

How to Tell Hinduism to Your Child?

EMESCO

K. Aravinda Rao

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Dedication

to

Sri Kalle Gundappa

my maternal grand-father

and my first teacher in Sanskrit

who taught Amarakosha with great love

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1

Need for the Book

1.1. Globalized Children

I write this book for the parents of today's globalized children. Students of higher classes can read it on their own. The subject is old but it has to be told in modern terms.

Perhaps, about fifty years ago, this book was not quite necessary, particularly as we grew up in rural India. We were credulous children, never doubting anything that our parents or grandparents told about gods, heaven, hell and all such stuff. We celebrated all festivals joyously and boisterously, worshipping which ever was the deity concerned. We would worship Sri Rama on the day of *Rama Navami*, worship the mighty god Shiva on the night of *Shiva Ratri* or goddess Durga on the day of *Durgashtami*. It never occurred to us to question why we had different gods and goddesses. We were willing to believe and admire when we were told about the demons slain by Rama or Krishna or Durga. Our childish curiosity was only about which god was more powerful – Whether it is Hanuman or Rama. Whatever answer was given by our elders was quite alright for us.

Social change has brought about a great disconnect with the traditional life style, the rituals and festivals associated with them. Our school education is not giving any exposure to the child about religion and parents too are isolated in a working environment. The modern child in India grows in an economically competitive environment without any idea about cultural heritage.

This may appear good, because a child will grow up with a scientific, questioning spirit. But as we see around, religion has become a globalized subject like all other aspects of human life and the other religions are seen marketing their religions in an intelligent but aggressive way. This is done at the community level by people who go about telling about their religion, at the level of media through debates questioning several traditional festivals, at the level of films by ridiculing Hindu manners and in a number of other ways. A modern child is unwittingly exposed to all this and he starts doubting whatever little religion he sees at home. There are questions about why we have several gods, as to whether we worship idols and so on. It is a testing time for the parents. They have to update themselves if they have to answer their kids.

1.2. Competing Religions

It is also an unfortunate development that the secular nations of the west are turning to be active defenders and propagators of their religion. This is the result of the conflict between two dominant religions of the world. Sociologists observe that while the 20th century was the century of secularism, the 21st century is emerging as the century of religious revival. The twentieth century saw communism, Maoism, rivalry between communism and capitalism and such ideological issues. This scene has changed and we now see religious extremism and civil wars between religious groups in several countries.

Indian children growing abroad do face strange troubles. Schools abroad do give some introduction to major world religions, including Hinduism. While other religions can be easily understood and explained in a simple way, Hinduism is found to be difficult because of several religious texts and several

traditions of worship. As such, it is likely to be improperly explained. Children sometimes get totally negative impressions by such presentations and sometimes get depressed because of ridicule from peer groups. The parents at home are ill-equipped to handle such challenges.

1.3. Two Types of Questions

There can be two types of questions on Hinduism. There are primary questions like – ‘why do we worship several gods?’, ‘are we idol worshippers?’, ‘are we asked to do work without expecting the fruit of it?’, ‘is everything destined by our karma?’ and such type.

There can be secondary questions like – ‘what is the significance of vermilion or *tilak* on the forehead?’, ‘what do we do *hārati* or circumambulation in a temple?’, ‘what is the significance of the sacred thread?’ and such type.

1.4. In This Book

In this book I have tried to answer the questions of first type, which are more fundamental and important. The first type can be answered only if we understand the basic philosophy of the Upanishads. The latter type is related to religious practice.

Hence a few chapters on philosophy have become inevitable and I apologize to the readers for the difficulty caused. They have to be digested slowly. I will present the basic facts based on the primary texts – the *Vedas*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. This would cover the philosophical queries.

All other books such as *purāṇa-s*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are secondary texts, based on the philosophy of the primary texts. These relate to religious practices, rituals, festivals

and ethical life. I have also explained certain social issues like caste and untouchability.

You may not straight away start teaching the contents of the book, but may wait for the query from your child. The children are bound to ask the questions discussed in this book. It will be good to tell them when they do ask about it.

I have used the IAST transliteration key for the Sanskrit terms, for parents who have some idea about it. It is my request to parents that they may get the pronunciation right or skip the Sanskrit lines if they so wish.

* * *

2

Who are Hindus?

2.1. Our Name and Spread

A commonly accepted derivation for the word ‘Hindu’ is like this. The ancient Persians, in their texts, referred to the river Sindhu as ‘Hindu’, as it was their way of pronouncing the sound ‘s’. They also referred to the people who lived around the river as Hindus. This name was adopted by various others who came to India either as invaders or visitors and the name got attached to us. This word is not in the Vedas or major *purāṇa-s*. Some scholars do say that the word ‘Hindu’ is found in the *purāṇa-s* and also give a derivation, but this is debated.

It is estimated that nearly one-seventh of the world’s population are Hindus, who are followers of the most ancient religion alive today. It is the fourth largest religion in the world after Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Both Buddhism and Hinduism originated in India, but Buddhism spread to China and other South Asian countries, while Hinduism is now mostly confined to India, though at one time it had spread to other countries too.

2.2. Sanātana Dharma

The real word for Hinduism is ‘sanātana dharma’. This was the word used to denote the religion and culture before the

British popularized the word 'Hindu'. 'Sanātana' is that which is permanent in nature and 'dharma' is that which holds the society together. It means the code of conduct which holds for all times for social harmony and integration. Religion and religious rituals were part and parcel of this dharma.

Sometimes it is said that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. It means that Hinduism is not like other religions. In other religions, there is only one book and one belief system about god, heaven and the devil. Hinduism has a number of belief systems under the umbrella of one single philosophy, as we shall see in great detail.

If you look at the map of the present day India, Himalayas are in the north-east, bordering China. Pakistan is on the north-west. At the time of origin of what we call Hinduism, the name of the country was 'Bharata-varsha', covering areas right up to the present day Afghanistan on the north-west and up to Myanmar in the east. The sister of the King of Kandahar (Gandhara) was the grand old lady Gandhari, the mother of the hundred Kauravas whom we see in the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*. All this land from Afghanistan to Kerala was the land of *sanātana* dharma. We had very friendly relationship with another mighty empire of olden days, that is, China. A large contingent of Chinese soldiers, a golden sea of people, fought on the side of the Kauravas in the epic battle of *Mahabharata*.

2.3. Cultural Unity of India

Historically, the whole of Indian continent was one cultural unit. All our prayers and rituals show this. See our daily prayer:

*gaṅge ca yamune caiva godāvāri sarasvati .
narmade sindhu kāveri jalesmin sannidhiṃkuru ..*

This is recited by all those who do their daily prayers anywhere in the country. It is an invocation to all the rivers of the country invoking their holy waters into the chalice. The prayers also refer to the whole of Bharata-varsha. We do pilgrimage to the twelve famous shrines of Shiva (*Jyotirlingas*), the eighteen shrines of Shakti (*śakti-pīthas*) wherever we may reside. Even an unlettered Indian, located anywhere in the country, would owe allegiance to all these shrines, which have become part of the Indian psyche. One has to listen to the *mahāsaṅkalpam* (a long hymn to our mother land) which is recited at the time of marriage, in order to understand the glorious vision of our country.

Mahabharata and Ramayana contain several descriptions of the geography of Bharata-varsha, as it was then called. There are details of several small kingdoms and their geographical details. Mahabharata describes the kings who took part on behalf of Kauravas or Pandavas in the war. Sanskrit abounds in such description of kingdoms. All these underline the cultural oneness of India.

The cultural unity of all tribes with the mainstream population has also to be noted. The great epic Mahabharata describes how the five exiled princes stayed with the tribes and took their help while staying in the forest. Yudhishtira sends them as spies to observe the governance by Duryodhana. Similarly, Ramayana describes how the chiefs of several tribes were invited on the eve of proposed coronation of Rama. Later, when Rama was in exile, he moved with the chiefs of tribes and took their help. There is a famous episode in which Rama held discussion on dharma with Sabari, a tribe's woman. All this shows that the tribes were an integral part of Indian culture.

Prof. Stephen Knapp notes how Indian culture spread to several East-Asian countries because of its sheer greatness of culture and not by military might. Extensive research has been done by him about how merchants were responsible for the spread of Hinduism in Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and such countries. The languages and diction of these countries bear testimony to the cultural connections.

Parents may see:

- See “Proof of Vedic Culture’s Global Existence” and other books by Stephen Knapp

* * *

3

Religion – A Set of Beliefs

3.1. Social Need

We see two aspects in any religion. The first is the usefulness of religion in bringing about social harmony and compliance to a moral code. The very word *religion* is from a Latin root '*ligare*', to bind. It binds people to certain common norms. This is what is called the utilitarian view.

The second is about the content of teaching. We have to see as to what is the degree of truth or probability in various things told by religion, and how far is it compatible with the rational thinking and the scientific world view. If what religion tells is like a school boy's tale, the school boys of today are unwilling to suspend their reason.

Some refute the utilitarian view and argue that religion is also the cause for great massacres and genocides on earth. Glaring examples can be seen if we look into the history of genocide. There are also claims of superiority of one religion over the other. These claims can never be settled. They were only settled by wars, conquests and conversions. This book does not discuss these.

3.2. Religion: A Set of Beliefs or Postulations

I hope you will not dispute that no one has seen either heaven or hell and come back to us to tell what it is. We have to admit that any religion, as we see now, is structured round a set of beliefs – beliefs regarding creation of the universe by God,

about heaven which is the God's abode and where good people go after death, about hell where the bad folks go and suffer for their bad deeds. Such beliefs existed all over the world and different religions visualized their own God forms, their own versions of heaven and hell, and their own norms about good or bad in society.

A majority of people take the belief system as the absolute truth and even now they do. This gives a lot of importance to the religious structure and the people in charge of that structure. Votaries of religion have always held that religion instills good values, social discipline and order. Religion served the purpose of binding the society as a culturally homogenous unit.

