God accepted in the modern phase of Hinduism, which is a continuation of the Vedantic conception, is a far cry from the popular concept of God seated on a throne in heaven, or reclining on a giant multi-headed serpent in the Milky Ocean. The concept now is that the Universe itself – with its orderliness, grandeur and awesome beauty is a manifestation of God, though God transcends beyond it too. The Universe is designed to secure the happiness of all its creatures in the long run, subject to the inexorable cyclical process of creation, maintenance and dissolution. God is present and expresses Himself in all creatures, particularly in the human beings who are at the highest step of the Karma law or spiritual evolution. **Sadhu T L Vaswani** (1879-1966) explains beautifully in this context the role of religion and meaning of God:

“Religion is life, is fellowship, is mingling of the individual with the Great Life. And this is not shut up in the temples. This is moving in the market place. The Great God is not somewhere in isolation.

The Great God is in possession of life. Greet Him there! You will not find him in the temples of marble and stone. You will meet him in the sweat and struggle of life, in the tears and tragedies of the poor. Not in decorated temples, but in broken cottages is the Great God – wiping the tears of the poor and singing this new *Gita* for the New Age!”<sup>21</sup>

Sadhu T L Vaswani was born in Hyderabad-Sindh (now in Pakistan) and true to his philosophy of meeting God in life, he took to social service as the path for obeying the will of God and realisation of God. His priority was emancipation of women, whom he called manifestations of Shakti. He helped many of them to make a living on their own through small business establishments, through education, through health care. Later, he extended the benefit of social services to other weaker sections of the society. He started Sadhu Vaswani Mission in 1931 in Sind, which had to be shifted after Partition to Pune, India in 1950. Apart from being active in the field of education and health care, the Mission has undertaken other charitable work too – provision of drinking water, digging irrigation wells, tree plantation, soil conservation, vocational training, free ration during famines and such other calamities both to humans and animals. The Mission has helped the rural poor in Maharashtra, Saurashtra and Kutch. **Dada J P Vaswani** (1918- ) is now the spiritual head of the Mission, who is the disciple and nephew of Sadhu Vaswani. Sadhu Vaswani was also a mystic, a philosopher, educationist, and above all a humanist. His love for humanity is fully reflected in what he once observed (inspired by a similar verse in the *Bhagavata*): ‘I do not ask for *mukti*. I fain would be born, again and again, if only that I might be some help to those that suffer and are in pain!’ (Vaswani 2002a: v).

Dada Vaswani is a scientist-turned-philosopher, and his approach to religion is modern, scientific and practical. A gifted orator and convincing writer, he has been truly a modern age Guru. He has authored over 75 books and no attempt is made here to summarise his philosophy. What follows below is only illustrative. At his address during the Conference on *World Vision 2000*, in Washington D C in 1993, he spoke on the relevance of Vedanta to modern problems and said that the real meaning of Vedanta is oneness of all life and even matter, and that all exploitation [of either man or nature] must cease. He stressed that we must recognise the moral inviolability of the individual – human and nonhuman. (Kumari and Sampath 2002: 236-37). A major feature of his lectures and writing is the comfort they provide, not just illumination. The title of one of his books is *Why Do Good People Suffer? – Guidance and Hope for those Who Suffer* (Vaswani 2002b), - quite a comforting book for those who are baffled by the ironies of life, and who ask why a God - whom we call kind, merciful and omniscient, also allows so much sorrow even for good people. He reminds us that in spite of this sorrow, the Universe created by God is still one of beauty, happiness and harmony, where an individual can find fulfillment. He advises us to count our blessings, not to focus on sorrow and disappointment, and thank God for these blessings (*ibid*: 20). Even suffering is a blessing, since it purifies and spiritually elevates us and brings us closer to God (*ibid*: 35). He assures us that God is Love, and Love would never wish to punish, but only ensures that the loved ones grow in perfection (*ibid*: 39). All this does not, of course, mean that one should meekly accept suffering without fighting injustice even if injustice is the cause of suffering, or, without fighting illness if that is the cause of suffering. Such a stand would not be consistent with the teaching of the *Gita*, nor is it Vaswani’s. We have to try to end not only our own suffering, but also the suffering of others. But what suffering still remains, in spite of our best efforts,

we accept it as God's will and with a sense of detachment. We cannot abdicate our responsibility, for Dada Vaswani says: 'When God created man, He gave to man the very freedom that He kept for Himself. Man has a choice to use freedom in the right or wrong way. Freedom entails responsibility and your choice creates your own *Karma*' (Vaswani 2001: 98). Taking into account Dadaji's valuable contribution to the renaissance of Hinduism, he has been awarded Hindu Renaissance Award for 2002 by *Hinduism Today*.

The famous Guru-Shishya duo of Vaswanis played an important role in providing a spiritual anchor and comfort to the Sindhi Hindu community, which migrated from Sindh, Pakistan, to various parts of India, and spread later to many parts of the World. For the displaced but resourceful and enterprising community, both Vaswanis gave a sense of direction, spiritual security and moral courage. The activities of the Mission also raised the image of the Sindhi community in India, and made them respectable members of the Indian society. Their coming to India was a gain for India both in material and spiritual terms. To the glorious credit of Vaswanis, it may also be observed that they did not confine themselves to Sindhis alone. Not only their social services reached others, even the audience for their spiritual teachings was also much wider than that of Sindhis, both in India and abroad.

A full expression of the philosophy that God is Love is reflected in the life and teaching of **Sri Sathya Sai Baba** (1926-2011). God's love for human beings is so great that he does not leave them to their Karma but also intervenes to help them wherever and whenever it pleases Him. He descends and emerges into the world as Avatar in human form. This is how millions of followers of Shri Sathya Sai Baba (Baba for short) believe and take him to be an Avatar. Unlike several modern Gurus whose appeal is mainly to intellectuals and the elite, Baba's appeal was directly to the masses, but it attracted intellectuals of high order too. His philosophy was very simple – Love and Service to fellow humans. The purpose of his Avatar was said to be to instill in people the values of *Satya* (truth), *Dharma* (righteousness), *Shanti* (peace) and *Prema* (love). These values express themselves in Seva (service to fellow humans).

His proneness to show miracles upset several rationalists, some of whom learnt magic and tried to repeat some of his miracles like producing fragrant ash by waving the hand in the air. But this hardly affected Baba's following. His followers did not see him as a magician. They also did not take him to be a mere Yogi, since a yogi who flaunts miracles exhausts his spiritual power attained through severe austerities and yogic efforts. He was taken as born with spiritual power, which came to him spontaneously and naturally without effort. The purpose of his miracles was not to show off, but only to give his followers what they want so that they begin to want what he wants to give them, using the saying of Shirdi Sai Baba, believed to be his previous incarnation. Unlike Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba did not talk in terms of difficult riddles and taught a simple philosophy without much metaphysics. Another difference is that Sathya Sai Baba took to social service on a far more magnificent scale, attracting a much larger following both in India and abroad. Consistent with his limited activities, Shirdi Sai Baba resided in his simple mosque throughout his life, but Sathya Sai Baba was not so confined. He even travelled abroad.

The earlier name of Baba was Sathyanarayana Raju, popularly called as Sathya. He was born in a lower middleclass family in Puttaparthi, then only a hamlet, in Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh, on

November 23, 1926. His elementary education was in the primary school of his home village, but he had to go to other places for high school education in small towns. Even during his school education he showed his religious bent of mind. He would organise small groups for devotional singing. In the high school in a town in the neighbouring district of Cuddappa, he became popular for both singing and acting in skits with religious themes. It was here when he was not even fourteen years of age that he realized his life's spiritual mission. In October 1940, while still in high school, he announced that he could no longer continue in the school nor stay with family, as he had a much larger family of devotees waiting for him, and that he cannot any longer confine his relationship to only a small family. Baba's mother persuaded him to return to Puttaparti, which he did but refused to stay in his parents' home. He stayed instead in an ashram-like house headed by two elderly widows. It was more suitable for group singing of devotional songs (*Bhajans*). When the number of devotees swelled, he moved to another building in the same village in 1944.<sup>22</sup> His real miracle was that by 1950, the village itself began to grow into a new township called Prasanthi Nilayam with his fame already spread far and wide. Now it has grown into a modern international township with an airport, which can be reached by air from Bangalore in less than half an hour. A new Taluk was carved out called Sri Sathya Sai Taluk with Prasanthi Nilayam as Taluk headquarters. Apart from Puttaparti, the Baba developed a major establishment in Whitefield, Bangalore, too. Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust and Sri Sathya Sai Ashram are located both in Puttaparti (Prasanthi Nilayam) and Whitefield (Brindavan). Besides these central organisations, there are thousands of Sri Sathya Sai Centres and Samithis all over the world, bulk of them being in India, but also covering the USA, South East Asia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Europe, South Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius, West Indies, Fiji, Australia and other countries. In spreading the message of Dharma, which is his main role, Baba believed in catching people young. Over a thousand Bala Vikas Kendras (Child Development Centres) have been set up in India and abroad, where children are taught basic moral values and also to sing *bhajans* and to express themselves. The number of his devotees runs into several millions all over the world, covering not merely Hindus, but also followers of other faiths. Like many other modern Hindu Gurus, Baba was also non-sectarian and his appeal or teachings are not confined to Hindus but have a universal character. Baba, his devotees, and students in his educational institutions used to celebrate festivals of all major religions.

Unlike other modern Gurus, he did not speak English. His discourses in Telugu are, however, translated by his followers into English and other languages. The speeches and thoughts of Baba have been compiled in many volumes. 16 volumes by Baba have been published under Vahini series; and his general speeches have been published in 27 volumes (up to 1999), and discourses given during his Summer Courses on Indian Spirituality and Culture have been brought out in 10 volumes. A devoted follower of Baba and an eminent writer in Kannada, N. Kasturi, brought out four volumes on his life, work and thoughts in 1975, which have gone into several subsequent editions and reprints. There are works by other devotees and admirers too. There is thus an enormous Sri Sathya Sai Baba literature.

No attempt is made here to summarise his thoughts. Only a few indications to them are given. He accepts God, particularly God as Love, who is also identified with Atman, the True Self (not ego). Individual is a spark of God and is thus valuable. God realisation can take place through pure love, by transcending one's passions and selfishness, and through devotion and service to fellow beings.

He accepts the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita as inspiring texts, which have to be interpreted with a liberal and open mind, and not as restrictive texts. The essential feature of Indian culture and spirituality according to him is that it is flexible, with diverse choices, and can be tailored to suit the requirement of each individual – not an attitude of one size fits all. Religion is the link between Jeeva and Deva, between individual and the ultimate reality. It has no other significance. Baba does not accept sectarian and caste divisions. Everyone is capable of religious experience and everyone has a right to it. Those, who regard their own spiritual path as the only correct path and that of others as false, are spiritually blind according to Baba. But no realisation of God is possible without one's own effort, without self-exertion, inner inquiry or self-analysis. He said:

“Imagine a house full of darkness. You may enter the house and pray to the darkness to leave the premises; or you may shower abuse on it ... or, frighten it by threatening force. The darkness will stay; it cannot be diminished at all. It will not yield to your tactics, and it will not be scared out. But light a lamp, and it will flee that instant”. (Baba1999: 45).

The Baba did not regard the material world as unreal, though it is mutable or changeable. He regarded the objective world or Prakṛti as eternal, though ever changing (*ibid*: 47). Prakṛti is ever in God's care. The sorrow that we experience is the result of our own Karma and ignorance (*ibid*: 48-49). Sorrow can be mitigated by good conduct, *jñāna* and love. There is no separate Heaven and Hell according to Vedanta. It is what we create ourselves in this very world (*ibid*: 51-52), for ourselves and for others.

