

Unity in Diversity: Hindu Perspective

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Abstract: Both accommodation and resistance were parts of Hindu behaviour pattern. caste is related to intolerance and much more. Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar fought for the rights and upliftment of the 'untouchables' thereby giving them their due place in society. Not letting them flourish in every possible way is a denial of humanity. Kant's advice can be emphasised here: "A social order requires defining the freedom of the individual in such a way that it discovers its own limits in other people." Hinduism accommodates a great variety of life styles and practices. Hindu communities assimilated people, customs and ideas despite having a hierarchy based on caste, age sex, and also despite having geographical diversity and thus bringing in unity without uniformity in diversity without fragmentation. Within the Hindu fold there are numerous evidences of crosscultural fertilization. Their religious outlook is unitary. Monier-Williams, a British scholar, wrote that Hinduism was like 'the sacred fig-tree of India (the banyan), which from a single stem sends out numerous branches destined to send roots to the ground and become trees themselves, till the parent stock is lost in a dense forest of its own offshoots.' Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall, a British literary historian, also wrote: 'Nowhere but in India can we now survey with our own eyes an indigenous polytheism in full growth, flourishing like a secular green bay tree among a people of ancient culture. The sects of the Hindus are numerous and new sects are coming up but Hindu sectarianism is not exclusive. The perfect harmony of relationships in this world is realised through one's union with other leaving behind the barrier of social inhibitions, thereby fulfilling the highest mission of the present age-the unification of mankind.' This is an ideal for which the present-day world must strive.

Keywords: Unitary, Otherness, Accommodation, Resistance, Caste

The problem of otherness arises because of the existence of plurality in Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi stressed that religious pluralism not only be accepted but must be welcomed. On September 22, 1947 he said: 'I have noticed with great joy at the annual sessions of the Congress on its exhibition ground several meetings held by religious sects of political parties holding their gatherings, expressing divergent and often diametrically opposite views without molestation and without any assistance from the police.'¹ Even today one witnesses such incidents where people live together despite great inequalities. A discourse on issues of otherness has always been associated with the relation between one religion and another. Significant contributions on these issues have been made by Indian thinkers like Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and B.R. Ambedkar. These thinkers in their own way have tried to show that the problematic of otherness arises when there is a perception of duality. The moment there is a realisation of universal 'oneness', or an all pervasive divinity, the problem dissolves. The ultimate Reality (God) is one who is universally present around us and within us. There are different ways of seeking the same ultimate Reality through different paths, cultures and symbols. Unless we realise this there can never be peace and harmony on earth. Mahatma Gandhi said, 'Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? In reality there are many religions as there are individuals.'² In his *The Vedic Experience* philosopher Raimon Panikkar wrote: 'It is precisely faith that makes thinking possible, for faith offers the unthought ground out of which thinking can emerge. It is faith that makes moral and other decisions possible, opening to us the horizon against which our actions become meaningful.'³

Prof. J.L. Mehta commented that the Indian cultural situation 'has at no time *defined itself* in relation to the other, nor

¹ M.K. Gandhi, *Delhi Diary* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1948), 29.

² M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1944), 24.

³ Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018), 9.

acknowledged the other in its inassimilable otherness, nor in consequence occupied itself with the problem of relationship as it arises in any concrete encounter with the other.⁴ However, 'otherness' was always present in Hindu society. Exploitation of caste is noticeable in India. In India caste hierarchies have existed for centuries. Caste is related to intolerance as well as much else. Historically, Hindu communities assimilated people, customs and ideas despite having a hierarchical society thus bringing about unity without uniformity in diversity without fragmentation. Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar were dissatisfied with the existing condition of the Untouchables and fought for their upliftment, and their right to enter the temples thereby giving them their due place in society. Each person would do his own work including scavenging that had traditionally been allotted to the Untouchables. Swami Vivekananda emphasised that 'all caste either on the principle of birth, or merit, is bondage.'⁵ He fought for the abolition of privileges and emphasised that all should be treated alike. Such sinful acts never had the sanction of any religious text. Within each religious tradition there was always a considerable gap between profession and practice. Not letting one flourish in every possible way is a denial of humanity. In 1924, Gandhi emphasized that, 'I believe in absolute oneness of God and therefore also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refractions. But they have the same source.'⁶ In the same year he again reiterated: 'I do not believe that an individual may gain spiritually and those around him suffer.....I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent.'⁷

Hinduism accommodates a great variety of forms of life.

⁴ J.L Mehta, "The Hindu Tradition: The Vedic Root," in *The World Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies*, ed. Frank Whaling (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark Ltd., 1984).

⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Mayavati Memorial Edition, Advaita Ashram), 320.

⁶ Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India* (25 Sept. 1924), 313.

⁷ Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India* (4 Dec. 1924), 398.