3.3. Philosophy versus Religion

Throughout history, there have been a lot many people who questioned such belief system. No one has seen God or heaven or hell but the books so solidly talk about these things. Hence, the non-believers or atheists had their own postulations about creation and about the human being's role in the universe.

We assume that scientific spirit is a product of modern times. It is not so. Logical thinking is as old as human mind. The ancient Indians (Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and others) had developed elaborate systems of logic. So did the Greeks, Romans and others. These thinkers were called philosophers, the lovers of truth. But quite often, the philosophical thought had nothing to do with religious structure. People of religion talked of a personal god in all grandeur while the philosophers tried to reason out and postulate. We can notice this among the western philosophers who, sometimes, talk almost on the same lines as the Upanishads but they were like rebels, and some were excommunicated by the clergy. Religion and philosophy were on a course of clash.

3.4. Two Levels of Truth

The Vedas talked of two levels of truth, one called *parā*, the supreme level and the other was called *aparā*, the lower level. The higher level corresponds to philosophy and the lower level to religion.

Indian sages examined the human mind and senses, the way they cognize the universe, the limitations of such cognitions and the nature of Supreme Reality. We find that the sages (we call them *ṛṣi*-s in Sanskrit) who gave Upanishads used elaborate reasoning in trying to know what is the ultimate reality, or God, as we call. They also realized that religion is a social need and that only a tiny minority indulges in philosophical quest. Hence the sages endorsed religion at the level of the common man in the early portions of Vedas and discussed philosophical issues toward the end of the Vedas. The belief system relating to rituals was accepted as a *lower level of truth* while the philosophical inquiry was regarded as the *absolute level of truth*. Hence we find stories of gods, demons and rituals at one level, and about human mind and its intricacies at another.

A distinct feature of these stories is that they are symbolic or allegorical tales, conveying the Vedic teaching to the common man. We shall see this in good detail in the forthcoming chapters.

* * *

4

Hinduism – Evolved from a Philosophical Base

What distinguishes the Vedanta philosophy from all other philosophies is that it is at the same time a religion and a philosophy.

-Max Muller

4.1. Our Interface with Religion

When we go to a temple we have the priest chanting some prayers, breaking a coconut which we offer and giving us some delicious snack which was earlier offered to the god. The priest chants prayers which are composed in Sanskrit which most of us do not know. (Sanskrit was once known to everyone in society and hence the prayers were in Sanskrit). We go to different temples and see priests chanting different prayers. We do not know what the prayers mean but we have a good feeling of listening to some awe-inspiring sounds and an impressive ritual. We hardly realize that the prayers contain deep philosophical ideas.

Religion can be presented in two ways.

- 1) It can be told as a myth about the God, the demons (Satan, as called in western religions), heaven, hell and related structures. The god has given some commandments and one has to obey. This will satisfy an innocent believer.
- 2) Religion can be an honest enquiry about the nature of Supreme Being. We have to keep in mind that it is the

man who is trying to know what is god. For that we have to know how far our instruments of knowledge are useful. The instruments we have are the five senses and the mind which coordinates them. Someone who wants to propose a religion has to keep this in mind and postulate an idea of god, demons, heaven and hell.

If we look at the world religions, a majority of them fall under the first category. Religions have a sacred book which is said to contain the word of god. All people have to obey unquestioningly. There can be description of heaven with gold pavements, fabulous mansions and heavenly damsels. In contrast, there is a dark dungeon with hellish fires to punish the non-believers.

Hinduism approaches this subject at two levels, as I said above.

- 1) At the level of philosophy it talks of the human being (all living beings in general) and his senses and mind. In an episode in *Taittiriya Upanishad*, a son goes to his father (who is a sage) and asks him to tell about the Supreme Reality. The father says – ‘you have got a body with flesh and blood, the five senses and mind. You have also got the vital force which is enabling the body to live. Meditate on these and try to know truth.’ The son starts thinking about them and finally arrives at the truth. We shall see in a later chapter. The idea here is to show that the sages had a logical approach to reality.
- 2) At the level of common man the sages did not prescribe a single belief system or mode of worship to a single deity. Whatever human mind can conceive is only a partial truth, says the *Kena Upanishad*. No one can say ‘this is what is god,

this is the way heaven is'. Hence the sages permitted different modes of worship which are all accepted as tentative or interim level of truth. This is the reason we find several gods being worshiped. We will see more about this in a later chapter.

4.2. No Single Prophet in Hinduism

Hinduism was not propounded by a single prophet. It did not originate in troubled times. There was no political power enforcing it and suppressing dissent. The basic texts like the Vedas evolved over a period of a few centuries. Sages who renounced the world and speculated over the mysteries of the universe have given to us certain observations or 'revelations' in the form of Vedas. These books talk about both religion and philosophy.

The Vedas thus talk at two levels, as we learnt. From the point of an ordinary man, they tell about various rituals and the fruit of such rituals. The common man is happy with them. At some point of time people start wondering about the nature of god. Vedas talk about the second level too. The end portions of the Vedas are totally devoted to this. The uniqueness of Vedas is that both philosophy and religion are described in the same texts by the same sages. They took a comprehensive view of society and addressed persons of different maturity levels.

Religion and belief system are accepted as a *lower level of truth* or empirical reality (*vyāvahārika satyam*) for the purpose of social guidance and harmony. Logical contemplation on the nature of reality is accepted as the *absolute level of truth* (*pāramārthika satyam*). The latter was told to persons trained in rigorous self-discipline, while the former was for everyone. Most people are usually happy with the lower level, conducting rituals,

seeking boons from different gods and seeking forgiveness. Very few are normally seen to be bothered about the higher level of truth.

This book, of course, tries to give a simple account of this philosophical stuff, as that is the only way we can answer the questions of skeptics. Questions about religion will be discussed in greater detail.

* * *

5

The Sacred Texts of Hindus

In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life; and it will be the solace of my death. They are the product of the highest wisdom.

- Arthur Schopenhauer, the German Philosopher

If you visit a bookstore where religious books are sold and look for books on Hinduism, you will find a number of divergent books. You may not know as to which one is the main text and which is not. Hence, it is necessary to know which are primary and which are secondary. We do not have a single text attributed to a single prophet, as in other religions. Instead, we have several works which were revealed by sages over a period of time.

5.1. Primary texts:

As I mentioned in the introduction, Hindus regard three texts as their primary texts – the *Vedas*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The Vedas: The most ancient and primary texts for the Hindus are the Vedas. The time of their composition is uncertain. Traditionalists even today maintain that the Vedas are directly revealed from the Supreme Being, called Brahman. But it can be reasonably established that they were revelations of several ṛṣi-s who had left their families, retreated to jungles and contemplated about the mysteries of the universe with an unbiased mind. It

was a time when there were no rigid boundaries for the countries as we see now, and it appears that they were composed at five to six thousand years ago. It is undisputed that the Rigveda is the oldest human document available. The language used is Vedic Sanskrit which is fairly distinct from the classical Sanskrit.

The antiquity of Vedas was never in question till the Europeans came to India. Several European scholars started studying Vedas in addition to the whole mass of Sanskrit literature. Their writings had profound impact on the European thought process. A recent book, 'American Veda' by the American writer Phillip Goldberg makes an interesting reading. It traces the impact of Indian philosophy on the West starting from Schopenhauer (the German philosopher of seventeenth century) till modern day. (The book is a compulsory reading for every Indian scholar).

The European scholars like Max Muller were bewildered by the sheer volume and depth of Indian philosophical thought. It was not similar to what they encountered in other colonial countries. Their first problem was to fix the time of composition of the books. They could not accept the Indian view that the Vedas were composed thousands of years ago, as the Biblical scholars and religious heads like Bishop Ussher had established that God created the Universe in 4004 B.C. and nothing on earth could be dated prior to that. They accepted the Biblical chronology and so they had to map all other cultures and societies on the Biblical time scale. With all this, there is some agreement now amongst scholars that they were composed during the period between 2000 and 1500 B.C.

The initial portions of these Vedas contain lyrical eulogies for different deities. Along with these are described certain rituals

called 'yajña' in order to propitiate these deities. In addition, there are forms of meditation on various deities. All these are at one level which is traditionally called the *karma kāṇḍa*, i.e. the portion of Veda which deals with Gods and rituals and what we now call religion. This is what is referred to as the lower level of truth or empirical reality.

It is the end portions of Vedas which were the cause of serious interest among philosophers all over the world. These end portions are called Upanishads, and their teaching is called 'Vedanta' – 'anta' meaning 'the end' or the final word of the Vedas. This is what is referred to as the higher level of reality or absolute reality.

These portions of Vedas are deliberations in what is now called philosophy. The subject matter is not social philosophy or political philosophy as we see in the West, but the deliberation is on the nature of the Supreme Being, the nature of creation, the nature of human, mind and senses. The final startling conclusion of the Vedas is that the individual and the Supreme Being are essentially one and the same.

Brahma Sutras: Vedas, we know, were composed over a period of a few centuries in different parts of the country. Though the central philosophy is the same, the language and expression differ in them. It was necessary to explain certain apparent contradictions and demonstrate a unity of thought in the Vedas. The Brahma Sutras do this job. These are aphoristic statements (*sūtra-s*) discussing important issues in philosophy and also religion. For instance, they discuss whether god can be a personal god or impersonal entity. They also discuss whether there are several gods or one and whether we have to worship all gods or any one. This book is for rather advanced students as it has serious philosophical discussions.

Bhagavad Gita: This is the most important for Hindus. The first thing we have to know about it is that it is not an independent text, but a small portion (700 verses) of the mighty epic Mahabharata (100,000 verses). This epic deals with the great battle between two groups of royal kinsmen, ‘Kauravas’ and ‘Pandavas’. It is encyclopedic in nature. It has several long passages about statecraft, about morality, about religion and about philosophy. *Bhagavad Gita* is one philosophical passage. It is a compulsory reading for every Hindu, if one desires to have an idea of the central doctrine of the Vedas. A traditional verse has metaphorically compared all the Upanishads (the end portions of Vedas) to cows, Lord Krishna, the narrator to the milkman and Arjuna, the listener, to the calf. While the calf is the immediate beneficiary of the nectar called Gita, we are all the incidental beneficiaries.