True to his philosophy of love and service, the Baba had monumental achievements in this regard. Let alone the urban development of the entire taluk with Prashanthi Nilayam as its head quarters, he also set up a University in 1981 – Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning in 1981, with an emphasis on moral and spiritual education in addition to the usual education for earning a livelihood and making a career. It has three campuses, at Prashanthi Nilayam (Puttaparthi), Brindavan (Whitefield) and Anantpur respectively. He also established several schools including schools for rural children and a few schools for girls specially. He used to take care of students in vacation too, during which Summer Courses on Indian Spirituality and Culture were conducted, and Baba personally participated in them by giving discourses. He also established two world-class Super-Speciality Hospitals which provide free medical and surgical treatment for the poor – Sri Sathya Sai Institute for Higher Medical Sciences, one at Prashanthi Nilayam and another at Brindavan. He started Sri Sathya Sai Water Project, under which he undertook to provide piped drinking water to entire Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh, known for its recurrent droughts and water scarcity, and earned the gratitude of millions of rural households especially women. A similar project was carried out in Bellary district of Karnataka, and there was a plan to augment drinking water supply to Chennai (Tamil Nadu). Thousands of volunteers who are devotees of the Baba undertake relief work in times of distress. They have conducted free eye-check up camps and supply of spectacles to the poor, establishing orphanages and homes for destitute women with children, supply of wheel chairs for the disabled, rehabilitation of disabled poor and destitute women (through helping them set up small business establishments, telephone booths etc), establishing schools for the blind and so on. It is these humane activities, expressions of Baba's love and grace for humanity, rather than his miracles, which have attracted millions of devotees and flows of enormous money to finance his projects.

Baba's proneness to produce miracles had raised a few questions among rationalists. Why should not the Bhagavan that he is reported to be, simply by a wave of hand abolish illness, poverty and hunger, instead of taking all the elaborate trouble of building hospitals, organising relief and food distribution? Such a question is asked in the case of others too who have been venerated as Avatars. Irrespective of whether the Baba was Bhagavan or not, reading the thoughts of Baba and such others, the reply appears to be as follows. God has designed the Universe and its working; he would not like to disturb it except where it pleases him. This is because He has given freedom of will to human beings, and He would want them to manage their own affairs according to the capacity, which God Himself has so kindly given. In His love and kindness to His creation, He would like nevertheless to help them and intervene when necessary. It is not that He would like human beings to suffer deliberately through hunger, poverty and illness, but he would like human beings themselves to solve their own problems with guidance and marginal intervention by God. The main role of Avatars and miracles is to make humans aware of God's presence among them and spread the message of Dharma, which they may otherwise tend to forget. It is not that God is a tyrant who would want the poor humans to be always aware of His presence; such awareness is needed only because it helps humans realise their own full potential and perfection.

The Baba was unfortunately so much identified with miracles that it indicated an obsession with his detractors. But he was much more than miracles. Gandhiji apparently did not believe in miracles of the sort the Baba is famous for. But such miracles apart, the Baba was Gandhi-like in his outlook. His religion was pure ethics, compassion and selfless service. He shunned all parochialism and very much like Gandhiji, accepted all religious as valid paths to truth or God. When L K Advani had launched his Rathayatra to Ayodhya, the Baba reportedly asked him why such fuss about Rama temple in Ayodhya when Rama is everywhere (cf. Ananthamurthy 2005: 48). He passed away at the age of 85 at Puttaparthi on 24th April, 2011, but continues to live in the hearts of millions of his devotees and the social service and educational activities which he started also continue unabated.

There have been outstanding women saints in Hinduism in the modern phase too, just as we had them during the Bhakti Movements. **Sarada Devi** (1853-1920), wife of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, is the first among prominent women saints in the modern phase. Though overshadowed by her husband, she was a saint in her own right and is venerated as the Holy Mother along with her husband. She survived her husband and also Swami Vivekananda and was a great source of inspiration and support for the Ramakrishna Mission and the followers in a critical period. Married at a very young age, their marriage was not consummated. Her husband chose to worship her as Divine Mother. She accepted this relationship without question, and took over the responsibility of taking care of her husband and his followers with motherly love for all. When Sri Ramakrishna passed away, she was preparing to wear widow's garments. But a vision of his appeared before her and asked her: 'What are you doing? Where have I gone? It is like passing from one room to another'. She made a compromise and cut off only the red border of her sari. When she tried to take off her bracelets as widows do, again Sri Ramakrishna appeared and prevented her. It seems she was in frequent communion with him. In a vision, he appeared before her and asked her to give initiation to an attendant as Sanyasi. She hesitated

as she thought she was not fit enough to initiate anybody. When she was told that the attendant too had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna to accept initiation from her, she relented and initiated him. She said once, ‘Sri Ramakrishna left me behind to manifest the Motherhood of God to the World’ (Suddhasatwananda 1962: 15). She travelled widely in India visiting several centres of pilgrimage and major cities and met the followers of Sri Ramakrishna. In her preaching, she laid a great stress on purity of mind. Austerity is helpful in preparing and purifying the mind. A human without compassion is only a beast, she felt. Compassion is a most essential human quality. Her advice was, never to hurt others even by words, and one’s sensibility was lost if one had no control over one’s speech.<sup>23</sup> Once a woman devotee requested the Holy Mother to order her daughter to get married. The Holy Mother replied. “Is it not a misery to remain in lifelong slavery to another and always dance to his tune? ... If she is not inclined to lead a married life, one should not be forced into it ...” (Suddhasatwananda 1962: 53-54).

In Hinduism, outstanding women saints are also accepted as Avatars. There is no limit to God’s manifestation of love and power. Devotees of Anandamayi Ma and of Amma – Mata Amritanandamayi, believe that they are Avatars and not just Gurus. The earlier name of **Anandamayi Ma** (1896-1982) was Nirmala Sundari. She was born in a remote village in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). As per the custom then, she was married when less than thirteen years of age, but remained in her parents’ home till 1914. When she moved to live with her husband, he noticed her extra-ordinary personality though she was only eighteen. She used to get into trances and long spells of silence; when she spoke, they were words of great maturity and wisdom. The husband, Ramani Chakravarthy, later called as Bholanath and Pitaji by Ma’s devotees, kept a respectful distance and it is said that the marriage was not consummated. It is also said that her husband became her first disciple and got spiritual initiation from her. They lived together, and when he moved to Dhaka as he found work there in 1924, she also moved with him. She became famous in Dhaka for her spiritual power and she is reported to have healed many people. She started travelling. Hundreds of people thronged to have her *darshan* (‘a sanctifying glimpse’) wherever she went. It was because she was always in a state of Bliss, she was named as Anandamayi by her devotees. Her teachings were in the form of answers to questions put by her devotees, some of which are recorded.<sup>24</sup>

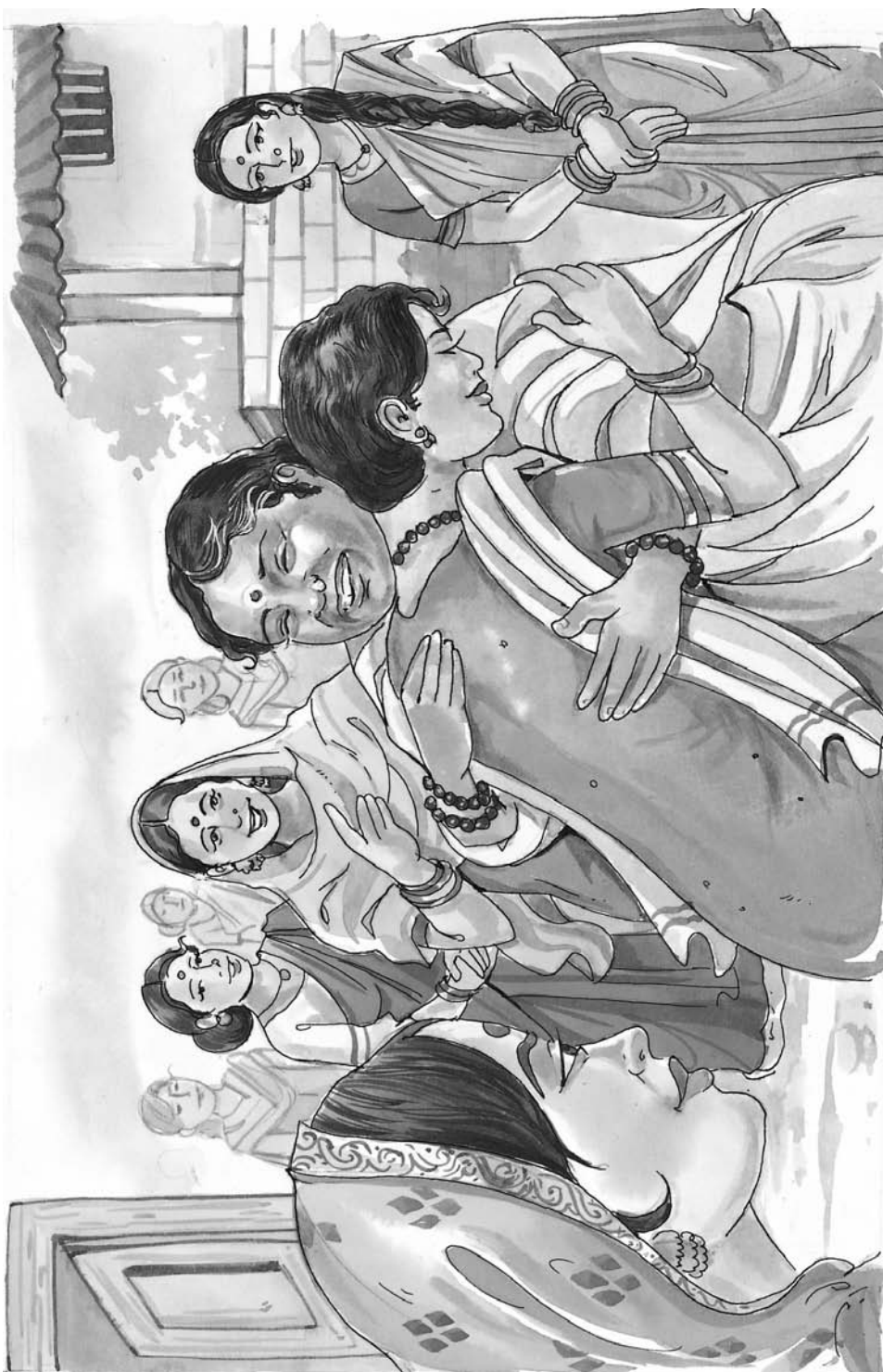
Anandamayi took the position that God alone Is, God is wholeness - a totality, but God realisation is possible through either of the two approaches or a combination of them – Vedanta (*Jnana*) and Bhakti (devotion). There is pain and sorrow only where there is feeling of duality but after God Realisation there is only Bliss. Falsehood and evil arise because of false consciousness of ego. In the act of *Pranam*, there is complete surrender of this false consciousness, a complete pouring out of one self, not holding back anything. She did not accept and observe any caste distinctions, and also declared all religions as only so many paths to God realisation. She did not teach renouncing one’s responsibility and duty in the world. She said: “Whatever you do throughout the day, endeavour to do it in a spirit of service. Serve God in everyone, regarding everyone and everything as manifestations of Him and serve Him by whatever work you undertake. If you live with this attitude of mind, the path to Reality will open out before you” (as quoted in Heehs 2002: 547). Dwelling upon the traditional difference made in Hinduism between *Shreyas* (what is ennobling, elevating) and *Preyas* (what is temporarily pleasing), she said that the pursuit of what is only entertaining and temporarily pleasing

can lead a human astray. The difference between humans and animals is that humans can know this difference. Humans should rather learn to enjoy wholeheartedly doing what is good for them and for other fellow humans and creatures. This can remove the dichotomy between Shreyas and Preyas. She advised that one could go through life easily simply by putting one's burden in His hands and seeking His guidance in everything.