There is no core figure or a single way. Hinduism has no fixed doctrine or compulsory dogmas. As Swami Vivekananda put it: 'Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognized it. Every other religion lays down certain fixed dogmas and tries to compel society to adopt them. It places before society only one coat which must fit Jack and John and Henry, all alike. If it does not fit John or Henry, he must go without a coat to cover his body. The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realized, or thought of, or stated through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols – so many pegs to hang spiritual ideas on. It is not that this help is necessary for everyone, but those that do not need have no right to say that it is wrong. Nor is it compulsory in Hinduism.'⁸ The concept of *svadharma* provides sanction for being a Hindu in one's own way. In Gita Lord Krishna says that "Whoever comes to me through whatever route, I reach out to him,' and that, 'all faiths in the end lead to me.'⁹ Social recognition of being a Hindu concerns observance rather than belief. Hinduism is compatible with any particular set of observances and also compatible with non-profession of any particular set of beliefs. As Mahatma Gandhi said: "Its freedom from dogma makes a forcible appeal to me in as much as it gives the votary the largest scope for self-expression."¹⁰ Even the rituals and practices differ according to caste, gender and age. Owing to geographical diversity a Hindu may follow the religious practices of a region where he lives. At the same time, he is not hostile to the religious practices of other regions. There is no exclusive loyalty to a particular regional form. No Hindu will withhold his faith or devotion to any other Hindu God irrespective of his personal or favourite deity. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan put it: 'God is more than the law it commands, the judge that condemns, the love that constrains, the faith to whom we owe our being, or the mother with whom is bound up all that

⁸ Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018), 126.

⁹ *Gita*, IV:11, IX:22.

¹⁰ Mahatma Gandhi, *Hindu Dharm* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950), 6.

we can hope for or aspire to.’¹¹ New cults are attracting a large number of people and different sects have different practices but this is perfectly goes well with Indian tradition which accommodates diversity without any attempt to transform it. However, nineteenth century reformists of both Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj present change of belief within Hindu form of life. Hindu sectarianism is not exclusive. Tagore lamented that ‘the Brahmo Samaj is belittling Raja Rammohun Roy by judging him as a Brahmo minus the Hindu society.’¹² He further reiterated that the ‘Brahmo religion without dogma’ is an ideology for ‘drawing all peoples together.’¹³ Nirad Chaudhuri in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* portrays an excellent picture of Brahmo movement: “Perhaps there never was any period in the last 200 years of the history of the Hindu middle class in which it showed greater probity in public and private affairs, attained greater happiness in family and personal life, saw greater fulfillment of cultural aspirations, and put forth greater creativeness in every field, than the fifty between 1860-1910- dominated by the moral ideals of Brahmoism and Hindu Puritanism.’¹⁴ While Hindu religious practices and beliefs are numerous, their outlook is very unitary. This is where the unity lies. Monier-Williams, a British scholar, wrote that Hinduism was like ‘the sacred fig tree of India, which from a single stem sends out numerous branches destined to send roots to the ground and become trees themselves, till the parent stock is lost in a dense forest of its own offshoots.’¹⁵ Alfred Lyall, a British historian, also wrote in the same tune. ‘Nowhere but in India can we now survey with our eyes an indigenous polytheism in full growth, flourishing like a secular green bay-tree among a people

¹¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: George Allen and Unwn LTD., 1926).

¹² David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of Modern Indian Mind* (USA, UK: Princeton University Press, 1979), 302.

¹³ S. Debi, *Punya Smriti (Pious Memories)*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Moitree, 1964), 68-9.

¹⁴ N Chaudhuri, *Autibiography of an Unknown Indian* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing house, 1969), 203, 211, 226, 438.

¹⁵ Quoted in Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By* (New Delhi: B.I. Publications, 1979), 146.

of ancient culture.’¹⁶

In a Hindu household along with the pictures of Gods and Goddesses one may find the pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and so on. The copresence of mythic and historical figures reflect that respect and reverence are similar to worship. A Hindu may visit a Muslim dargah or a church with the same respect and devotion as he does when he visits a Hindu temple. Being a Hindu one may not go to offer prayers during Id but in the evening, he may host Iftaar party in his house where people belonging to diverse cultures are invited. Doctrinal reservation in no way intervenes with a cultural observance. This sets an example of communal harmony. This is an opportunity for participating in each other's festival and sharing the celebrations. Religion among the Hindus was always connected to their general life. The many festivals of Hindus which were held throughout the year were open to all and provided joy and happiness in their life. Such religious festivals and fairs are very democratic and people come to such festivals and fairs for entertainment and also for profit where merchants sell their products.