We are going to know about Gita in an exclusive chapter.

5.2. Secondary texts: –Itihāsa and Purāṇa.

The Vedic sages had a scheme for transmission of knowledge. They gave the core texts in the form of Vedas. As the philosophy of Vedas (Vedanta) is not easily understood by all, they wrote popular texts to spread the message of Vedas. These popular texts are the *itihāsa* and *purāṇa*-s. These are the secondary texts.

Sage Vyasa’s line from the first canto of the great epic Mahabharata defines the framework of these texts:

‘itihāsa purāṇābhyām vedam samupabrṃhayet’.

‘The message of the Vedas has to be popularized through the *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* texts’, it says. If Veda were to be compared to a text of law, the above secondary texts can be compared to the studies in case law. For instance, if the Veda says ‘*satyam*

vada' (speak truth), the secondary text gives several examples of people who implemented this injunction, and how they came out successful in spite of facing several problems during the course of such implementation.

The Upanishads are called the *śruti* while the secondary texts are called *smṛti*. The latter follows the former like a faithful follower, says Kalidasa, poetically (*Raghuvamsha* 2-2).

The primary texts can be compared to the software of religion and the secondary texts its hardware. It is these secondary texts which were followed by the society and which created the ethical edifice of religion.

The epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* were called as *itihāsa* (closer to historical narrations) and the mythological tales were called *purāṇa-s*. Rama of *Ramayana* and Pandavas of *Mahabharata* could have been historical characters whose history was glorified in the epics called *itihāsa*. They were called *avatāra-s*, the reincarnation of God. The *purāṇa-s*, however, are many in number and they belong to different traditions of worship. Some extol Shiva as Supreme, some extol Vishnu as the Supreme and some others extol Shakti. They give a picture of various deities who were being worshipped in different parts of the country, as we saw above.

Later day sages of *purāṇa* times seem to have brought the belief systems popular in different parts of the country under the umbrella of Upanishadic thought. They did a great job of harmonizing different systems. They also blended the mythological symbolism with the philosophy of the Upanishads.

The mythological tales called *purāṇa-s* have something more to offer. The Vedas and Upanishads postulate the philosophical

concepts. These concepts are told in the form of allegorical tales by the *purāṇa-s*.

Though secondary in nature, these are very important from the point of view of value building in society. The family values and social values are still intact in the Indian society because of the hundreds of stories from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *purāṇa-s*, which have gone into the collective memory of even illiterate villagers. These secondary texts played an important role in keeping the society together even when the Hindu society was under severe attacks in the last one thousand years.

However, in case of doubt on any philosophical concept, we have to go to the primary texts and not to the secondary texts.

Parents may see:

- ‘The American Veda’ by Philip Goldberg
- Google search – ‘Ussher chronology’

* * *

6

Introducing the Idea of God

6.1. An Exercise

If we can gather a group of intelligent people and give an assignment to come up with an idea of what could be God who would have created this universe, they could come up with the following three scenarios.

1) *God – A cosmic super cop, with functions, name and form:*

This is the basic level of thinking where God is someone who is infinitely more powerful than everything in the Universe, that he is having a form like Vishnu, Rudra or Durga and that his or her abode is up above in the skies, or that he or she would punish the wrong doers and reward the good and so on. Here, the God is having a form and some attributes, in other words, some functions. Vedanta calls it 'sākāra' ('with form') and *saguṇa* ('with functions') level.

2) *God – formless, but with functions of controlling the universe:*

This is a slightly improved level. Here God is someone for whom we cannot think of any shape, but he is an infinitely powerful being and he has the functions of rewarding the good and punishing the bad. In other words, he is a 'nirākāra' (formless) but *saguṇa* (with functions). *This is the level at which all religions end.* The western religions talk of a formless God, but of one who has all the above functions. Among the Indian schools of philosophy, the logicians (called *tārkika-s*), the '*sāṅkhya-s*' and the Patanjali yogis believed in such a concept of God.

3) A nameless, formless, functionless entity:

The third group which says so, is thinking on the lines of the sages of the Upanishads. Upanishads say that what we call the Supreme Being (God) cannot be something saddled with the mundane supervisory activity of the world. They further say that the Supreme Being cannot be something which can either be called a male or a female or that it is in a human form. This being, whatever it is, cannot even be the something which is creating and maintaining the universe, drawing up some rules and regulations for all the celestial bodies to move in their orbits, and rules for humans to follow. If that entity were to have all these duties, then it would be somewhat like a cosmic super-cop. God cannot be someone who is fond of a chosen tribe and who is punishing the other tribe like a group leader.

6.2. God is Infinite Existence of Consciousness

This is the level called *nirākāra* (formless) and *nirguṇa* (attribute-less). Apart from the Upanishads no other religious text in the world talks of this level. God is Existence, Consciousness and Infinitude (*satyam, jñānam anantam Brahma*), as the *Taittiriya* Upanishad says. It is not a Being or a person as we conceive at the first two levels. These three words need some explanation.

Satyam is something whose existence cannot be negated or denied in past, present and future. All things in the world undergo change and decay. The human life is for mere hundred years and the life of the planet earth is only for a few more million years. This universe itself was not there a few billion years ago. But this principle called existence was always there even prior to the origin of the universe. In fact, the concept of time is associated with events and hence time is an appearance in that Existence,

which precedes time. Existence of all beings and things is only a reflection of this Supreme Existence.

Jñānam means consciousness or intelligence. It does not mean that God is all knowing, but it means that it is of the nature of intelligence, whose intelligence is reflected in all beings.

Anantam is infinitude. There is nothing which can be outside of it. The nearest example is space, which pervades the whole universe. Vedanta says that even space is an appearance in that Supreme Being, which is here denoted by the word infinitude. What all we see is pervaded by It and not apart from It.

It is thus clear that as per Vedanta *the ultimate reality is neither a man nor a woman nor is it in a human or any living form. It is of the nature of existence, consciousness and infinitude.* The principle of existence is all over the cosmos. Everywhere we see things and say ‘this exists’ ‘this exists’ and so on endlessly. There is a principle of existence which is underlying all things we see.

Likewise, the whole cosmos is permeated by consciousness, in other words, intelligence. Consciousness is manifesting along with existence in all things we see whether they are sentient or insentient. The human mind is said to be a smart ‘reflector’ of this consciousness in comparison with all other things. In fact, the human being himself is called a reflector of this consciousness.

The next attribute for the ultimate reality is infinitude. Existence and consciousness are all pervading. What all we can conceive and beyond that too is that ultimate entity.

For the purpose of usage we have to give some name to this Supreme Being. Vedanta calls this entity Brahman. The word literally means ‘infinitely expanding’. *This Brahman is referred*

to in neuter gender. We refer to it as 'It'. What all universe we see should obviously be the creation of this entity, one naturally presumes.

If Brahman is such formless and nameless entity, what is the status of Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti and other deities? This we shall know in the following chapters.

If we look at the world religions, they usually talk of a formless god, but the god is a male, so human, so partisan to his chosen tribe and so jealous that he punishes those who worship any other deity. He also creates man in his own image. He sends believers to heaven and non-believers to hell. It is to the credit of our ancient sages that they analyzed this issue dispassionately and proposed the above concept of Brahman.

The parent may also see:

- www.scienceandnonduality.com

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7

How did Universe Come About?

It (Hinduism) is the only religion in which the time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology. Its cycles run from our ordinary day and night to a day and night of Brahma, 8.64 billion years long, longer than the age of the earth or the sun and about half the time since the big bang.

- Carl Sagan in Cosmos

We have to use a little bit of terminology in this chapter.

7.1. Material for the Universe

When we see any object it is natural for us to assume the presence of a creator. The created object is called the effect and the creator is the cause. When we take the example of an earthen jar, we see that clay is the raw material (called the *material cause*) and the potter is its maker (called the *intelligent cause*). The question now is, as to what is the cause of the universe we see, who is its maker and wherefrom the material has come?

Different religions give different versions of creation of Universe by God. Upanishads give a different picture. A passage from *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2-1) of *Krishna Yajurveda* tells like this:

*The all pervading space emerged from the eternal
Consciousness.*

From space, emerged air.

From air, emerged fire,

*And from fire, emerged water
Earth as we see, has emerged from these waters.
The plant kingdom originated thereafter.
Plants became the food for the living beings,
And thus, all the living beings emerged.*

We are concerned about us. The above passage says that all living beings, including humans came from the plant kingdom, which is called ‘*annam*’, the food, because they eat and get eaten. We too are called food. The sage, on discovering that he is nothing greater than ‘fodder’, cries out ‘I am food, I am food, I am the eater, I am the eater.’

The above description by the Upanishad is almost close to the scientist’s view of the origin of earth. It is the hot airs or the nebulae which condensed to become fluid and thereafter to solidify in order to become all the stars and planets. Vedanta is not saying that there is a creator who is sitting high above in skies and creating the cosmos from out of some material.

The idea of ‘all illumining’ *ākāśa* i.e. space, which was the origin of all, is something surprising at a time when all other cultures accepted only four elements i.e. earth, water, fire and air. These five elements are like the raw material for all the living beings as we shall see later.

What is the material with which Brahman created the universe and where did it come from? Let us try to follow what Vedanta says.

In the earlier chapter we saw that Brahman is Existence, Consciousness and Infinitude. In other words, it is consciousness existing infinitely around. It is not of the nature of a personal God. There cannot be anything un-pervaded by It.

In such case if we accept any material outside what we have called Brahman, then, Brahman would be a limited entity, however powerful it may be. Therefore *the material should be from the Brahman itself.*

If we agree that the material is from the Brahman, then, we would be assuming that Brahman is an entity with limbs or parts in it. It is facile to say that Brahman took out a part from itself and fashioned the cosmos. Brahman having limbs or parts would also make it a very limited entity. It would hit the definition 'infinitude' which we noted above.

If we think that Brahman changed itself into the cosmos just as milk changes into curd, then Brahman no longer exists having transformed itself into the universe. This cannot be the situation. Brahman would become a changing and impermanent entity. This would again hit our conception of Brahman.