Another woman spiritual leader of prominence, venerated as Divine Mother, and also lovingly called as Amma, is **Mata Amritanandamayi**. She was born in a fisherman's family in a small fishing village in Quilon (Kollam) District of Kerala in 1953. The village is now known as Amritapuri. She is a very popular living saint, with millions of devotees both in India and abroad. Referring to her skin colour, one of her admirers and biographer Judith Cornell calls her 'A Light that is Black'! (2001: 3). It is to the glorious credit of openness and liberalism of Hinduism that light has emerged of such eminence from a poor, so-called low caste family, in a girl with hardly any formal education. Like Sri Sathya Sai Baba and Anandamayi Ma, Amma also had no formal Guru, and is considered equally self-emerging Divine. Her love for her devotees and all humanity expresses itself spontaneously in her hugging them when they meet her, and their experience is ecstatic, comforting and healing. She hugs thousands every day to a point where her arms ache but she does not mind it. She is known as the Hugging Saint.

Amma's childhood was rather unpleasant, as she was ill-treated by most of her close relatives because of her dark colour.<sup>25</sup> Her earlier name was Sudhamani. Since childhood, she had a yearning for the Divine and was, therefore, considered as abnormal. A lot of household chores were imposed on her from dawn till night, and she was withdrawn from school when she had barely finished four years of schooling at primary level. Her elder brother was a tyrant, and gave no peace to her. Her parents sent her to richer relatives almost as an indentured servant, but she was a problem to them too as she did not turn out to be an obedient and normal servant. At sixteen, she came back to her parents' home. Her spirituality began to grow stronger, in spite of her being kept busy with household work. Her parents thought of marrying her off and a young man came to see her. Cornell describes the incident: "When the young man arrived and sat quietly in the living room waiting to meet Sudhamani, she was in the kitchen, pounding red chillies with a wooden pestle. Suddenly to everybody's horror, she ran into the room screaming, brandishing the pestle like a weapon at the young man. Terrified, he ran out of the house" (Cornell 2001: 25-6). The embarrassed parents consulted an astrologer, but he said: "This girl is a Mahatma (a great soul)! If a marriage has not yet been arranged for this girl, please do not do so" (*Ibid*: 26).

A miracle is attributed to Amritanandamayi through an event that proved to be a turning point in her life when she was twenty-two. After gathering grass for cows, she was returning home with her younger brother one afternoon. On the way, she heard singing of devotional songs in praise of Lord Krishna in a neighbour's courtyard. She stood intently listening for a while, and then suddenly rushed into the courtyard and stood there. What the gathering there observed was not Sudhamani but Lord Krishna himself with his typical features! In that instant, not only she but also others there perceived her identity with the Lord. Many more gathered hearing about the incident, but by then she was back



Mata Amritanandamayi, known as hugging saint, embracing and blessing devotees. She is well known for her charity, social work and spread of education

to her original form, and stood in a state of divine bliss. Some of the crowd told her, ‘you are God, show us a miracle!’ The crowd pleaded and pestered – ‘just show one miracle, we will not ask for more’. After a lot of persuasion, she yielded. After she sang some Bhajans and prayed, she is reported to have turned a vessel filled with fresh water before everybody into *Panchamṛtam*!<sup>26</sup> According to the legend, everyone gathered there partook of it; even though more and more people kept coming, the vessel continued to have enough to satisfy everybody.

News of the miracle spread far and wide and people came first with curiosity and then turned to become devotees. She chose a banyan tree to sing *bhajans* whenever people gathered. Her younger brother was a patient of asthma and she cured him completely by applying sacred ash blessed by her. Subsequently, she showed *Devī-bhāva* (form of Devi or Goddess) just as she had shown *Kṛṣṇa bhāva* earlier, and as Divine Mother she developed love and compassion for all humanity and all earthly creatures. She would hold each devotee tenderly in her arms addressing each as ‘Darling daughter’ and ‘Darling son’, listen to them attentively about their problems, and comfort them. By the age of twenty-four itself, she became established as Divine Mother. She started healing people.

Seekers of God–Realisation also began to come in large numbers. She teaches everyone a simple thing – Love, which is a blessing to both, to the one who receives and to the one who gives, and unlike money, love never diminishes when given, it increases. She attributes miseries in the world to lack of love in us. She feels that it is futile to try to change the external world before we ourselves develop a right attitude. Once our own mind is firm in love, it can change the world. The essence of spirituality is to change the mind in a positive way that imparts strength to overcome any challenges, any ordeal. She insists on having a child-like openness and curiosity to allow the mind to be creative and expansive. She advises us to continue to be children all the while in this regard. Her embrace is not merely a manifestation of her love for her children, but also a means of instilling love in their hearts for all humanity.

Though Amma was deprived of education, she is keen that every child should have access to good education. She wants meditation to be part of children’s education, as it sharpens intellect, strengthens memory and reduces stress. She has opened several schools and colleges, including both schools for the poor and high profile advanced centres of learning like Amrita Institutes of Engineering, Advanced Computing and Advanced Management. She started a big super-speciality hospital in 1998 – Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences near Cochin, Kerala. This is apart from smaller projects like a hospital near Mumbai for terminally ill cancer patients, a charitable hospital at her Amritpuri Ashram in Kerala, several dispensaries in Ashram Centres in many parts of India, and an Old Age Home in Kottayam and several orphanages. To manage and co-ordinate these vast social service activities, Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (MAM) was established in 1981, with headquarters in her native village of Parayakadavu in Kollam district. It has grown into a huge organisation with branches and centres all over the world, including the USA, Britain, France, Australia, Japan, Mauritius and Singapore. A common feature of the followers of both Sri Satya Sai Baba and Amma is that their devotion to God or Devi is expressed in terms of seva or social service to fellow humans. They provide their labour, skills and also money for this purpose in the most selfless way, in the true spirit of Karmayoga.

The way Amma interacts with intellectuals is amazing, considering her lack of formal education (see Ch.10 in Cornell 2001). But she is critical of too much intellectualizing since it makes us lose faith in our own self. It does not mean that she is opposed to intellect. If it were so, she would not

have started so many advanced centres of learning. Amma has gone abroad several times and has many devotees outside India too. Her 50th birthday was celebrated on an international scale in 2003 in Kochi with participants from nearly a hundred countries. She was presented with the prestigious Gandhi–King Award for Non-Violence at the UN General Assembly Hall in 2002, which is a reflection of her international recognition. She has addressed the UN at the Millennium World Peace Summit in 2000 on the topic of ‘The Role of Religion in Conflict Transformation’

Amma does not believe in caste distinctions. She has started Vedic schools where persons of any caste can get training to become priests. This is open to women as well. She wants women to break out of their traditional shells and participate equally with men in public spheres. In quite a few temples built by her, women are priests. She is cosmopolitan in outlook. Though she has opened several temples, she has equal respect for all religions as many valid and time-tested paths to God realization. She has followers from all religions. Catholic devotees call her Black Madonna, Buddhists call her Tara, and Gypsies call her Sara or Kali (Cornell 2001: 132).

Claims to being Avatar by a human being is ridiculed by rationalists even in India, though India has a long tradition of it. As Warriar and Fuller explain, the avatar-gurus like Amma ‘make devotion and bhakti a highly intimate and personal experience for devotees, thus making their goals of proximity to the divine and god realization that much more immediate and accessible’ (Fuller 1992: 178, quoted in Warriar 2003: 260). The tradition of emphasis on a living Guru in India can also be understood in this light. But quite apart from satisfying the inner urge for God-realisation, what they have achieved by way of mobilising vast resources for social development and in providing succour to the needy in a country very much in need of it, is no small achievement. Relying on government alone for social development cannot be enough.

**Mata Nirmala Devi** (1923-2011) was a Guru of Christian parentage. Like many other Gurus of modern phase, she also did not confine herself to Hinduism, and preached universal values. She was known for discovering and teaching ‘*Sahaja-Yoga*’, an easy method of arousing *kundalini* power and experiencing Bliss. Awakening *kundalini* has been a part of traditional Yoga system in Hinduism, but according to her, it is not necessary to undergo a long period of austerities for the purpose. Traditional exponents of Yoga have warned against instant and quick arousal of *kundalini*, and in the absence of a trained Guru to assist, such psychic experiments can even lead to mental imbalance. Such fears are discounted by the followers of Nirmala Devi. Her father was Parsad Rao Salve, a Protestant Christian, and had become a member of the Central Legislative Assembly in 1920. Nirmala spent a part of her childhood in Gandhiji’s Ashram which initiated her into an austere and spiritual experience. Her parents participated in the Freedom Struggle and were jailed in 1928. Though Nirmala secured admission into a medical college at Lahore, she could not complete her studies because of her involvement in the Freedom Struggle. She was married in 1947 to C.P. Srivastava, IAS, who rose to become the Chairman of Shipping Corporation of India, and Secretary General of the Maritime Corporation of the UN. She accompanied him wherever he was posted. It was in 1970, that she experienced for the first time the arousal of *kundalini*, which became a turning point in her life. She experienced a union with the Supreme, and developed Sahajayoga as the science of helping others too to connect to the Collective Consciousness or the Supreme. It is reported that she developed healing powers too, and several

benefited from it. She took steps to teach this science not only in India, but also in other countries. It is reported that her centres are spread over 65 countries.<sup>27</sup>

Latest to come out with a new technique of Yoga is **Sri Sri Ravi Shankar** (1956 -), who is settled in Bangalore. He spent a few years with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and began preaching independently in 1980. He was a child prodigy, who could recite the entire *Gita* at the age of four, and mastered the *Rgveda* at the age of nine. He also acquired a degree in science (Gautier 2002). He has been teaching Yoga technique developed by him, known as *Sudarshan Kriya* since 1982, which is claimed to help people facing stress due to their busy life style. He believes that stress need not be a normal part of our routine. He runs popular courses in the Art of Living, which includes the teaching of his technique. It is claimed to help in improving the state of awareness and concentration, reducing and stabilizing blood pressure, controlling diabetes, and even in curing back pain and asthma. His Art of Living Foundation has a consultative status with the UN and has centres all over the world.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is more than his technique. He is also considered as the Guru of Joy, which incidentally is also the title of a book on him (Gautier 2002). He believes that God Loves Fun, which is a title of one his books (Ravi Shankar 2002). He is one of the most readable Gurus, his writings and speeches marked with wit and wisdom at the same time. He remarked: “If you ever happened to meet God, do you know what you would tell him? ‘Oh, I have met you inside!’” (*Ibid*: 69). He tells parents: “Your concern is how your kids will grow up. My concern is when you will become kids again!” (quoted in Gautier 2002: 92). Someone asked him: “What happens after death?” He replied: “Let there be some suspense! I can assure you, you are not going to miss it. That’s for sure” (*Ibid*: 31). He is not only the Master of Art of Living, but also the master of the Art of Sayings. His sayings are sheer poetry and also give a significant message. He brought out the essence of the *Gita* thus:

“Life is a war. Doctors fight against disease. Lawyers fight against injustice. Teachers fight against ignorance. Depression happens when you lose the will to fight. Arjuna was depressed; he did not want to fight... but Krishna urged him to wake up and fight. The decision to fight can take away your depression” (Ravi Shankar 2002-b: 31).