Healthy interaction depends on a certain 'openness of relationship', mutual understanding where cultural diversities do not lead to separatism, thereby as Tagore said, fulfilling 'the highest mission of the present age – the unification of mankind.'¹⁷ During his prayer meetings Mahatma Gandhi wanted people of different faiths to gather together. Though this rarely happened. Gandhi had a pluralistic understanding of religion. His utmost concern was for a healthy development of inter-faith, inter-cultural human relations. During the meetings there would be readings from different scriptures. Prayer was followed by focusing on day to day issues thereby promoting a sense of community and common responsibility through what Gandhi called 'heart-unity.' As Gandhiji said, 'I have come to this fundamental conclusion that if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ P.C. Mahalanobis, "The Growth of Visva-Bharati," *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (April 1928): 94.

reason is more to the head but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding of man.'¹⁸ Today it is heartening to see the development of several bodies with different political, cultural and religious frontiers focus on humanitarian issues thus bringing about common commitment to a cause. Vivekananda said: 'each must assimilate the spirit of the others yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth,'¹⁹ that is, not giving up of one's religion but abandonment of exclusiveness. Learning from other religions is a way of accepting and also welcoming diversity.

Within the Hindu fold there are abundant evidences of cross-cultural fertilization. Theoretically in Hindu society priestly duties are performed by higher castes. However, one can notice priestly duties in certain areas being carried out by lower castes or tribes. Hindus from higher castes worship these local Gods through the help of these lower castes. This is an outcome of the desire of the underprivileged to find their due place in society. This reflects the assimilative feature of core Hinduism. Sacred rituals require involvement of florists, barbers, and musicians. These professions include people from different communities. This goes well with the remark made by Baidyanath Saraswati that sacred is 'a tool in various spheres of man's creativity.'²⁰ Emphasizing the reality of syncretism the Muslim reformist scholar Asghar Ali Engineer wrote: '...cultural integration between the Hindus and Muslims is a fact which no one except victims of misinformation can deny.'²¹ Swami Vivekananda held that 'Muhammedans in India is quite a different thing from that in every other country. It is only when Muhammedans come from other countries and preach to their co-religionists in India about living with men who are not of their faith that a muhammedan mob is aroused and fights.'²² 'Absorption within core Hindu fold

¹⁸ Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1931), 341.

¹⁹ Swami Vivekananda, *Chicago Addresses* (Calcutta, 1989), 45-6.

²⁰ Baidyanath Saraswati, *Kashi: Myth and Reality of a Classical Cultural Tradition* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1975), 46.

²¹ Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018), 205.

²² Swami Vivekananda, *My India: The India Eternal* (Calcutta: Sri

(rather than conversion), for example, merging tribes into the core Hindu fold is never an impossibility as the limits beyond which a Hindu should not go are never laid down in history. However, in some sensitive states people are seeking both a separate cultural and a political identity. Unfortunately, some groups have created unhappy situations and fundamentalism in Hinduism. Along with accommodation, resistance was also a part of Hindu behaviour pattern. Hindus treat large section of their own community unjustly. Very often lower castes are treated with disdain by the upper castes. Refusal to drink water given by a member of the lower caste, refusal to marry one's daughter to a member of another caste are some such examples of despicable condition of the lower caste in the society. Sometimes there are such situations which give rise to confrontation of communities leading to conflict. Very often offence is felt when a noisy procession passes by in front of a place of worship. The responsibility of accommodation lies on both the sides. Those objecting should concentrate on their prayers and the processionists should choose another route. As Radcliffe-Brown said, 'An orderly societal life depends upon the presence in the minds of the members of sentiments which control the behaviour of the individual in relation to the other.'²³ Voltaire remarked: 'We are all products of frailty, fallible and prone to error. So let us mutually pardon each others follies.'²⁴ Cow slaughter presents a problem in India. This is an extension of the worship of the cow and abstention from cow-killing. During particular festivals certain kinds of foods are not kept in shops keeping in view the religious sentiment of the public. As such those wishing to eat non-vegetarian foods have to travel considerable distances to obtain these. Kant's advice is very relevant in this context that 'A social order requires defining the freedom of the individual in such a way that it discovers its own limits in other people.'²⁵

Ramakrishna Math, 1993), 124.

²³ Margaret Chatterjee, *The Religious Spectrum, Studies in an Indian Context* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1984), 47.

²⁴ Susan Mendus and David Edwards, eds., *On Toleration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 6-7.

²⁵ Quoted in Ernest Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 225.

To quote Tagore, the problem today is not to wipe away differences but how to unite while keeping the differences in tact, a difficult task.²⁶ The perfect harmony of relationship in this world is realized through one's union with others, leaving behind the barrier of social inhibitions. This is an ideal for which the present-day world must strive. The world must strive to make humanity more humane. For, as Bhagwan Das has said, 'if we do not end war, war will end us.'²⁷ 'Between me and you there is an "I am" that torments me. Ah! Remove with your "I am" my "I am" from between us.'²⁸ (-Al-Hallaj)

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²⁶ Sisir Kumar Ghose, *Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1980), 104.

²⁷ Bhagwan Das, *World War and Its Only Cure* (Benares: Published by the author, 1941), 457.

²⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 305.

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