The only option which remains is to say that *it is the Brahman which is 'appearing' as the universe, while itself not undergoing any change. It is the unchanging material cause and also the intelligent cause of the universe.* (Vedanta calls this the *abhinna nimitta - upādāna - kāraṇam*).

7.2. The Concept of Māyā.

The Brahman has no doer-ship, we saw. It cannot be having the duty of being the creator. How is it that space, the other elements and universe emerged from that? The scriptures introduce a sort of interface called 'māyā'. This is described as *a sort of enveloping and manifesting power in Brahman.* It envelopes the real nature of Brahman and makes it appear or manifest as the universe. In other words, you and I are the same consciousness, appearing as individual entities. All the animals,

plants and all inanimate things we see are all manifestations of the same consciousness.

We have landed in a situation where we say that the cosmos is ‘appearing’, all appearances are not real. This is a question which has perplexed the minds of the sages who revealed the Upanishads. Science, till recently, maintained that consciousness has come out of matter. Vedanta on the other hand, says that matter is appearing from consciousness. Science appears still undecided about the issue. The Vedantins too are undecided, and hence, they said that the existence or otherwise of the universe cannot be asserted. It is neither real nor unreal (neither *sat* nor *asat*).

Vedanta says that this creation is a temporary appearance in māyā. It appears and disappears. It is not a one-time activity of God. In fact, what we call creator is only a function in māyā.

Western Religions talk of only one creation. The Vedas talk of recurring cycles of creation. There is a creation, sustained for some time and then which resolves into the above said *māyā*.

All the above discussion may not be easily understood by the common man. Hence the later texts, called *purāṇa-s*, told the above in a figurative way. The power of creation was called Brahma, a four headed god, whose consort is Saraswati (symbolizing wisdom). The power of sustenance was called Vishnu, whose consort is Lakshmi (symbolizing wealth). The power of resolving the universe was called Rudra, whose consort was Shakti (symbolizing the power of destruction). We will know about these god forms in later chapters.

The parent may also see:

- *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2-1) any translation with a traditional commentary.

- Google search for 'Ussher chronology' for a comparative understanding.
- Google search Carl Sagan's series on Cosmos.
- www.wikiquote.org for Ervin Schrodinger's remarks on Vedanta.

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8

Man and Creator from the Absolute Point of View

8.1. Understanding Consciousness

We saw above that god did not abruptly stand in the space and create the whole universe. We merely saw a phenomenon called creation and that Brahman (consciousness) had no direct activity called creation. The question follows as to what is the human being (and other beings) and who is the creator?

Let us take the example of the ocean. What all you see is water, but in different shapes like giant waves, small waves, bubbles and foam. We see them all collectively as ocean. Waters do not undergo any change whether it is a giant wave, a petty wave or mere froth.

Take another example of space. The space in a room, the space in a vessel, the space in a huge building and the infinite space outside are all but space. The space does not undergo any change because of its apparent limitations like vessel-space, room-space or a building-space.

The Supreme Being was called Brahman, as we recall. It is consciousness existing infinitely all around. Upanishads say that there cannot be anything other than consciousness. In such case where do we map the human being or the creator?

In the above chapter we saw the lines from the Upanishad about the emergence of the universe. It told that all living beings

have come out of the plant kingdom. All these beings (both animals and plants) starting from a blade of grass to mighty trees and starting from an ant to a dinosaur do have some intelligence. This is to feed themselves, protect themselves and also propagate themselves. It means that all these beings seem to be a mixture of intelligence plus some other raw stuff. It is flesh, blood and bones in the case of mobile beings (called *jaṅgama*) and fibrous stuff in non-mobile beings (called *sthāvara*).

8.2. Individual Mind and Consciousness Animating It

Upanishads say that what we call mind in the living beings is merely an insentient material, but very sensitive material capable of reflecting the consciousness (Brahman). It is somewhat like a mirror reflecting the consciousness. It is capable of interacting with the world around it by the senses and mind activated by the same consciousness. Thus we note that the living beings are associated with some bit of consciousness, which we call it intelligence. This tiny bit of intelligence is called the individual self, *jīva* (it includes plants and all animals). We may compare this with a tiny wave in the ocean of consciousness or a mere pot-space in the space like consciousness.

8.3. Cosmic Mind - Iswara

If we visualize all the beings in the universe collectively and look at it at a cosmic level, we can call it the cosmic mind. The cosmic mind has certain additional abilities like governing the heavenly bodies like the stars, sun and the moon. In other words, the cosmic mind is in charge of the cosmic order. This cosmic mind is called *Iswara*, the Lord and creator of the universe. We may compare this cosmic mind with the giant wave or with the building-space.

What we noted as Brahman is not limited to the universe. Universe is a temporary manifestation in the Brahman consciousness. This can be compared to the ocean or the space in terms of the above examples.

All living beings have limitations of space and time. They live and die for a specific time in a specific place. Even the cosmic mind, is a limited entity compared to Brahman consciousness.

The *jīva* consciousness and the *Iswara* consciousness are said to be delimited, while the Brahman is infinite.

Iswara is called the creator, and he is as much a limited being as the *jīva*, though he pervades the universe.

Consciousness cannot be taken as a substance which can be divided into parts but the expressions such as 'pot-space' are only for the sake of illustration. Another example given is that of the same sun getting reflected in different water bodies and appearing as different. Shankaracharya uses these comparisons in different places to illustrate the point the consciousness is one and the same in all beings whereas the delimiting factors (the mind in which it gets reflected) can be different.

Iswara, the empirical god at the cosmic level is a manifestation in the Supreme Consciousness called Brahman, due to the power called *māyā* as we noted earlier. An ocean is a manifestation of water and so too a wave. The ocean is called the cause and the wave is called the effect, though they are both water. Even so, the Supreme Consciousness manifesting as *Iswara* is the cause and manifesting as *jīva* is the effect.

Vedanta has to take into consideration the requirements of human society. At all times, human beings thought of a God form and submitted himself to His or Her will. This was

a convenient and happy arrangement. It is a sort of utilitarian view of religion. The ancient seers did not want to dismiss this and hence, accepted different God forms but then treated them as a lower level of truth (*vyāvahārika satyam*) i.e. which is true at a transactional level (as we noted earlier). The higher level of truth, or the real truth, at the absolute level, is that Brahman has nothing to do with creation as we understand.

For the purpose of devotees, God or *Iswara* who is accepted at an empirical level can be a man or a woman. Thus we see a number of Gods and Goddesses in our religion.

God is 'intelligent' (in the sense that he has the cosmic functions of creation, maintenance and dissolution) and Brahman is intelligence, i.e. consciousness.

The functions of creation, sustenance and dissolution are functions which we attribute to the cosmic mind *Iswara* but not to Brahman. These functions are given various names,

Whatever you call it, it is the cosmic being with different functions and different names. It is the cosmic being *Iswara* who has functions like creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe. Each cosmic function is visualized as a God. The function of creation is called Brahma (different from the Supreme Brahman which we saw above), a four-headed deity who keeps on creating the universe. He requires intelligence for creation and that power of intelligence is visualized as his consort named Saraswati.

The function of sustaining the universe is visualized as Vishnu, a male deity and a powerful one. All resources are required for sustenance of the universe and these resources are visualized as a female deity named Lakshmi, who is said to be the consort of Vishnu. Similarly, the function of dissolution

of universe is visualized as Rudra, or Shiva and his power of dissolution is visualized as a female deity named Shakti, who is the consort of Shiva.

The Sanskrit word for power is *śakti*, which is in feminine gender. Hence these powers are visualized as wives of the Gods. It is not as though these Gods have many wives and live a polygamous life. When we say that the popular god Lord Venkateswara has two wives it means that he has two types of power – the resources (Lakshmi) to sustain the universe and the power to restore dharma on earth (Bhudevi, the goddess of earth).

8.4. All Forms are One

While talking at two levels, and writing different prayers for different deities, the sages left enough hints in the mantras to show that all god forms were, indeed, one.

When you go to any temple and perform worship, you find the priests chanting the mantra from the *Narayanopanishad* –
sa brahma sa śivaḥsa hariḥ sendraḥ sokṣaraḥ paramaḥ svarāṭ.

“What we call Brahma (the creator) is the same as Shiva, it is the same as Hari, (the sustainer), Indra, and the non-perishing Brahman”. All these are the same as one’s own self because the consciousness is the same in one and all. We find several other mantras in the same vein. (Note the difference between Brahman and Brahma. The former is the infinite and the latter is the finite. The former is in neuter gender and the latter is in masculine gender).

There are several minor deities, like the fire god, the rain god, the lord Yama (who is the one that awards the fruit of karma to a person) and so on. These have to be understood as universal or cosmic functions visualized as gods.

When the creation itself is a temporary appearance in Brahman, it follows that all these deities are temporary appearances. Hence they are like tenure posts, valid as long as a particular cycle of creation appears in Brahman.

There is no uniform description of the trinity in the Vedantic texts because the function of Vedanta is to show that Brahman is all pervasive and what we think as a human being is nothing but Brahman itself. *Vedanta does not attach much importance to the description of deities.* This resulted in a number of belief systems and stories of god under the broad philosophy of the Upanishads, as we shall see.

8.5. Debate about Consciousness and Matter

This discussion is about *advaita* (non-dualism), *viśiṣṭādvaita* (qualified non-dualism) and *dwaita* (dualism). These are difficult concepts to be introduced to the students. It is difficult to discuss these in a primary text like the present one. However, a brief idea is needed for the parents who may be belonging to one of those traditions. Most of us, happily, do not belong to any tradition and so look at this issue without bias.

We see the world around us, with all its variegated gifts to man. We see the beautiful rivers, mountains and forests which we freely exploit. Not only the humans but also the animals do this. The trees too, have intelligence to some extent and they know how to survive. Thus, we identify two aspects in nature – one intelligent and the other non-intelligent; one is the enjoyer and the other is the enjoyed; one is the knower and the other is the known; in other words, one is sentient and the other is insentient. The body is made of matter, but somehow it is also having intelligence.