About free will versus destiny, he has a very practical advice – just consider the past as destiny and the future as free will! “When you consider the past as destiny, no more questions are raised and the mind is at ease. And when you consider the future as free will you are filled with enthusiasm and dynamism. Of course, there will be some uncertainty when you consider the future as free will, and some anxiety, but it can also bring alertness and creativity” (Ravi Shankar, *Times of India* 28.4.2004).

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is not an armchair philosopher. He travels widely, and has taken to social work significantly. This includes rural development and Dalit development programmes. He has taken initiatives to solve the Naxalite problem in a constructive and peaceful way, and also to bring about a better understanding and harmony between India and Pakistan. He has worked for peace and harmony in parts of the world. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001, he organised free courses in stress reduction for the affected people; ran relief centres for the war-ravaged people of Kosovo, and similar programmes in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>28</sup>

An eloquent illustration of the fact that the appeal of Hinduism is not confined to Hindus alone, is the case of **Sri ‘M’**, a living Guru now in his fifties. His original name is Shri **Mumtaz Ali** (1949-). He was born in a ‘moderately affluent’ and educated Deccani Muslim family settled in Thiruvananthapuram, capital of Kerala. When he was just eight, he had a small spiritual encounter with a stranger, who tenderly put his hand on him, spoke to him in Deccani Urdu, the boy’s mother tongue: “I am your teacher, though you won’t be meeting me for a long time. But I shall always be overseeing your growth. ... Continue your normal schooling”, and then walked away. This left a deep indelible impression on the boy. Even when pursuing his education, he kept up his spiritual seeking and met a great many Sadhus and Sants. He went in search of his Master to Himalayas, and met him, apparently by coincidence but pulled and guided by an inner call, in a cave near Keshav Prayag, close to the confluence of the Saraswati and the Alaknanda. The youth, then in his twenties, immediately recognised his Master. Sri ‘M’ has written about his interaction with his Master (Maheshwaranath Babaji) and his experience of spiritual seeking in *Jewel in the Lotus* (Sri ‘M’ 2011). Later, he lived with J Krishnamurti for some time, where he met Sunanda, a Brahmin lady, whom he married. Now they are settled in Madanapalle in Andhra Pradesh, where he runs an old age Home for the destitute and a free school for the poor rural children. He is a practising Hindu who has not given up Islam. Though it may look like self-contradiction to the orthodox, he sees no conflict between the two. He is well versed in the Vedas, the Upanishads, Yoga as well as in the Quran. His discourses on three important Upanishads – Isha, Kena and Mandukya – have been brought out (Sri ‘M’ 2002). He is an artist too, and painting exhibitions of his works have been held. An enlightened soul, he preaches self-inquiry, humanism, communal harmony, compassion and service to other fellow humans.<sup>29</sup>

No account of the major contributors to the dynamics of Hinduism in the modern phase would be complete without taking into account the teachings of **Deepak Chopra**, (1947-). Settled in the USA and though not an ascetic, he is one of the most creative interpreters of Vedanta, blending it with modern science, so as to address effectively to human problems of modern age. His appeal and popularity extend beyond the followers of Hinduism and spiritual seekers of ultimate Truth. He was voted by the *Time* magazine as one of the top 100 heroes and icons of the 20th Century (reported in *Times of India*, Bangalore, Jan 6, 2004). Most of his over 60 books have been path breaking and make refreshing reading, quite a few of which have been best sellers. His book, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* (1993), sold 130,000 copies in one day! (Barker 1998)

Born in India, Deepak Chopra, graduated from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. He went to the United States in 1970 to pursue his medical career and in the early 1980, became the chief of staff at the New England Memorial Hospital, a highly coveted position. He left the position in 1985 to dedicate his life to popularizing holistic health. He met Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1985, who had popularised both TM and Ayurveda in the West. Chopra studied Ayurveda and became the founding President of the American Association for Ayurvedic Medicine. Barker observes: “In the Late 1980, and early 1990s, Chopra became a dedicated Champion of TM thought and practice. His 1989 book, *Quantum Healing: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind Body Medicine*, explains how the body is a ‘net work of intelligence’ that can be programmed through meditation and clean living to be immune to disease and ageing” (Barker 1998).

Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (1994) brought him considerable renown in many parts of the world. It opens with a quotation from *Bṛhadāraṇyak Upanishad* (IV.4.5).

“You are what your deep, driving desire is.

As your desire is, so is your will.

As your will is, so is your deed.

As your deed is, so is your destiny.” (Chopra 1994: v’)

Chopra is not concerned here with purely spiritual success as such. What he does is to show how spiritual laws, if correctly followed, give us material success as well mental well being, not only of one's own but also of those around, and that too with least effort. Chopra teaches how we can channel the primal energy of the Universe – ‘the field of pure potentiality’ or ‘quantum soup’ or God, into fulfilling our desires and attaining success. The way he makes an insightful and creative interpretation of basic ideas of Hinduism (like Advaita, Karma, detachment, dharma and Purusharthas) is very striking. He spells out his teaching in terms of Seven Spiritual Laws:

1. The Law of Pure Potentiality: It recognises that the source of all creation is pure consciousness, which is ‘pure potentiality seeking expression from the unmanifest to the manifest. And when we realise that our true self is one of pure potentiality, we align with the power that manifests everything in the universe’ (Chopra 1994: 7). This can be achieved by meditation, by communing with nature, and by practice of ‘non-judgment’ (*Ibid*: 23-4).
2. The Law of Giving: ‘The Universe operates through dynamic exchange. ... giving and receiving are different aspects of the flow of energy in the universe. And in our willingness to give that which we seek, we keep the abundance of the Universe circulating in our lives’ (*Ibid*: 25). This Law is put into effect through a commitment to (a) making a gift wherever one goes, which may be even a compliment or a prayer; (b) gracefully receiving all the gifts that life offers including gifts of nature; and (c) keeping ‘wealth’ circulating by giving and receiving – gifts of caring, loving, wishing well silently everyone we meet (*Ibid*: 35-6).
3. The Law of Karma: ‘Every action generates a force of energy that returns to us in kind ... and when we choose actions that bring happiness and success to others, the fruit of our Karma is happiness and success’- (*Ibid*: 37). The law can be applied to our life by (a) being conscious of the choices that we make, (b) thinking over the consequences of choice, – will it bring happiness to me and others affected by the choice? (c) seeking guidance from our heart or conscience (*Ibid* : 49-50).
4. The Law of Least Effort: ‘Nature’s intelligence functions with effortless ease ... with carefreeness, harmony, and love. And when we harness the forces of harmony, joy, and love, we create success and good fortune with effortless ease’ (*Ibid*: 51). The Law is put into effect through (a) practising acceptance, (b) taking responsibility, and (c) being open-minded (*Ibid*: 63-4).
5. The Law of Intention and Desire: ‘Inherent in every intention and desire is the mechanics for its fulfillment ... intention and desire in the field of pure potentiality have infinite organizing power. And when we introduce an intention in the fertile ground of pure potentiality, we put this infinite organizing power to work for us’. (*Ibid*: 65). The law is applied to our life by (a) being aware

of our desires, (b) by accepting gracefully that the cosmic plan has a better design than what is contained in my desire, if that desire is not fulfilled, (c) by practising present-moment awareness, – ‘accept the present as it is, and manifest the future through my deepest, most cherished intention and desires’ (*Ibid*: 79-80).

6. The Law of Detachment: ‘In detachment lies the wisdom of uncertainty ... with wisdom of uncertainty lies the freedom from our past, from the known, which is the prison of past conditioning. And in our willingness to step into the unknown, the field of all possibilities, we surrender ourselves to the creative mind that orchestrates the dance of the Universe’ (*Ibid*: 81). This is applied to our life by (a) participating in everything with ‘detached involvement’, (b) factoring ‘uncertainty as an essential ingredient of my experience’, (c) remaining open to infinity of choices (*Ibid*: 91-92).
7. The Law of Dharma’ and Purpose in Life: ‘Everyone has a purpose in life ... a unique gift and special talent to give to others. And when we blend this unique talent with service to others, we experience the ecstasy and exaltation of our own spirit, which is the ultimate goal of all goals.’ (*Ibid*: 93). This Law is applied through commitment to a) paying attention to the spirit within me that animates my body and mind, (b) using my talents in the service of humanity, (c) asking myself ‘How can I serve?’ and ‘How can I help?’ and taking guidance from these answers (*Ibid* 102-3).

Chopra came out with another path breaking book—*How to Know God* (Chopra 2000). It is a great landmark in the literature on spirituality, for no one else has approached the subject of mysticism with such clear, practical, step-by-step approach. The book makes God accessible even in this age of science and reason, not to one special individual with the grace of a personal guru but to anyone seriously interested.

Chopra observes significantly: “In our search for the one and only one God, we pursue the impossible. The issue isn’t how many Gods exist, but how completely our own needs can be spiritually fulfilled” (*Ibid*: 43). This observation offers a fresh insight in to the so-called polytheism of Hinduism. He says further: “we select a deity based on our interpretation of reality ... The ancient Vedic seers put it quite bluntly: ‘The World is as we are’” (*Ibid*: 45). A person who needs protection from threat and danger needs a Protector–God; one who wants power needs an Almighty who can empower her/him; one who wonders where we come from, He is Creator, and so on. A person can evolve spiritually in one’s own life time from stage one of perceiving a personal protector God to the ultimate stage when one experiences a ‘God of pure being’ – “I am” – where all boundaries and dualities are transcended, - an impersonal Advaitic God or Brahman. Chopra says: “The wonder is that the human nervous system can operate on so many planes. ... If you do not understand that you are multidimensional, then the whole notion of God runs off the rails” (*ibid*: 48). A major obstacle in knowing God is *Avidya*, According to Chopra. “*Avidya* consists of impurities like ego needs, distortions of perceptions, lack of self worth, and all kinds of trauma and wounds that defeat our real intentions” (*ibid*: 192). Because of this, “the only clear path to God is a path of constant self-awareness” (*ibid*: 192).

Over forty men and women of eminence have been covered in the account above to show the many moods of the modern phase of Hinduism. They have in one way or another given expression to the Gandhian perspective of Hinduism. The coverage, though fairly comprehensive, is more illustrative

than exhaustive. Only non-traditional religious and spiritual leaders have been covered here. The heads of *Mathas* (traditional monasteries) –Brahmin as also non-Brahmin - have been left out, though many of them like Chandrashekharendra Saraswati of Kanchi are well known for their piety, nobility of heart, upholding Dharma and promoting social work and education. A striking paradox with them is that though according to Hindu tradition ascetics or *Sanyasis* are outside the pale of caste, they are nevertheless identified with particular castes, and this contradiction does not appear to bother either the heads or their followers! The leaders whose contributions have been discussed in our account above were, however, truly outside the pale of caste, whether *Sanyasis* or not, and played an active role in the rediscovery and renaissance of Hinduism. This chapter has shown that there is ample and more vibrant Hinduism outside caste framework than in orthodox caste-based establishments.

Interestingly there have been so many of progressive leaders in every phase who have given expression to the Gandhian perspective of Hinduism. No wonder then, India has been traditionally called as a *Punyabhumi* (land of piety). The fact that Hinduism could throw up so many creative leaders, many of whom did not go by the letter of the sacred texts, and some of whom were either not learned in them or were even indifferent to them but taught their own philosophy, is an evidence of both creative dynamism and tolerance of Hinduism. In spite of this abundance, Hindus have also accepted without any reservation –not one, but several – Gurus originating from other faiths also as their own, with neither the Gurus nor the followers accepting boundaries between religions. Whether credit for piety can be given to Hindus on the ground that they had so many saints, is, however, a matter of opinion. Following the *Gita*, which said that God incarnates whenever and wherever Dharma declines and *Adharma* (lack of Dharma) prevails, it may even be said – in lighter vein, of course - that Hindus have troubled God more often than others!