Are these two things or are they one? This is a question which engaged the sages who gave us the Upanishads. In chapter 7 we were examining as to what could be the matter for creation and we saw one view that consciousness itself manifested as the *jagat*, the universe, in other words, as matter. But this is only one view. This view is contested by other equally learned sages. We may briefly see their points of view.

The first view (predominant view) is that there is only one entity, consciousness, which is manifesting as all the things which we see. How is it done, is inexplicable. That is why the idea of *māyā* was postulated and *māyā*, the creative or manifesting power in consciousness is something inexplicable (*anirvacanīya*). The consciousness itself has no attributes and no activity in it. This is the Brahman we saw in chapter 7.

The second view is that there are two aspects – sentient (*cit*), and insentient (*jaḍa*), but both exist in the body of the Supreme Being Vishnu. This Supreme Being is with all glorious attributes – omniscience, omnipotence and so on. He is a personal god who is closer to religion than the attribute-free Brahman.

The third view is that the two aspects – sentient and insentient, and they are two distinct things. Materialist philosophers of all types held this view. All diversity which we see is real. All sentience is from the Supreme Being Vishnu, and the universe is his creation. All differences – that between one individual and another, that between *jīva* and the world, that between *jīva* and Iswara – are all real and irreducible. The god is a personal god, as in the above case.

The first view is what is called the non-dualism (*advaita*), the second view is known as qualified non-dualism (*viśiṣṭādvaita*) and the last view is known as dualism (*dwaita*). The prominent

exponent of the first school is Sri Shankaracharya, that of the second is Sri Ramanujacharya and that of the third is Sri Madhwacharya. It is also the chronological order of the three masters.

All the three teachers based their arguments on the basic texts, the Upanishads, because the Upanishads spoke of a god with attributes and also about a Brahman who is attribute-free. Sri Shankara called them two levels of reality, one at the level of religion, to guide the common man and the other at the level of absolute reality. The god with attributes is for *upāsanā*, and through such *upāsanā*, the Brahman without attributes has to be realized.

It may be relevant to see that the changing times could also have impacted the thinking of these teachers. During the time of Shankara, the very existence of Brahman was questioned by Buddhists and others who advocated nihilism. Shankara was able to dispel the arguments of the nihilists and establish religion with a philosophy.

There was considerable social ferment in the Hindu society by the time of Sri Ramanuja and hence he had to give more importance to a personal god and social harmony. He introduced *bhakti*, devotion to Vishnu, as a means to unite all sections of society. Thus we see the religious teachers, called *Alwars*, even from the lowest castes in society.

By the time of Sri Madhwa, India was already under the ruthless invasion by the Muslims and hence, perhaps he had no great inclination to call the world as an appearance. He was a wrestler who is also said to have taken part in fighting the invaders. His followers consider him to be the reincarnation of Vayu, the strongest among the gods. Madhwa, like Ramanuja considered Vishnu as the supreme deity and as a personal god.

This book has broadly adopted the non-dual approach, as it is the oldest way of interpreting the texts and also because we can answer all criticism relating to the multitude of gods, idol worship and many other questions at the philosophical level. Besides, it is able to cover all forms like Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Shakti or any other form or formless god.

It is interesting for us to know that this debate about consciousness and matter is also the most important debate in science and the issue is yet undecided. Several modern physicists seem to be closer to the non-dualist way of understanding the universe.

Parents may see:

- Erwin Schrodinger on Vedanta in www.wikiquote.org

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9

Who Am I?

The perennial philosophy is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula – ‘tat twam asi’(That art thou); the Atman, or the immanent eternal Self is one with Brahman, the Absolute principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being, is to discover the fact for himself.

- Aldous Huxley

9.1. Social Identity

Most of us have an identity card or a social security card. In addition we carry a visiting card mentioning our status, qualifications and job details. When we come home we belong to a particular religion, may be a sub-division of that religion. In addition we are also male or female, father or son and husband or wife. Our identity depends on the relationships we have with various persons or institutions. All our interactions with fellow humans are deeply influenced by our understanding of the above identifications.

Vedanta says that this is not your real identity. When a person is stripped of all the above identities, he is merely a human being. He is equal to any other living being. Like all living beings he exists, he experiences the world with his senses and feels happy or unhappy. He has a physical body, supported by some energy system based on intake of food, five senses perceiving five different things and transmit to mind where these impressions are processed and collated and the ‘I’ in him is happy about it.

9.2. Evolution of the Body-Mind Complex

Our Vedic sages speculated on the formation of the physical body and told interesting facts. In the earlier chapter on creation we learnt that it is consciousness which is manifesting in different ways, starting from a blade of grass to mighty animals. We saw the lines from the Upanishad saying that the five elements – space, air, fire, water and earth appeared from the Supreme Being. Ironically, the Supreme Brahman has no doer-ship, we saw. A manifestation in Brahman, called *māyā* was the material cause for all the creation. Maya cannot be anything other than consciousness. It is in fact, comparable to the giant wave, which we saw in an earlier example. This was called *Iswara*, the over lord of the universe.

The actual process of evolution of body is like this.

The creative power *māyā* is said to have three characteristics or tendencies in it. They are called *guṇa-s* which are called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. This is a postulation based on a lot of empirical observation. If we observe human nature we find three tendencies. Some are quiet, contented, peaceful and contemplative type. Some are aggressive, acquisitive and dominating type. Some others are lazy, slothful, lacking in initiative and dull type. The psychologists may call them personality types, but this is the observation of the ancient sages. All human activity – good, bad and ugly – is the result of the three *guṇa-s*.

This can be seen in animals too. Some are quiet and bovine, some are aggressive and some are lazy (python).

It is also observed that the food we eat influences our minds because of the three above noted characteristics in that. Some types of food cause quietness and contribute to health. Some cause heat in the body and related changes while some others

cause dullness of mind. The depressants are derivatives of such food types only.

The sages observed the three dispositions or tendencies in everything in the universe. The *Bhagavad Gita* says that there is nothing in the universe which is not a product of the above three tendencies (18-40).

Māyā, otherwise called *prakṛti* is the source for everything in the universe. The above three *guṇa*-s intermix in infinite number of combinations and produce the diversity in the universe. The first fall out of this is the five elements which we know – earth, water, fire, air and space. These five elements too have the three *guṇa*-s in them, which lead to further evolution. All living and non-living things are products of the five elements only.

The *sattva* component of the elements evolves into the mind and senses of all animals, including man.

The *rajas* component of the elements evolves into the organs of action (hands, feet and other limbs) of all animals.

The *tamas* component of the elements evolves into the gross elements around us.

We have five senses, each sense able to cognize only one sense object. The nose can only notice smell, the eye can only notice form of an object and so on. The mind is able to cognize all the five sense objects. Senses and mind are said to evolve as follows.

The *sattva* component of space is said to evolve into the sense of hearing.

The *sattva* component of air is said to evolve into the sense of touch.

The *sattva* component of fire is said to evolve into the sense of sight (fire also gives light).

The *sattva* component of water is said to evolve into the sense of taste.

The *sattva* component of earth is said to evolve into the sense of smell.

The collective *sattva* component of all the five elements is said to evolve into mind. The mind is able to collate the five types of sensory signals presented to it by the five senses.

Vedanta analyzes the stages of mind in four levels. The stage of simple cognition in the mind is called *manas* and the stage of analyzing that cognition is called *buddhi*. At this stage there is a notion of 'I', that 'I have known this'. This stage is called *ahāṅkāra*, the notion of 'I'. When an experience is recalled and relived at a later stage it is called *cittam*.

Bhagavad Gita summarizes the above discussion in the chapter relating to the connection between the corporeal body and consciousness (13:5-6). The Upanishads and subsequent texts of Vedanta discuss the above topic in great detail but it has been very briefly mentioned here.

We are aware that in addition to the mind and senses we have another important component, the life force. This is called *prāṇa-śakti*. The living beings cannot survive without breathing. The air system in the body is said to be the life force.

9.3. Layers of Personality

If we contemplate on all the above, we see that there are several layers in the personality of any living being. The first layer is that of the gross body with flesh, blood and bones (Vedanta

calls it *annamaya* sheath). The next level is that of life force (called *prāṇa* sheath). These two are of no use unless there is intelligence. Hence the mind and senses are said to be the next higher level (mind sheath). The next higher level is that of the self which is the experiencer (the 'I'), and it is called *vijñānamaya* sheath. The next level is the level of bliss which is experienced in deep sleep and which is said to be close to the bliss of Brahman.

The body-mind complex is not you and if you wish to know who you are, you have to start analyzing the different levels and try to know what your real self is. This is shown as an episode from the *Taittiriya* Upanishad.

9.4. Bhrigu's Episode

The episode talks of a young man called Bhrigu who approaches his father Aruni and asks him to tell the nature of the Supreme reality, which, the scriptures say, is the same as the nature of the living being too. His father tells him – 'you have the following data, you have a body, you have the life force called *prāṇa*, you have the five senses and a mind. You contemplate on these and find out which exactly is your real self' – *tapasā brahma vijijñāśasva* – know the truth by contemplation.

This is the procedure adopted in the Upanishads. Everyone has to contemplate and discover the reality for himself.

Bhrigu contemplates on what his father said. His first understanding is that the body is the real self. He then realizes that the body is of little use if there were to be no life force. Even life force is of no use if there were no mind in order to direct the activities of sense organs. Bhrigu then identifies with this mind-self but later realizes that in deep sleep even when the functions of the mind were absent he was very much experiencing the

blissful sleep he had, which means that his real self is not even the mind. He thus discards one layer after the other. Vedanta tells about five such layers – the body layer, the life force layer, the mind layer, the ego layer and the layer of bliss in deep sleep.

Bhriḡu, by peeling off different layers by such reasoning, realizes that his real self is the principle of existence, consciousness and bliss which is also the nature of Brahman, the Supreme reality.