We may now take an overview of the modern and the contemporary phase and observe what it all amounts to. What interests particularly is the extent of continuity and change in the modern phase as compared to the earlier phases, and the distinct contribution of this phase.

## 2. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: A FEW GENERAL FEATURES

### (i) Modern Phase – A Synthesis

Using a Hegelian terminology, it is insightful to view the Classical phase as thesis, the Bhakti Movements as anti-thesis, and the modern phase as synthesis. This is, of course, so in relative terms, and is not to be taken as absolute lines of demarcation. The relative emphasis on canon and the use of Sanskrit during the classical phase was eroded to some extent during the Bhakti movements. The regional languages rose into prominence in the second phase and Bhakti songs led to rich blossoming forth of high quality literature in these languages. During the modern phase, interest in canon and Sanskrit revived, without reducing the importance of compositions of bhakti saint poets. Gradually English took the place of Sanskrit as Pan-Indian language of religious discourse, but the Indian languages also grew enormously even in the field of religion and spirituality, especially in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada and Marathi. While the Bhakti movements were relatively region-based or localised, the modern phase

was Pan-Indian, without again reducing the importance of regions. While the relative emphasis of the classical phase was on Jnana, it shifted to bhakti in the medieval phase. The modern phase gave a balanced emphasis on Jnana, Bhakti, Karmayoga and Raja Yoga.

There was nevertheless a divide between the elite and the common people. The Bhakti movements brought the common people into the mainstream of Hinduism, changing its character, making it more democratic and broad-based. However, in the absence of the emergence of a middle class, the divide between the elite and the common or between the Sanskrit and Sub-altern was not eliminated, though it was considerably narrowed. The modern phase saw the emergence of the middle class and its rise to a status of eminence, which constituted the main following of most of the leaders of the modern phase. The bulk of the followers of even leaders like Mata Amritanandamayi who came from a humble origin, comprises the middle class. There are at least two more forces at work in the modern phase, which were absent during the medieval period – the adult franchise leading to popular democracy, and modernisation – both leading to a significant weakening of the hierarchical and ritual basis of the caste system as explained in the fifth chapter of this book. Including the emergence of an influential middle class, these three forces gave a tremendous boost to giving a broad-base to the Indian society – particularly the Hindu society. The deprived classes began entering the middle class and contributed to its expansion. They entered politics too, and became a force to reckon with. They asserted their religiosity too, through Sanskritisation as well as through adoption of non-caste independent paths within Hinduism. New temples sprung up not only in elite places, but also in slums, and on roadsides and in fishermen hamlets. The poor rub shoulders with the middle classes in religious fairs and festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi, and in pilgrim centres. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims thronging Sabarimalai and many other such places are difficult to distinguish on either caste or class lines. The deprived classes may not sit through discourses of modern spiritual Gurus or read their books, which have attracted mainly the middle class. The subaltern, however, continue to derive inspiration from the medieval Bhakti Saints and modern Gurus such as Narayana Guru. Many modern Gurus are sincerely trying to break the traditional caste and class barriers through social service activities. We thus see elements of both continuity and change in this synthesis still taking place.

Let us first take note of points of continuity between the two earlier phases and the modern phase, and then observe the points of change and the distinctiveness of the modern phase.

### **(ii) Continuity: Personal Background of Spiritual Leaders**

In popular perception, Hinduism has been led by monks or ascetics. As a matter of fact both householders and ascetics have contributed to the development of Hindu thought. This was so in the classical phase as well as in the medieval and modern phases. Though the ascetic Acharyas like Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Vallabha developed different schools of Vedanta, there were also others – the householders, who played an equally important role. The Rshis in the Vedic and Upanishadic phase as well as the majority of Bhakti saints, who played a crucial part in developing and strengthening Hinduism, were householders. This was so in the modern phase too. The renaissance of Hinduism in the modern phase was spearheaded by those coming from outside the traditional *Mathas*. They included both ascetics and householders. Some are difficult to classify as they did not formally adopt Sanyasa, but

lived like ascetics. Swami Vivekananda did not come from any Matha tradition, but started his own order of monks through the Ramakrishna Mathas. Several others like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Srila Prabhupada, Swami Shivananda, Swami Chinmayananda also were like Swami Vivekananda in this respect. A distinguishing feature of ascetics in the modern phase is that though they renounced personal family life, they did not renounce the world. The world was taken as their extended family, and they considered it their mission to serve it. They renounced personal family life, not because of an aversion to it, but only because it enabled them to give full attention to the extended family and to *loka sangraha*. Among the leading householders who contributed to the Renaissance were luminaries like Raja Rammohun Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and S. Radhakrishnan.

Women too played an important role in the development of Hinduism, particularly in the medieval and modern phases. They may be fewer in number than men, but their importance cannot be belittled for that reason. While in the medieval age we had such luminaries like Akka Mahadevi, Andal, Janabai, Sant Meerabai, Lalla and Rupa Bhawani, we had no less women leaders in modern Hinduism of equal eminence like Annie Besant, Sri Sarada Devi, Anandamayi Ma, Mother Krishnabai, the Mother (of Aurobindo Ashram), Mata Amritanandamayi, Nirmala Devi, Godavaritai of Sakuri (Maharashtra) and of course many Brahmakumaris. Women leaders of Bhakti Movements were regarded as rebels, but the new women of the modern phase did not have to project any such rebel-like image to make an impact. They were in fact accepted with equal – if not greater – affection and devotion compared to male leaders. It does not mean, however, that they did not face difficulties as women. They did, as illustrated by the life of Mata Amritanandamayi who had to slog like a slave when she was young and was denied the benefit of proper schooling. In spite of this, she did not choose to project a rebel image. Instead, hers has always been an image of an all embracing love.

As shown earlier, even during the ancient phase, Hinduism was not a creation of Brahmins alone, since the Vedic and Upanishadic sages came from a variety of class and caste background. During the Bhakti movements also, Sants from the so-called lower castes played a prominent role as seen in the preceding chapter. During the modern phase too, we see a mix of religious leaders coming from all castes including even the so-called low castes. Sri Narayan Guru, Sant Gadage Baba, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj and Mata Amritanandamayi came from either Dalit or low caste background, but contributed significantly to the renaissance of Hinduism during the modern phase. Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Aurobindo, Swami Chinmayananda, Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, Sants of Radha Soami Satsang and several other prominent leaders of the modern phase were not Brahmins by birth. Even the traditional *Mathas* are no longer the monopoly of Brahmins. Many non-Brahmin castes including the so-called low castes and Dalit castes have their own *Mathas* in the process of Sanskritisation, some of which are ancient as in the case of Veerashaiva *Mathas* and some were established in the modern phase though legends have been created about their ancient past. The point is that non-Brahmin castes including lower castes have been well represented both among traditional Matha-based leaders and non-traditional leaders of Hinduism during the modern phase. If *Mathas* correspond to the 'Establishment' in religion, non-Brahmin castes have also been a part of it since long and have very much become so in the modern phase. Starting new *Mathas*, including

quite a few not based on caste lines (such as the Ramakrishna *Mathas*), can be taken to mean that the 'Establishment' in religion has now become very much more broad-based. These facts support the contention made in this book that Hinduism cannot be termed as Brahminism. It belonged to all classes and castes, and all classes and castes contributed to its development and dynamics. As in the Bhakti movements, the leaders in the modern phase too made it an important point to denounce caste discrimination and caste distinctions.

Contributions to the modern phase of Hinduism did not come from the intellectuals and the educated alone. There are several important figures in this phase, who did not have any formal education or schooling worth speaking and yet their contribution has been no less valuable than that of the elite and education. We may recall here the names of Shri Shirdi Sai Baba, Shri Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi, Sant Gadagebaba, Sant Tukdoji Maharaj and Shri Nisargadatta Maharaj. There were many more too. They appealed to the masses (except the last mentioned), brought the noble values of a universal religion to them, but they did not fail to attract the middle classes too. The significance of Shri Nisargadatta Maharaj is that even with his humble position and background, he attracted elite intellectuals because of his highly sophisticated thoughts.

Cosmopolitanism of Hinduism opened the doors even to leaders born in other religions without their having to convert to Hinduism. The preceding chapter on Bhakti movements has referred to several saints with Muslim background who played a prominent role, the most eminent of whom was Kabir. This trend continued in the modern phase too. In this phase, we had Sri Shirdi Sai Baba, Shishunal Sharief and Sri 'M' from Muslim background; and Sister Nivedita, Annie Besant, Mother (of Aurobindo Ashram), and Mata Nirmala Devi from a Christian background. 'Foreign origin' was not a contentious issue in Indian religions; not only Sister Nivedita, Annie Besant and the Mother of Aurobindo Ashram in the modern phase, but also Heliodorus (Indo-Greek king who became a *Bhagavata*, devotee of Vasudeva), Milinda (Buddhist king), and Kanishka (Buddhist king) in the Classical phase were accepted as leaders of religion, though they were all of 'foreign origin'. Inclusiveness has been a prominent feature of all Indian religions including Hinduism all along.

### **(iii) Syncretism and Universality of Appeal**

There are many examples of 'shared faith' as Yoginder Sikand has put it (Sikand 2003), where people belonging to different faiths worship together. This has been the case all along in India right from the classical phase to the modern phase. The concept of religion in the western sense (in terms of exclusivity) is foreign to Hinduism. What it knew was spirituality which had universal appeal. Though Islam emphasised its exclusiveness from other faiths, there were several explicit attempts at syncretism during the medieval period, the main examples being Sufism, Kabir Panth, Nund Rishi in Kashmir, and the Sikh Panth. The syncretic tradition continued in the modern phase too. Brahmo Samaj, especially under Keshab Chandra Sen, was an attempt at syncretism with Christianity. Among the contemporary examples of shared faith, Sikand mentions the Ayyappa-Waavar cult in Kerala, Our Lady of Good Health – the Blessed Virgin Mary of Velankanni in Tamil Nadu, Sri Guru Dattatreya Baba Budan Darga in Karnataka, Hazrat Jagat Guru Abdul Qadir Chisti al-Qadri Ling Bandh of Kowthalam in Andhra Pradesh, Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi in Maharashtra, the Imam Mahdi and the Buddh Avatar of Panna in

Madhya Pradesh, Goga Pir in Rajasthan, Baba Ruttan in Punjab, Baba Jiwan Shah in Jammu and in Kashmir. Besides these examples cited by Sikand, Meher Baba (1894-1969), an eminent Parsee Saint, had a significant Hindu following in addition to Parsee devotees. Sri Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi too have many followers from other faiths. Many of the spiritual leaders of the modern phase have a significant following abroad too. Apart from the last two here, Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, Sri Sri Ravishankar, Srila Prabhupada, Brahmakumaris have many followers abroad, not just among Non-Resident Indians but among others too.

Most of the spiritual leaders of the modern phase made it a point to emphasise the universal appeal of their preaching. While drawing inspiration and ideas from the Vedas, Upanishads and the *Gita* and other Hindu texts, they never projected any impression that their teaching was confined to Hindus. They took care to separate spirituality from religion in the narrow sectarian sense, and emphasized the former. The universal appeal of Hinduism was further helped during the modern phase through rediscovery of the Western values of democracy, humanism, social equity and respect for women, in its own tradition. Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi achieved this task with considerable ease and blended new values with traditional Indian values of truth, non-violence and respect for the dignity of every individual.