Vedanta does not talk in terms of individual souls which are created by God and which once created never die and linger on in several places like purgatory. On the other hand, Vedanta says that what is called the individual self, ‘*jīva*’, is nothing but consciousness which is reflected in the mind. We saw the example of pot space above. The mind, according to Vedanta, is only a reflecting medium. An individual considers his self a *jīva*, a limited entity, so long as he identifies himself with the body-mind complex. Once he overcomes this identification, he realizes that he is the same as the Supreme Self. The difference is only due to the perception.

Vedanta says that *jīva* is not only a human being but all living beings. All living beings are by definition, the same as Brahman.

Gita (5:) says –

śuni caiva śvapāke ca paṇḍitāḥ samadarśinaḥ.

“The wise persons see Brahman everywhere, be it in a learned person, a cow, an elephant, a dog or a dog-eater”. This is the reason why Hinduism does not say that animals are created as a food for man. (It is also the reason why animal sacrifice was only permitted during *yajña-s* but the general rule was ahimsa, avoiding killing of any animal).

9.5. Does the Self Die?

The so called 'self' is like pot space, we saw. Consciousness looks as though limited in the body-mind complex like space in the pot. Consciousness is never created, it exists at all times. Hence, Vedanta says that the *jīva* is never created, never born and it never dies. There is no birth or death for consciousness (*Gita* 2-20). *Jīva* in the form of a living being is only an appearance in consciousness. The gross body is a product of the five elements - earth, air, fire, water and space. Here, Vedanta accepts the religious postulate of rebirth and talks of a subtle body, (the mind, ego, the five senses and the life force). It is this subtle body which transmigrates into a new body when the old body falls off. Such transmigration continues till a person remains ignorant of the nature of his self.

Man gets rid of this subtle body only when he realizes that he is nothing other than the supreme consciousness. It is somewhat like the wave realizing that it is the ocean itself or the pot-space realizing that it is the infinite space. The gross body and subtle body are merely the limiting factors for the consciousness.

Hinduism does not say that a *jīva* is born with sin. But he has the baggage of his past karma, both good and bad. If there is more good karma to his credit, he would enjoy good things in this life and if he has bad karma pending, he would suffer in this life.

This is not fatalism. It is only a result of fruit of action and a human being has a free will to rectify himself by self purification as told in the scriptures and get on to a higher level.

A human being is not expected to end up at the human level only but he is exhorted to do *sādhana*, that is, to undergo spiritual discipline along with contemplation and thus attain the status of

Brahman. *Vedanta makes an emphatic statement that the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman.* This knowledge of Brahman is not an intellectual appreciation of Brahman but undergoing an internal transformation and shedding of his total identity belonging to caste, class, sex and so on and lose his identity in the identity of Brahman.

This can happen in this life itself and not after life. Every human being has the potential to realize the Supreme Being and become that being. This is called *jīvan mukti*, that is, liberation from the limited self while being alive.

This is not a stage which is the preserve of one class of people like the Vedic scholars or persons of some castes, as it is now misunderstood. This is a spiritual discipline recommended for every human being. Our history and literature abound in examples of such realized persons from every class. It is the highest goal set for a person, as we shall see when we study the human goals.

The parents may see the following YouTube videos

- Influence of Vedanta on the West
- *'American Veda'* by Philip Goldberg

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10

Why do We Worship Several Gods?

10.1. The Spirit of the Vedas

Vedas postulated the Supreme Reality as infinitely existing consciousness. It is a formless, functionless entity. This is for a serious student. But the ordinary man needs a religion. He needs a god to cry on his shoulder and to pour his requests on him. The Vedic sages did not prescribe or mandate one single god form for the common man, but instead, admitted all existing forms of worship in different parts of the land as valid. To say that only one god form as correct is against the basic principle of Vedas. How then, can they dictate that one form is right and one form is wrong?

Vedas do not dictate so and hence we have different forms of worship.

10.2. A Saint Who Established Six Religions

Can we think of a religious leader who can establish six religions? The idea appears crazy. But what Shankaracharya did in India was just the same. He earned the title 'the establisher of six religions' – *ṣaṅmata sthāpakācārya*. We have to know how it happened.

Shankaracharya was a saint born in Kerala sometime in the early eighth century AD. He wrote commentaries on all the primary texts of Hindus and toured all over the country. It

was a practice for the saints (and also for *sanyāsi-s*, those who renounced their worldly pursuits), to travel all over the land and have scholastic discussions.

The Indian sub-continent had different practices in different parts. Different Gods were worshipped according to local practices. The most prominent Gods were, Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti (in several names such as, Durga, Kali, Ambika), Surya (the Sun God), Vinayaka (also called Ganesh), Murugan, just to mention a few. When Shankaracharya toured all over the country, having discourses with the learned scholars of the day, he noticed several sects and cults all broadly owing allegiance to the Vedas, but no uniformity in worship. There were also certain non-Vedic practices like drunken orgies in grave yards, wearing garlands of skulls etc., in the name of worship. Shankaracharya disapproved such practices and validated six prominent systems which were compatible with the Vedic vision of the Supreme Being.

How did he reconcile all? He chose six popular systems and explained in philosophical terms how the deities of those systems were merely manifestations of the one and the only Supreme Reality. The six deities were Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Ganesha, Murugan, and the Sun. What Shankaracharya did was to harmonize the existing religions and tell people that all the deities should be worshipped with equal regard. Even today we find that except for the hardcore followers of Vishnu or Shiva, all of us go to all temples and show equal regard.

Shankaracharya composed hymns praising all the above deities and brought them under the umbrella of the Upanishadic thought. To a lay devotee, these hymns appear like praises for his favorite deity, but one who is familiar with Vedanta would see that they are referring to the impersonal Brahman. This was one

strategy to bring the seeker from a lower level of understanding to the right understanding.

Thus Hinduism as we see now can be understood as a cluster of religious beliefs under the umbrella of Upanishadic thought.

10.3. What Does Gita Say?

The *Bhagavad Gita* has this to say, which every Hindu has to memorize.

*yo yo yāṃ yāṃ tanuṃ bhaktaḥ śraddhayārcitumicchati .
tasya tasyācalāṃ śraddhāṃ tāmeva vidadhāmyaham ..*

(Whoever desires to worship a deity in whatever form, I, the Supreme Reality, will confirm to his devotion in that very form. 7-21)

The Supreme reality is the same for one and all whether one is in Alaska or in Timbuktu. One can worship the Supreme in any form or without any form. All prayers are answered by one and the same deity. We notice certain important points from a study of Gita. The points that can be derived are like this:

- Hinduism is a cluster of religious beliefs under the umbrella of the Upanishads. Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shakti worship and so on are all the religions validated by the Upanishads.
- At the level of religion it describes God as someone who rewards good and punishes evil, for the common man whereas Vedanta describes it at a different level for the seeker of truth.
- Hinduism does not say that one has to worship only one form of deity. There is freedom for the individual to choose his own deity and also worship all deities at a time.
- *Gita* says that people visualize deities according to their own nature and their own desires. Righteous people visualize

deities with righteous qualities whereas unrighteous visualize and worship deities for earthly results and for harming others.

- Different God forms are tools for meditation and concentration of mind. Meditation on such God forms is prescribed for purification of the mind of the seeker.
- Similarly the idol is only a tool which facilitates concentration of mind. It is idea behind the idol which is being contemplated upon, and not the idol as such. It is wrong to assume that we are idol worshippers.
- It is wrong to assume that one particular God gives wealth, another gives wisdom and another gives valor. We are invoking the one and only Brahman in different manifestations. It is merely a convention that we worship Ganesha when start of any project, worship Goddess Saraswati when we appear for an examination and so on.
- If we closely see the Ganesha Vratam or Saraswati Vratam or any other specific worship relating to a deity, we find that the same deity is worshipped at two levels, one as the Supreme Being and the other as a functional God awarding a particular boon. It depends on the maturity of the worshipper to realize the philosophical view.

10.4. Is the Student of Vedanta an Agnostic?

No. All the above discussion may appear like a non-believer's version. The fact that Vedanta accepts a personal god as a lower level of reality does not mean that Vedanta is atheistic or agnostic. A student of Vedanta continues to worship the traditionally handed god-form with all the love, in order to achieve purity of thought, to take support of the god to get rid of his weaknesses

and bad tendencies. It is also as a matter of duty as prescribed by dharma and to set an example for the unenlightened ones. His worship is not a pretentious act or a condescending act. He uses this as a means to attain self-realization.

10.5. Vaishnavism and Saivism :

Vishnu and Shiva are two prominent deities mentioned in the Vedas and they became more popular than other Vedic deities in different parts of the country. Shiva worship was popular in the north western parts – Kashmir and beyond today's Afghanistan. Worship of Vishnu was more in some other parts. Kashmir Saivism is a form of monotheism which accepts the above Vedantic thought but calls the Supreme Being as Shiva (instead of Brahman) and gives some attributes and an exclusive abode (Kailasa) of his own. The same was done by the worshippers of Vishnu who treated him as the Supreme Being and gave some attributions to him besides describing his special abode Vaikuntha. Each one has a hierarchy of attendant gods, divine musicians and so on.

Once we understand the above spirit of the Upanishads about Brahman (Consciousness) at the level of Supreme Reality and a functional god at the level of religion (*vyāvahārika satyam*), we will understand all other forms of worship like Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti (Durga), Ganesa, Sun and so on and have no difficulty in accommodating all of them in that framework. The uniqueness of Hinduism is that it accommodated and harmonized all of them. Hence, these are not being discussed in detail. It is enough to know that each of these forms has developed a theological system in consonance with the Upanishadic thought and treated its own god as the Supreme Brahman. The mythological tales surrounding these schools can be understood accordingly.

10.6. Historical Reasons for Multiple Gods:

- There appears to be a historical reason too, which we have to note, for the existence of multiple gods. The Indian sages did a peaceful and harmonious integration of different systems and permitted all systems to coexist. This is in sharp contrast with what happened in rest of the world.
- History shows that when the new religions originated in the West, they wiped out all existing religions with varying degrees of bloodiness by calling them pagan or barbaric. The religious leaders took the help of the kings or emperors and physically eliminated religions like Mithraism (a religion of the Roman Empire). The same happened in the Arabian Peninsula.
- There is no organizational structure for Hinduism, unlike the western religions. The hierarchical structure in the western world could wield enormous influence on the political system. This did not happen in India as the approach of the sages was to engage in discussions and harmonize traditions. There was no teaming up (like church and the state) with the political power as in the western world.
- The priestly structure of western religions has consolidated over the ages. There are global structures now. An order can be given by the religious high command and it will be obeyed down the line up to a remote parish in Alaska or a remote village in India. Hinduism has no such structure and hence never had the bargaining power with the political structure.

A Hindu child is occasionally ragged by others when he says that Ganesha with an elephant's head is a god or when Hanuman, a monkey king is a god. A Hindu parent has to take

some additional pain to explain the egalitarian Hindu view to a child so that the child will not fall in self-esteem, thinking that it is from an inferior culture. The child will realize that the Hindu texts are most compatible with science and cosmology and are more open minded. Parents may also be careful not to make their kids argumentative and aggressive about religion.

Parents may suggest the following book to kids:

- *'The Story of Mankind'* by Hendrik van Loon (Google search) to see how religions spread by violence.

11

Gods and Demons

11.1. The View of the Upanishads

‘The battle between gods and demons is a symbolic description of the battle between good and bad in our own minds’.

I am not sure whether any religious text can give such honest interpretation. But Vedanta gives this startling interpretation for the idea of Gods and demons. Shankaracharya, the great Vedantin, wrote commentaries on all the Upanishads, on *Gita* and on the *Brahma Sutras*. In his commentary on *Chandogya Upanishad*, he makes the above remark that the fight between Gods and demons should not be seen as though two warring groups are present in the sky, fighting against one another. Gods are merely our own behavioral patterns purified by the study of scriptures and pursuit of righteousness. Demons are our behavioral patterns driven by sensual desires. These two are engaged in constant battle in the human mind. The battle between Gods and demons is a battle in human mind. (*Chandogya* 1-2-1). It is a *ādhyātmika-saṅgrāma*, an inner battle in every human being, which has been going on perennially. Shankaracharya repeats this idea in other works too.

11.2. Heaven and Hell

The heavenly worlds are not some three dimensional places hanging out in space but they are different states of experience. A miserable state of mind is one of the hellish worlds and a pure and

happy mind is one of the heavenly worlds. As Shankaracharya says '*lokyate iti lokaḥ*', that which is experienced due to result of one's own action is a loka or a world. Villainous actions lead to miserable states of mind and benevolent actions lead to pleasant states of mind. He says that *loka-s* can also be the rebirths in a happier or miserable condition depending on actions in this life. *Lokyante bhujyante iti janmāni* – happy or unhappy lives, which are experienced are themselves *loka-s* – says Shankaracharya. We do not clash with other religions for space in heaven.

11.3. Mythological Stories

The Lordly, the Friendly and the Books from the Beloved:

Indian tradition calls the Vedas as the commanding or lordly (*prabhu-sammita*) texts, the mythologies as advisory and friendly (*mitra-sammita*) and the religious poetry as the counsel of the beloved (*kāntā sammita*). As the names indicate, the first type is commanding in nature, the second type gives friendly illustrations and the third type counsel as a beloved would do to her lover.

We may recall that In the Vedic scheme of transmission of knowledge Vedas were considered the primary texts. The epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* were considered as *itihāsa* (closer to historical narrations) and the mythological tales were known as *purāṇa-s*.

The Vedas and *Upanishads* contain philosophical reasoning where the Supreme Brahman is postulated. Such reasoning is beyond the understanding of the lay devotee and hence these ideas are retold in the form of allegorical tales by the *purāṇa-s*.

11.4. The Symbolism

For instance, Vedanta says pure consciousness is the substratum on which *māyā*, its creative energy, manifests. *Purāṇa* presents consciousness as Shiva as lying on a couch and presents Maya/ energy as a goddess sitting over Shiva. The philosophical concepts consciousness (*chit*) and creative power (*śakti*) are allegorically shown as male and female deities.

11.5. The Story of Elimination of Desire

A popular tale about the marriage of Shiva and Parvati has an episode about Shiva turning Kama (Indian version of Cupid) to ashes by his angry looks blazing fire. Shiva has a third eye on his forehead, symbolizing knowledge. In the story, gods stand vanquished by the demons and are looking for some strategy to regain their kingdom. They are told by the creator god that the son born to Shiva and Parvati would be able to destroy the demon king. But Shiva is in deep meditation and would not be disturbed for several ages. The gods have to disturb his meditation and ensure that he gets married. They find a lovely bride, Parvati, who also falls in love with Shiva, and starts serving him, though Shiva takes no notice of her. The gods plan to do so by sending Kama, otherwise called Manmatha (literally, one who churns the mind). When Kama disturbs Shiva by shooting his flower arrows and draws his attention to lovely Parvati, Shiva grows angry and looks around for the cause of such disturbance. He sees Kama, the culprit and opens his third eye, and the flames emanating from that eye burn Kama to ashes.

The symbolism is clear. The fire of knowledge kills Kama, which, in Sanskrit means desire and lustfulness. This is the message of Gita too. Action without desire, performed for universal good is the karma yoga. In the present tale, a

combination of knowledge (Shiva) and action (śakti) without desire (Kama) is shown as producing a child who has the power of restoring the good forces, in other words, gods. This is what is advised to the newlyweds too. Love, not lust, should play the major role in order to have children with good character.

Most of the characters in the *purāṇa*-s have names which symbolize some human folly such as arrogance, avarice, cruelty, rapaciousness, lust and so on. When these demons are shown as being killed by the deities, we have to understand that the particular folly is cured and not that the God is fond of killing. *Bhagavat Purāṇa* is a book where almost all characters are allegorical representations of human characteristics.

11.6. The Happy Boy Prahlada

We know the story of the boy Prahlada who was tormented by his father Hiranya-kasipu, the demon king. Hiranya-kasipu means the man on a golden mattress and Prahlada means one enjoying the bliss of Brahman. The earlier story goes that two attendants Jaya and Vijaya, who served Lord Vishnu, got a curse when they behaved arrogantly with sages. They were cursed to go to earth forever, leaving Vishnu's abode. When they repented, Vishnu gave them the option that they would return to heaven if they take three births as demons and after their arrogance was destroyed by Vishnu they would come back to heaven. Accordingly they took birth and one of them is Hiranyakasipu, who represents greed, avarice and arrogance of wealth. He is unaware of his earlier heavenly status, and hence defies Lord Vishnu, (representing the cosmic dharma) and decrees that all gods and demons should worship him. His son Prahlada, a devotee of Vishnu, does not do so. The demon king grows angry and starts tormenting Prahlada. Finally he has to be vanquished

by Vishnu who comes in the avatar of Nrisimha, the lion-man, to save his devotee Prahlada. Here too, the symbolism is clear. Greed and arrogance of power do not coexist with the bliss of Brahman. Hiranyakasipu merges in the Lord and attains liberation.

11.7. The Buffalo Demon

Another popular story is that of the Mahishasura, the buffalo demon. He is the personification of cruelty, lust and ignorance. Goddess Durga is shown as killing him in the text *Devi Bhagavatam*. It is the abominable qualities which are being 'killed' and not a person and hence we should not construe that the goddess is fond of killing. It is a long allegorical tale where the subalterns of the demon king are vanquished by the attendants of the goddess and finally the goddess 'kills' him.

The slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra, the king of gods is a Vedic story. The word Vritra means that which envelopes or covers a thing. It symbolizes ignorance because ignorance envelopes our right understanding and makes us perceive things wrongly. The gods were once over powered by Vritra. A sage named Dadhichi sacrifices himself and offers his back bone (the vertebral column) as a weapon to be used against Vritra. Back bone symbolizes a nerve named sushumna passing through that and that symbolizes the *kundalini* energy. This is the yogic power which the yogi-s yearn for. Indra slays the demon with the weapon acquired from the sage.

Another symbolic story is that of the demon king Bali. As the name indicates, he is one with enormous strength, both physical and spiritual. However, he is arrogant about his powers. His sense of egotism and defines of gods (the good forces of the world) is his flaw. As he is a mighty demon he defeats the gods and drives them away from heaven. The gods approach Vishnu

to restore the kingdom to gods. Vishnu appears in the form of a boy sage Vamana and approaches Bali who happened to be doing a *yajña*. It is customary for the kings to grant boons to sages at the time of *yajña*. Vamana makes a strange request and seeks space measuring three foot lengths. The king grants accordingly. Vamana then grows in size, occupies the whole universe and covers the whole earth (which was earlier lorded by Bali) with one foot, covers the whole heavenly worlds (which were also conquered by Bali) with another foot. He needs space to put his foot again and finds no space. Bali realizes that the visitor was Vishnu and suggests to Vamana to keep his foot on his head. Vishnu places his foot on the head of Bali. There are several long chapters in *Bhagavatam*, relating the above story. The symbolism is also explained there. Bali symbolizes egotism. Vedanta says that the individual self (*jīva*) is a mere reflection of the Brahman consciousness and it is by sheer ignorance that *jīva* assumes his self to be the doer. This sense of ownership in action has to be eliminated and that is the moral of the story.

11.8. The Weapons of Gods

In almost all stories the gods and demons do have weapons like swords, bows, arrows, maces and such others. Even these symbolize certain human characteristics. For instance, the weapons of Vishnu are described in a few verses in the *Bhagavatam* (Book 12- chapter 11). The name Vishnu means ‘all pervading’ entity. The life force in the universe is said to be the mace of Vishnu and this is said to symbolize the intellect in the humans. The waters (one of the five elements) is said to be the conch and this is said to symbolize the ego principle in the living beings. The fire element becomes the circular disc weapon in the hand of Vishnu and this is said to symbolize the mind in living

beings. While offering prayers to Vishnu, the devotees mention this symbolism and recite mantras saying – ‘we bow to the disc symbolizing the speed of mind, we bow to the conch symbolizing ego’ and so on.