The universality of appeal was within Hinduism too, extended to all castes. Not only all the spiritual leaders of Hinduism – at least those outside the traditional Brahmin *Mathas* – openly denounced caste discrimination and caste system in no uncertain terms. They also followed it up in practice by taking up disciples from various castes and training leaders from deprived castes. Ramakrishna Mission, ISKCON and many more institutions were warmly open to seekers from all castes and encouraged them to be leaders. The story of *How a Shepherd Boy Became a Saint – Life and Teachings of Swami Adbhutananda* (Chetanananda 2002) is particularly interesting in this context. Unlettered, and known popularly as Latu Maharaj, Swami Adbhutananda was a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and attained the highest wisdom. Swami Vivekananda called him as Sri Ramakrishna's greatest miracle. Sri Narayan Guru and Mata Amritanandamayi, Sri Balagangadharnath Swamiji of Adi Chunchanagiri Math, Sri Nareyana Yati and several more accelerated this inclusive process.

#### **(iv) Continuity in Sanatana Dharma**

The modern phase marked a renewed interest in the scriptures of the classical age and writings of the great Acharyas. Many leaders of the modern age like B.G. Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Vinobaji, Aurobindo, S. Radhakrishnan, Srila Prabhupada, Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Shivananda, Swami Chinmayananda and others wrote treatises and their own interpretations of the *Gita*. The principal Upanishads were translated with commentaries by several including S. Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, Hiriyan, R.D. Ranade and others. Translations of major epics – Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and others appeared. Rendering of the Ramayana and Mahabharata by C. Rajagopalachari (1878-1972) were particularly lucid and popular. Bulk of available ancient literature in Sanskrit, Tamil and other regional languages was republished with translation in contemporary spoken language. Artists too played an important role. Raja Ravivarma recreated Hindu gods and goddesses in his paintings, which proved to be very popular and stimulated calendar art. Colour copies of Ravivarma's paintings adorned the walls

and even the Puja rooms in millions of Hindu houses. Musicians popularised devotional songs, verses from ancient classics and even Vedic *mantras*, which were made available to millions in taped form or CDs. Many films were made based on themes from Hindu epics and *Puranas*. Known as *Pouranic* films, they became popular in rural and urban theatres alike. The modern phase thus hardly saw any denial or rejection of *Sanatana Dharma* literature and values. It was marked instead by a reiteration and revival, with reinterpretation where necessary. This was so even in the case of spiritual leaders of non-Brahmin background. Literature of Bhakti movements was also not ignored, some of which was made available in English. It reached a pan-Indian audience, unlike before when it was confined to respective regions. Even children's literature reflected this revival of interest in the past literature. *Amara Chitra Katha* series brought out by Anant Pai played an eminent role in popularising the great epics and the life stories of great saints among children in easy-to-read and well illustrated books. The role performed by parents and grand-parents earlier was taken over by such books for children. The role of Harikatha and Keertankars continued unabated, who began to appear on the electronic media too. Several of them won great fame by rendering Keertans and Harikathas in English too, went abroad and kept the Non-Resident Indians there in touch with Indian culture and Hinduism, in addition to doing so in regional languages in India. Two brothers – Sant Bhadragiri Keshavadas and Sant Bhadragiri Achyutadasa, and also Aralumallige Parthasarathy from Karnataka distinguished themselves greatly in this field. These are only examples, since there are many others like them in other regions. This was apart from the lecture tours of religious leaders, which were extensive, both in India and world at large, covering not only USA, Canada and Europe, but also Africa, South East Asia and Far East. They were by no means missionaries, but played an important role in reiterating and strengthening Hinduism. They were not one but in hundreds of thousands.

If we deduce a gist of the teaching of all the spiritual gurus during the modern phase, it becomes crystal clear how the phase is marked by a continuation from the past. Though it is difficult to deduce such a gist, it is easy to mark a certain refrain across the teachings of most of the Gurus, which can be accepted as the gist. The major element in this refrain is an assertion of humanism of *Sanatana Dharma* derived both from the philosophy of Upanishads and the *Gita* on the one hand and the teachings of the Bhakti Sants on the other. Swami Vivekananda was the most prominent exponent of this, basing himself on the Advaita philosophy, and many others also joined him. Mahatma Gandhi did this without depending much on the Advaita philosophy and derived his humanism from what he considered to be the basic tenets of Hinduism – Truth and Non-violence. Gandhiji did not reject Advaita philosophy, but the two principles of truth and non-violence were enough for him. Advaita meant that there is divinity and dignity in each individual, which also meant the caste system was irrational and also inconsistent with Hinduism. It also meant that the doctrine of 'original sin' or that a human being is a sinner was unacceptable. Instead of having to merely defend itself against Christian propaganda, Advaita was used as a powerful instrument of attack on a basic Christian doctrine. Once the divinity of each was accepted, it followed that each had to be treated with dignity and love. Helping and serving others was viewed in this perspective, and not as sentimental charity. The theistic perspective of Bhakti in this regard, which did not accept Advaita, was no different from Islamic and Christian perspective; however, the Bhakti perspective also did not subscribe to the doctrine of 'original sin'. The Bhakti school did not regard God as a stern Patriarch watching every move of sinful human beings, but as a treasure of love eager to bestow His compassion on His beloved children. The essence of Bhakti was love, not fear. It may

be recalled that Bhakti school also was an integral part of *Sanatana Dharma* right from the classical phase, but got a boost during the medieval period, which continued in the modern phase too.

The second element in the refrain was the assertion of liberalism and tolerance in Hinduism. This was done prominently by Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Mahatma Gandhi, in which many others too joined. The third element in the refrain is the assertion by many including mystics and ascetics that there is no mutual exclusiveness between the goals of Dharma and Moksha, and that a householder engaged in worldly tasks can also have high spiritual aspirations, provided the person concerned respects dharma or ethics. Many Gurus even discouraged followers from renunciation. The fourth element in the refrain is the insistence on following moral values. Mahatma Gandhi was prominent exponent of this, and he was not alone.

The belief in the Law of Karma was reiterated by almost all leaders, but with more emphasis on human capacity to change one's own destiny which the Law allows. There was continued acceptance of the main paths of God realisation developed during the ancient and classical phase – *Jnana* (along with *Rajayoga*), *Bhakti*, and *Karmayoga*. However, the emphasis of individual leaders differed. Aurobindo developed a path that integrated all of them – Integral Yoga. Gandhiji advocated Jnana (search for Truth), Karma and Bhakti alike. Jnana-marga was emphasised by Ramana Maharshi and Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. On the other hand, Swami Vivekananda, B G Tilak and Aurobindo put emphasis on Karmayoga saying that one's own moral responsibilities in this world mattered most. Shirdi Sai Baba and Srila Prabhupada were emphatic on Bhakti. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Brahma Kumaris and others focussed on meditation in the broad tradition of Rajayoga, but with their own innovations. *All*, however, emphasised social service and help to fellow humans as necessary and integral to any spiritual path, since without love and compassion to all creatures, spiritual attainment would be hollow. Though this precept could be interpreted as an instance of syncretism with Christianity, it was derived from the teachings of Hindu scriptures themselves, particularly the *Gita*.

### **(v) Change: Distinctiveness of Modern Phase**

With all the above features of continuity, the modern-cum- contemporary phase has its own distinctiveness, which sets it apart from the earlier two phases. An interesting feature of Bhakti movements was its central focus on bhakti, in spite of its diversity in social and linguistic background of Sants. The modern phase, however, has no such central focus and resembles more the ancient phase with multifarious interests and paths. The Bhakti phase was more emotional, focussed on loving both God and fellow beings. The modern phase is more intellectual with greater appeal to reasoning, though it certainly has an honourable place for Bhakti, mysticism, Yoga and meditation too. There is something for everybody in the modern phase, just as in the ancient phase. One can choose the path best suited to one.

An important feature of distinctiveness of modern phase is the strong emphasis on social service to fellow humans. During the earlier phases, the virtues of charity, hospitality and helping fellow human beings and even other non-human creatures were emphasised, but it never took an organised form. It was all at an individual level. During the modern phase, many Hindu institutions and individuals, under the banner of Hinduism or not, took to social service in a big way. Even the traditional *Mathas* made a breakthrough in that they took to spreading secular education, providing health care, distress relief, taking care of the destitute and the aged and so on. Hinduism can no longer be accused of ignoring

this *Seva* (service) aspect. This may have been influenced by the role of Christian missionaries and also by the assimilation of western values of humanism. But Hinduism did rise to the occasion and did not fight shy of emulation. Several Hindu individuals and institutions may have lacked adequate resources, including organisational resources. But their sincerity cannot be doubted. A glowing example of intense sincerity for service is Sant Gadagebaba, who almost single-handedly, sought to change the face of Maharashtra as far as deprived communities were concerned, through social service. He did not teach hatred of upper castes to the deprived classes. He taught love and self-reliance. Sri Narayana Guru in Kerala changed the fortunes of his entire community, which was once deprived and oppressed.

Social Reforms and social change have been a burning issue during the modern phase. Enlightened Hindus, influenced by English education and Western humanism, looked upon social evils like Sati, female infanticide, untouchability and caste system with shame and horror. They also could see that these evils were not consistent with basic teachings of Hinduism, in fact, they were against them. The task was first taken up by Raja Rammohan Roy during the modern phase but continued unabated even later. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) and Dhondo Keshav Karve (1858-1962) took up the task of emancipation of women, women's education and widow remarriage. Some of the reformers like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy (1879-1973) took Hinduism itself to task for these evils, while others thought that even if they were a part of Hindu Society, the purpose would be better served by reforming the society than by reviling Hinduism for it. The legislative process, however, seems to have helped even more, by banning Sati and child marriage, permission and recognition to widow remarriage, a similar legal validation of inter-caste marriage, the Hindu Law, and reservation in government employment and admission to educational institutions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes – extended later to Other Backward Castes. A bitter critic of Hinduism though he was, Dr. Ambedkar made a tremendously valuable contribution to Hinduism by trying to reform its society through the required legislation. Sants of the medieval age could not succeed in social reform despite strongly advocating it, because they had no political and legal backing. It was the modern phase and its legislative process in a secular frame that finally dislodged the *Dharmashastras* from their legal authority. Sardar Panikkar observed that social evils persisted in Hindu society through ages, not because of lack of dynamism on the part of Hinduism but because India had lost political power for nearly seven to eight hundred years (Panikkar 1953: 328). When democratic forces strengthened, the demand for social reform could materialise through legislation. But the legislative process alone cannot work, and the ground for its success was prepared by religious reformers. It is wrong to blame upper castes for all social evils. Amiya P. Sen observes: “Not surprisingly, barring a few exceptions, reform movements concerning Hindus were either initiated or led by Brahmins [Brahmans]. In some regions the practical enactment of new reform measures also went to the credit of Brahmins. In Bengal, the first man to marry a widow under the Widow Remarriage Act was a Brahman” (Sen 2003: 17-18). Though social reforms including abolition of untouchability and caste discrimination, and women's emancipation seem distinctly modern, the ground for it was prepared by the Bhakti movements. The task was made easier by the recognition that social reforms were consistent with the basic teachings of Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita.

Apart from the legislative process, forces of modernisation and economic development also helped social reforms. With the breakdown of old institutional forces like Jajmani System, and with urbanisation and modern education having gathered momentum, the caste system considerably weakened. The role

of rituals also declined. For example, the Hindu marriage ceremony which used to take at least a week only some fifty years ago, is now reduced to only a day even when done according to the *Shāstras*. Several modern sects do not practice ritual worship of deities. Priests and even heads of *Mathas* are emerging from the so-called low castes. Sophisticated practices like meditation and *Yogasanas* are no longer the domain of higher castes. Devotional songs or Bhajans are sung in mixed gatherings without consideration of caste and class. Cinema, the printing press and the electronic media have also played an important role in giving easy access to religion for the masses.

Women have started getting new opportunities as never before and begun to occupy public spaces monopolised by men earlier. The enactment of Hindu Law made it possible for Hindu women to obtain divorce and claim alimony; it enforced monogamy, made demanding and taking dowry illegal, and gave rights of inheritance and property to women. The task, however, has yet to be fully achieved, since dowry system has yet to vanish and women's status is not yet equated with that of men in practice. Sexual harassment is hardly a thing of the past. India is still behind many other countries both in respect of human development and gender equality, as seen from its low rank in this regard in respect of concerned indicators published in the Human Development Reports of UNDP.

It is hoped that with a faster pace of economic, educational and social development combined with transparent democracy, the socio-economic situation would improve in India to the levels prevailing in advanced countries before long. Hinduism cannot and will not be an obstacle in this improvement. What distinguishes the modern phase from the earlier in respect of social reforms is not that the Hinduism of earlier phases was against them and the modern phase supported them, but that the social evils could not be curbed without the aid of a pan-Indian legislative process, modern mass education, mass media, urbanization and modern economic development all of which accelerated social reforms. Religion alone could not achieve this.

Another prominent distinctive feature of the modern phase of Hinduism is its globalisation. In terms of sheer numbers, globalisation of Hinduism is still very limited. Of the 1025 million Hindus all over the world (as in December 2012), which is 15 per cent of the world population, 94.3 per cent are in India alone, and 5 per cent in the Asia-Pacific region. The only other country with a majority of its population being Hindu is Nepal. India and Nepal together account for 96.6 per cent of the world Hindu population.<sup>30</sup> There is, however, a good deal of scatter of Hindu population almost all over the world. The globalisation of Hinduism has been more in terms of the spread of Hindu ideals and values like respect for all faiths equally and concern for environment, than in the number of Hindus. At one level, the process was started by Max Müller, who popularised the ancient Indian sacred literature in the West. The next landmarks were the achievements of Theosophical Society and Swami Vivekananda. The momentum gained with almost every prominent Guru establishing several centres abroad, with disciples stationed there, organising regular lectures and discussions, and selling Hindu religious literature, during the twentieth century. Along with this, many temples came to be built, a prominent role in which was taken by the followers of Swami Narayan and ISKCON. While these efforts covered both non-resident Indians and the local people, there was no attempt to convert non-Hindus to Hinduism. Nevertheless, India became a major centre of spiritual tourism, and the two-way traffic became significant. At another level, the process of globalization was started by the migration of Hindus in large numbers to several countries right from the nineteenth century. Gurus in India tried to reach out to them, providing spiritual anchor and guidance, and helping them to nourish their cultural and religious roots. They have also

spread the ideals and values of Hinduism and its special contribution in terms of yoga among native inhabitants who may still retain their respective faiths. Globalization of Hinduism covers thus not only the Hindus whose ancestors migrated from India and settled there, but also the native inhabitants of the countries. Hinduism thus became a global religion, no longer confined to India, with valuable principles to teach like respect for differences in views and faiths, for diversity and environmental sustainability. Globalisation has helped India not only in getting funds for social service projects and other schemes started by the spiritual leaders, but also to spread its influence. However, an important significance of globalization of Hinduism is that, identifying Hinduism exclusively with India has become difficult, just as it has become unreasonable and impractical to identify India only with Hinduism. Separation of nationalism and politics from religion, which is a fall-out from globalization of Hinduism, has the potential of improving communal harmony in India.

Interestingly, this ancient Sanatana Dharma or Hinduism has shown continuing evidence of its relevance and potency in the modern phases. This is illustrated by examples, some of which have been discussed earlier, are brought here together for readers' convenience. First is the case of Swami Sahajananda's (Swaminarayan's) success during the British days in Gujarat in 19th century in establishing moral order and peace in areas infested with lawlessness, violence and plunder. Next is the case of Narayan Guru's success in social transformation of his downtrodden community and in incorporating it into the Hindu mainstream (see Ch.5). The most prominent example is the inspiration that Hinduism provided to the Freedom Movement, for the moral courage imparted to the people, and creating pride in their culture and history. This was done by Gandhiji and many others without inducing hatred against followers of other religions. He made Truth and Nonviolence the basic principles for his freedom struggle. The survival and sustainability of democracy in India owes, in no small measure, to the liberal and tolerant ethos of Indian religions, and to the fact that the bulk of India's population professes them. It is again the same factor which made it possible for a nation yet to be adequately modernised to declare itself as secular, and reject a theocratic state. If a fringe section of Hindus were fanatical and parochial about their religion, it does not and cannot offset or mar the above facts of history.

We have also another example of continuing relevance of Hinduism in the inspiring case of Srila Prabhupad's success in dissuading thousands of youths in USA, and UK and Western Europe from the influence of drugs and drawing them into ISKCON movement, through the power of his Mahamantra – '*Hare Krishna ...*'. Next is the case, pointed out by James (2001: 499-530), of how the *Chipko* movement<sup>31</sup> successfully used the imagery of Shivas' locks capturing river Ganga and moderating her force. Shiva's locks were a metaphor for forests which if revived could control flooding and help recharge local water resources in the Himalayas. Quite apart from a single Movement such as the Chipko, the attitude to the natural environment in Hinduism is one of respecting and conserving it, rather than one of exploiting it (as has been explained in section 7 of chapter 3 above). One more example is the case of farmers' leader Sharad Joshi's success in launching Lakshmi Mukti Andolan in Maharashtra, where he persuaded farmers to transfer land in the name of their wives by appealing to them in the name of avenging the curse of Sita. These are only illustrations and more instances can be found and cited. More than such occasional instances, the evidence for constant and continuous relevance of Hinduism in the lives of people is to be found in the fast growing popularity of meditation, Bhajan groups, temple construction, *Harikathas* and *Keertans*, and of discourses by religious leaders.

In this modern age full of stress, Hinduism has been playing a major role in helping people reduce their stress and cope up with the fast pace of life and its uncertainties, and above all in giving a sense of purpose and meaning to life.

The outstanding feature of Hinduism which is particularly relevant for its future in this Millennium is that it has never claimed any monopoly of truth either in its perception of God or in the paths to self realisation, liberation or salvation. Lord Krshna declared: In whatever way people worship Me, in the same way I fulfill their desires (Gita IV. 11). Hinduism does not claim that only those who believe in Krshna go to Heaven and others go to hell. An attitude of respect for differences – what B P Singh(2011) calls as the *bahudha* approach, which is inherent in Hinduism, will impart unrivalled respectability to it in the future world, if also followed in practice. Hopefully, more than mere economic and technological development, this Millennium will witness a triumph of the forces of freedom, liberalism, tolerance and concern for environment over the forces of violence, parochialism and fundamentalism. The rich cultural diversity that we have needs to be protected as a valuable heritage at the global and also national levels, as much as bio-diversity. If a religion has to survive in this millennium, it will have to first learn religious tolerance and respect for pluralism both within and outside of it, and recognise that there is no single exclusively valid path to spirituality. Let us hope that democracy will thrive in this millennium; but democracy is nothing without respect for liberalism and pluralism.

I conclude the book by quoting a very precious gift of Hinduism to the world in the form of a verse which has tremendous contemporary relevance. The verse emphasises not merely tolerance, but also respect, compassion and love to all as if we all belong to one family, with commitment to carry out our respective moral responsibilities. The verse is:

*Ayam nijah paro veti ganana laghu chetasam /*  
*Udara-charitanam tu Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam //*

(*Hitopadesha, Sandhi 131*)

(He is ‘ours’, that one is the ‘other’.  
Such is the calculation of the narrow-minded.  
For those with liberal conduct, however,  
The whole world is one family!)

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 9

1. From an address in London 10th Nov. 1896, reproduced in *Vivekananda* (1997-2001) CWSV Vol. II: 295.
2. From an address at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 20th Sept, 1893, reproduced in (*ibid* I : 20).
3. The original is ‘*dhanaddhi dharmah sravati shailadapi nadi yatha.*’ It is from verse 23, Chapter 8 of *Shanti Parva of Mahabharata*, as cited in Aiyangar (1934: 23).
4. This incident is narrated in the biographies of both Ramakrishna Paramahansa and of Swami Vivekananda. The latter himself refers to it in *Vivekananda* (1990: 50).
5. For a more thorough discussion of Gandhian approach to ethics and its applications, see chapters 1 to 4 in Nadkarni (2011: 35-124).
6. This account about Thyagaraja is based on Rao (1995: 98-105). Rao has called him Thyaga Raju, but he is popularly known as Thyagaraja.
7. This account of Shishunil Sharief is based on a book in Kannada – *Sharief Sahebara Charitre hagu Tatva-padagalu* by H T Mahantesha-shastri, pub. by P C Shabadimath Book Depot, Gadag. Year of publ. is not given. It contains Sharief’s life-sketch and also selected songs both in Kannada and Urdu in Kannada script.
8. The account of Sant Gadagebaba above is based on Pingale (2002).
9. Information on Sant Tukadoji Maharaj was obtained from *Lokarajya* (Special issue on him) November 2000. Thanks are due to V B Lokare for making it available.
10. There are several books on the life and teaching of Sri Aurobindo: Diwakar (1953) and Pandit (1998) are popular. For a short but very useful life-sketch, see Heehs’ ‘Introduction’ in Heehs (ed) (1999), and Minor (1991-a).
11. See his *The Secret of the Veda, Hymns to the Mystic Fire, The Upanishads, and Essays on the Gita*, all published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.
12. From ‘Letters to Disciples’, as quoted by Heehs (2002: 464).
13. This account about Swami Ramdas is based on Heehs (2002: 497-509) and also on a chat with Swami Vishwanand, who was close to Swami Ramdas and Mother Krishnabai.
14. This is so according to Goswami (2002: x). According to another version from Manipur, Srila Prabhupada was born near a village in Imphal, Manipur (told personally by Dr Komol Singha who hails from Manipur).
15. This account is based partly on my personal knowledge of the institution and its working, especially when I was in Gulbarga, and also on an official brochure of the institution – *Landmarks in the History of Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwavidyalaya*, brought out on the occasion of its Diamond Jubilee Celebrations in 1996.
16. This account about Swami Shivananda is based mostly on Miller (1991).
17. The brief account of Swami Chinmayananda’s life here is based on Patchen (2003).
18. Based on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dayanada\\_Saraswati\\_%28%C%84rsha\\_vidya%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dayanada_Saraswati_%28%C%84rsha_vidya%29); [http://www.aimforseva.org/about\\_us/overview](http://www.aimforseva.org/about_us/overview); both downloaded on 19-12-12; and letters from AIM for Seva recd in December 2012.
19. As referred in Mehta (1993), in Preface, p.vi.
20. This account is based on the ‘Introduction’ in the interview given to Juline (1993).
21. As quoted in web page on Sadhu Vaswani, <http://contents/ashrams/vaswani/main.asp#top>.

22. This and the following account of life of Sri Sathya Sai Baba is based on Rao (1995) and Kasturi (1980).
23. Based on Swami Pavitrananda (1967); this includes a chapter on ‘Culled from Stray Thoughts’ which is used here to give a crux of her teaching. Also useful was Swami Shuddhasatwanannda (1962).
24. The account of Anandamayi Ma’s life and teachings here is based on Heehs’ ‘Anandamayi Ma’ in Heehs (2002: 533-548), Maschmann (2002), and a booklet on her – *Our Mother: Shree Shree Ma Anandamayee* brought out by Shree Shree Ma Anandamayee Trust in Bangalore in 1979 (author anonymous).
25. The account of Mata Amrtianandamayi’s life here is based mainly on Cornell (2001), Amritaswarupananda (1996) and Warriar (2003).
26. *Panchamṛtam* is offered during ritual worship to God and then sipped by devotee as a symbol of grace from God. It consists of five ingredients – milk, curds, honey, sugar and ghee, and is delicious in taste.
27. This account is based on Mahajan (1999).
28. Based on websites: [www.indiayogi.com/content/indsaints/ravishankar.asp](http://www.indiayogi.com/content/indsaints/ravishankar.asp) and [www.artofliving.org/-9k-21-March-2004](http://www.artofliving.org/-9k-21-March-2004); <http://www.artofliving.org/srisri> downloaded on 19-12-12; [http://en-wikipedia.org/wiki/RaviShankar%28Spiritual leader%29](http://en-wikipedia.org/wiki/RaviShankar%28Spiritual%20leader%29) downloaded 19-12-12; and <http://srisriravishankar.org/biography/timeline> downloaded 19-12-12.
29. This brief account about Sri ‘M’ is based on ‘The Mystique of ‘M’: A Profile’ by Arvind Menon in Sri ‘M’ (2002: 1-20), a chat on phone with Suryadev of Satsang Communications which has published this, and Sri ‘M’ (2011).
30. Sourced from <http://www.pewforum.org/global-religions-landscape-hindu.aspx> (accessed on January 15, 2013).
31. Chipko’ in Hindi is ‘to hug’. The Chipko Movement was started to save trees by hugging them - protecting them from the axe, and in general to save the Himalayan forests endangered by ‘development’ projects. The main leaders of the Movement were Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt. (See Guha 1989, esp. chapter 7 on the Chipko Movement).

# References

- A A – Advaita Ashrama  
B V B – Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan  
C I S – Contributions to Indian Sociology  
E P W – Economic and Political Weekly  
M B – Motilal Banarasidass  
N D – New Delhi  
N P H – Navjivan Publishing House  
O U P – Oxford University Press  
S A A – Sri Aurobindo Ashram  
S R M – Sri Ramakrishna Math

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# Glossary

<i>Adhikara</i>	– The right one is entitled to.
<i>Advaita</i>	– A school of philosophy in Hinduism which regards the Ultimate Truth as One, where the Supreme or Absolute ( <i>Brahman</i> ) and the Self ( <i>Atman</i> ) are one and the same; monism.
<i>Ananda</i>	– an aspect of God as Bliss or Pure Joy, as in <i>achchidananda</i> .
<i>Ananta</i>	– Infinite; literally endless.
<i>Animism</i>	– Religion based on the belief that inanimate or natural phenomena have souls or spirits, involving their worship.
<i>Apourusheya</i>	– Not originating from human beings, divinely revealed (such as the <i>Vedas</i> ).
<i>Arati</i>	– Practice of waving lighted wicks soaked in oil placed on a metal plate before the deity being worshipped so that a glow is created on the face of the deity.
<i>Artha</i>	– 1: Acquisition of wealth or gaining economic welfare, as one of the four <i>Purusharthas</i> . 2: Meaning, Purpose, Goal.
<i>Ashrama</i>	– Hermitage; usually a place where a sage teaches students in matters of religious discipline and philosophy.
<i>Ashramas</i>	– Stages in one's life: <i>Brahmacharya</i> (Celibate student), <i>Grhastha</i> (householder), <i>Vanaprastha</i> (retreat from the hustle and bustle of mundane life), and <i>Sanyasa</i> (renouncing personal possessions, and adopting the whole world as one's family).
<i>Atman</i>	– Soul (to be distinguished from body-centric ego). (See also <i>Advaita</i> ).
<i>Avidya</i>	– Wrong understanding; ignorance.
<i>Bhakti</i>	– Devotion, Love.
<i>Bhakti-marga</i>	– The path of devotion or love to God realization.

<i>Brahma</i>	– Creative aspect of God along with <i>Vishnu</i> (sustaining aspect), and <i>Shiva</i> (dissolving aspect).
<i>Brahman</i> (also <i>Parabrahma</i> )	– The Impersonal Absolute (see also <i>Advaita</i> )
<i>Brahmanas</i>	– A part of Vedic scriptures dealing with rituals (to be distinguished from Brahmins as a caste; in Sanskrit, the same term <i>Brahmana</i> is used for both).
<i>Caste</i>	– A word introduced by Portuguese (original word <i>Casta</i> ) to denote endogamous communities in Hindu Society; <i>jati</i> .
<i>Chit</i>	– An aspect of God as Consciousness or Awareness, as in <i>Sachchidananda</i> .
<i>Darshana</i>	– <i>Philosophy, school of philosophy</i>
<i>Dharma</i>	– 1: Code of moral conduct or duty, in traditional usage; 2: Natural inclination (as in <i>Prakṛti-dharma</i> ), or aptitude (as in <i>svabhava-dharma</i> ); 3: Religion as in modern usage (as Hindu-dharma).
<i>Dharma-yuddha</i>	– Battle conducted according to prescribed moral conduct or principles; battle for a just cause.
<i>Dhṛti</i>	– Fortitude, moral resoluteness or integrity, moral courage.
<i>Epistemology</i>	– Branch of philosophy that probes into nature, methods, limits, criteria and validity of knowledge.
<i>Great Tradition</i>	– Mainstream Tradition (as distinguished from the Little Tradition).
<i>Henotheism</i> (also Kathenotheism)	– A term used by Max Muller to describe the Hindu Practice of worshipping several deities, but one at a time by turn, and regarding the deity being worshipped at any one point of time as the Supreme.
<i>Hindutva</i>	– Nationalism based on ‘Hinduness’ involving acknowledgement of India as ‘fatherland’ and cultural primacy accorded to religions originating from India (should not be confused with Hinduism.)
<i>Impersonal God</i>	– God seen as Absolute, with all distinctions and attributes dissolved, <i>Nirguna Brahman</i> (distinguished from Personal God)
<i>Ishwara</i>	– Personal God, the Supreme Lord, seen as formless or with form, as per the inclination of the devotee.
<i>Japa</i>	– Constant repetition of the name of God or a <i>mantra</i> with awareness and devotion, usually counting with rosary.
<i>Jati</i>	– Endogamous social unit or community in Hindu / Indian Society, determined by birth; caste (not the same as <i>Varna</i> ).
<i>Jñāna</i>	– Knowledge.
<i>Kāma</i>	– See <i>Purusharthas</i>

<i>Karma</i>	– 1: Action or work as in <i>Karma-marga</i> (path of work). 2: Accumulated effect of past deeds with potential to affect the present and future.
<i>Karma-yoga</i> (also <i>Karma-marga</i> )	– Path of selfless work without personal attachment as a way of God realization.
<i>Kathenotheism</i>	– See Henotheism.
<i>Little Tradition</i>	– Peripheral religious traditions and practices as in village Hinduism and <i>Tantra</i> (distinguished from the Great Tradition).
<i>Loka-sangraha</i>	– Service to people; working for the welfare of people (as preached in the <i>Gita</i> ).
<i>Mathas</i>	– Hindu monasteries headed by a senior monk.
<i>Maya</i>	– Appearance or projection as on a screen; creative power of God.
<i>Mithya</i>	– Literally, false; Shankara (Advaita) uses it to denote relative reality, which is neither real nor unreal in absolute sense ( <i>e.g.</i> ornament of gold is relatively real, while gold is basically real).
<i>Moksha</i>	– See <i>Purusharthas</i> .
<i>Nirakara</i>	– Formless, invisible (as with <i>Nirguna Brahman</i> )
<i>Nirguna</i>	– God seen as one without attributes and form (distinguished from <i>Saguna</i> ).
<i>Pagans</i>	– Non-Christians in the early days of Christianity and earlier; Pantheists.
<i>Pantheism</i>	– Religion based on the belief that the Universe (Nature) is God or manifestation of God; nature worship (to be distinguished from animism).
<i>Personal God</i>	– God with whom one can establish a personal relation or rapport; to whom one can pray.
<i>Prasad</i>	– 1. What is received from God after worship, usually from the food offering made to God as <i>naivedya</i> , or from flowers offered and placed on the deity; 2. Serenity ( <i>Gita</i> II. 65).
<i>Puja</i>	– Worship.
<i>Purusharthas</i>	– Four goals of human existence: <i>Dharma</i> (moral conduct/duty, piety), <i>Artha</i> (acquisition of wealth or economic welfare), <i>Kama</i> (satisfying desires, sensual pleasure) and <i>Moksha</i> (liberation, Self-realisation).
<i>Rasa</i>	– Subtle essence which is pleasing and engaging; for example as in music, artwork, poetry, in a delicious dish, or even in the joy of living meaningfully.
<i>Rasika</i>	– One who can appreciate and enjoy <i>rasa</i> .
<i>Rshi</i>	– <i>Rishi</i> - Sage.
<i>Sachchidananda</i>	– (Sat + <i>Chit</i> + <i>Ananda</i> ) - Pure Being, Pure Consciousness and Pure Bliss or joy : description of the Supreme in terms of three attributes or aspects
<i>Sadhana</i>	– Spiritual endeavour; spiritual striving or seeking.

<i>Saguna</i>	– God seen as one with attributes ( <i>guna</i> ) (conceptualized as with form or without).
<i>Sanātana</i>	– Eternal, perpetual (does not mean orthodox, conservative or rigid)
<i>Sanātana Dharma</i>	– Moral conduct based on eternal values; traditional name for Hinduism.
<i>Sanyasa</i>	– Ritual renunciation; abandoning worldly attachments in favour of spiritual pursuit.
<i>Sanyasi</i>	– One who has taken <i>Sanyasa</i> , a monk; one who is ‘in the world but not of the world.’
<i>Sat</i>	– That which exists / is; Pure Being or existential aspect of God, along with <i>Chit</i> (consciousness) and <i>Ananda</i> (Bliss).
<i>Sati</i>	– An uncommon practice of a widow voluntarily burning herself to death on the pyre on which her husband’s body is cremated, believing that thereby both would continue to be together after death. (The practice was banned by Lord William Bentinck after persuasion by Raja Ramamanohar Roy in the early 19th century).
<i>Satyam</i>	– Truth.
Secularism	– 1: In western sense (a) primacy given to promotion of economic welfare rather than to spiritual development as a human goal, (b) separation of state from religion. 2: In the Indian sense, equal respect to all religions ( <i>sarva dharma sama bhava</i> ) or neutrality between religions ( <i>dharma nirapekshata</i> ). 3: Not concerned with religion.
<i>Seva</i>	– Service.
<i>Shivam</i>	– Auspicious; Personal or Ethical aspect of God, along with <i>Satyam</i> and <i>Sundaram</i> .
<i>Shraddha</i>	– Intense dedication to striving for Self-realisation or union with God; faith.
<i>Shruti</i>	– What is heard from the Divine; i.e., scriptures comprising <i>Vedas</i> and <i>Upanishads</i> (to be distinguished from <i>Smrtis</i> , which have a lower status than <i>Shruti</i> ).
<i>Smrtis</i>	– That part of literature in Sanskrit which served as law-books to guide daily conduct and mundane lives of human beings, such as <i>Manusmrti</i> (to be distinguished from <i>Shruti</i> ).
<i>Untouchability</i>	– A practice of segregating certain castes for discrimination against them, whose touch was supposed to be polluting, and who were barred from access to temples, drinking water wells and localities used by other castes.
<i>Sundaram</i>	– Aspect of God as Beauty, along with <i>Satyam</i> and <i>Shivam</i> .
<i>Varṇa</i>	– Community determined by social division of labour or occupation, not necessarily by birth (not the same as <i>jati</i> or caste).
<i>Yajna</i>	– Sacrifice, generally; any devotional offering either to God/gods or to venerable/ needy persons.