When Vishnu took the *avatāra* of Rama, his weapons the conch and the disc took birth as Rama’s two younger brothers. The snake god on which Vishnu reclines took birth as Lakshmana.

In the thousand names of Lalita, the weapons are described in the very beginning. Sometimes, the symbolism is explained by the text itself, as it is done here. The names say – *rāgasvarūpa pāśāḍhyā krodhākārāṅkuśojvalā* – which means that desire is the snare which the goddess has in one hand and anger is the spur, the sharp iron prod (which controls the elephant) in another hand. It means that desire is permitted to a limited extent and anger (which is associated with knowledge) controls the desire.

The goddess has two more weapons – bow and arrows. The sugar cane bow represents mind (*manorūpekṣu kodaṅḍā*). Like the sugar cane, it is filled with savory juice presented by the five senses. The five flowery arrows represent the five senses (*pañcatanmātra sāyakā*) which go after all beautiful things we see. This is a hymn on Lalita, the Goddess (representing *māyā*) that we see in a *purāṇa*. Millions of people, perhaps recite this every day, little realizing the philosophical meaning, but feeling extremely rewarded by the prayer itself. Lalita is praised here as the deity who would fulfill desires and also as the Supreme Being.

Stories relating to all deities indicate that the so called weapons are not actually weapons but some of the characteristics associated with the cosmic being, whether it is called Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha or any other name.

Such tales abound in our *purāṇa-s*.

Some *purāṇa-s* extol Vishnu as the Supreme Being, some extol Shiva as the Supreme Being and some others extol Shakti, Ganesha and others as Supreme Being. This should not be taken as a serious contradiction because these could have been composed by supporters of the respective sects. (Tradition has it that it was sage Vyasa alone who composed all the eighteen *purāṇa-s*, to bring together different belief systems. Some moderns say that the name Vyasa was more a title than reference to a single person.) These could have originated in different parts of the country where that particular tradition or sect was prevalent. However, we see that all these broadly follow the philosophical framework of Vedanta, while presenting various characters and stories in their narrative.

11.9. No Concept of Devil in Hinduism

In order to explain the evil in the world, religions normally portray God as representing good and devil representing evil, as polar opposites. God throws the devil and his team into hell.

We do not have the concept of devil in Hinduism. If we accept devil as distinguished from God, God would be a delimited entity howsoever powerful he may be. God will be in heaven and the devil will be reigning in hell and there will be constant tussle between God and devil.

We noted that there are three *guṇa-s*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in *māyā*, the power of revelation that is in the Brahman. This power is otherwise called '*prakriti*'. What we call bad or evil is a product of these *guṇa-s* only and it gets resolved by the cosmic design of an *avatāra* which is the means to restore the balance among the *guṇa-s* and restore dharma in the universe.

Gita says that whenever there is ascendance of evil and suppression of the good, the cosmic being manifests in some form to restore order and protect the good (*Gita* 4-7 & 8). The commentators have explained that the cosmic being takes birth with the power of *māyā* and this birth is not like the birth of all other humans, though the activities of this *avatāra* will closely resemble the activities of humans. Lord Rama and Lord Krishna are examples of this.

There is an interesting discussion in *Bhagavatam* (1st chapter, 7th canto) between sage Suka and king Parikshit. “How can God have enmity with the demons, when He is supposed to be equally kind to all?” questions the king. The sage replies that in reality, the Supreme Being is above all this. It is the *māyā* which is a manifestation in the Supreme Being, and what we see as evil is only an interplay of the three *guṇa*-s. The empirical god, whom we call the creator is but consciousness delimited by *māyā*. When there is upsurge of *tamas*, it is the cosmic design to control it by unleashing the *sattva guṇa*. Thus the empirical god appears as though he is the vanquisher and the vanquished (*Bhagavatam* 7-1-6).

That is why it is seen that the demons vanquished by the God merge in the same cosmic being. The same text in *Bhagavatam* gives examples of demons and other evil persons who were killed by different avatars of Vishnu and how they merged in the same avatar-person after they got killed. Hiranya-kasipu, the demon king merges in the avatar of Nrisimha (the man-lion), and Sisupala, the evil king merges in the avatar-person Krishna. It means that evil is something which gets subsumed in the cosmic being.

Good and evil cannot be different from the cosmic being, as they are manifestations in the same consciousness. The Supreme Consciousness is untouched by all this.

11.10. Distorted Presentation of Hindu Culture

Parents generally are not aware of this subtle but pervasive phenomenon.

In 5.2 we saw sage Vyasa explaining the framework of *itihāsa* and *purāṇa*. They were designed to convey the complicated message of the Vedas to the lay devotee in terms of understandable tales.

Some of the Western writers, followed by the Indian communists, have deliberately ignored the ancient commentaries and also the framework in which these texts have to be understood. Some have given racist interpretations with an intention to divide the Indian society (for political or evangelical reasons) and some others have superimposed the western ideas of abnormal psychology which are alien to Indian psyche and culture. It is a grave hurt to the sentiments of millions of Hindus to say that Ganesha had a lustful eye on his mother Parvati or that Lakshman in Ramayana had lusted for Sita (as Paul Courtright says).

These writers have chosen to take *purāṇa-s* as the primary texts, though it is not the Vedic scheme of things. *Purāṇa-s* have to be studied in the light of philosophical perspective of the *Upanishads* but not from any anthropological or racist perspective as some of the modern writers, ignorant of the philosophical tradition, have done.

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12

Do We Worship Idols?

12.1. The Idea of God Becomes the Idol of God

Vedas (Upanishads) talk of meditations of different types. One can meditate on god as though god is seated in one's heart. One can meditate on the Supreme Being as located in the sun or moon or any other object. The major *Upanishads* are silent about idol worship, which shows that this practice is of later origin.

We saw above how the mythological tales give symbolic description for the philosophical concepts. These concepts are given a shape and form by seekers for easy recapitulation and practice of meditation. This can be in the shape of a diagram called *yantra*, or a drawing which is a pictorial representation or a three-dimensional representation of the same, which is an idol. Thus we see *yantra*, mantra (sacred chanting with chosen words), pictures and idols, all forming aide-memoire for the seeker. (Such symbolic representation is seen in all ancient religions).

A verse from *Rama-Tapaniya Upanishad* (a minor Upanishad) explains thus:

*cinmayasyādvitīyasya niṣkalasyāsarīriṇaḥ .
upāsakānāṃ kāryārthaṃ brahmaṇo rūpakalpanā .*

(The Brahman, the Supreme Reality, is of the nature of cit, that is, intelligence, and it is non-dual. It has no parts in It and no body. The visualization of some shape for It is merely to facilitate the meditators).

Another well known verse from a *smṛti* says this:

*agnirdevo dvijātīnām munīnām ḥṛdi daivatam .
pratimā sthūlabuddhīnām sarvatra veditātmanām ..*

(It is the Agni, the fire God, who is worshipped by *dwija*-s; the saints visualize god in their own hearts. The laymen need an idol or a symbol for devoting their attention. The wise persons see divinity everywhere).

12.2. Emergence of Idols

Buddhists perhaps sculpted the largest idols in the world (eg, Buddha's statues in the Bamiyan caves in Afghanistan) though Buddha himself did not advocate the idea of God or idol worship. The Buddhist practice could have influenced the Hindus or the practice could have co-existed in both.

Hindus, as we noted above, worshipped different deities and had visualized certain belief systems around the idea of that deity. For instance, the worshippers of Vishnu held that Vishnu resided in Vaikunta with his consort Lakshmi. Worshippers of Shiva held that Shiva resided in Kailasa with his consort Parvathi. Other minor systems too existed in the same way.

The Indian sages appear to have done an ingenious thing by establishing relationship among these deities. Shakti, otherwise known as Parvathi, was treated as wife of Shiva by the followers of Shiva. A different power or Shakti, known as Lakshmi, was treated as wife of Vishnu by followers of Vishnu. Ganesha was made the son of Shiva and Parvathi. It was a very harmonious integration of deities under the umbrella of Upanishads, without harming the basic philosophical doctrine of the Upanishads.

Vedanta treated the above three major deities, that is, Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra as associated with the three *guṇa*-s,

rajas, *sattva* and *tamas* respectively, corresponding to the three cosmic functions of creation, sustenance and dissolution. They are not three different 'persons' but three aspects of the same functional god.

Worship of some type of symbol is seen in all religions. As we noted above, the emergence of new religions led to destruction of all temples and idols both in Christianity and Islam. Yet all religions hold several symbols as sacrosanct and inviolable. The Christians worship Cross, Muslims hold the Quran with great reverence. They also hold physical structures of Mosques or Churches as inviolable and any perceived insult would result in street protests and violence.

12.3. Do we worship the cow?

We do respect the cow, of course, but not worship it. Cow is the most important participant in a *yajña* because of its milk, butter and all other products from the cow. Several cows are also given as gift at that time. Hence the tradition of treating it as a sacred animal has started. All Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism advocated ahimsa – non-violence to animals. There was a limited exception to this, permitting sacrifice of animals during certain rituals but non-violence was the rule. We may also know that our religion does not say that God created all animals as food for man.

The daily practices of Hindus (which we may still see in rural India) reveal the respect for nature around. When a person gets up he mutters a small prayer to mother earth seeking permission to set his foot on her. When a person takes dip in a river (all rivers are considered holy) he seeks forgiveness of the river for polluting it with his bodily dirt. When a person builds a house and starts digging the earth, he seeks pardon, as he is hurting the

earth as well as the worms which may be there in the soil. The Vedic sage seeks permission of the tree to break a twig from it for performance of a ritual. A healthy respect for nature is built into the psyche of a Hindu, which can be seen in the rural India even today.

* * *

13

Enjoy Your Temple Visit

13.1. Temple Symbolism

We had earlier noted that philosophical reasoning is like the software of Hinduism whereas rituals, festivals and other practices are like the hardware.

It is not certain whether there were temples in the Vedic times. The Vedas talk about *yajña-s*, which did not need the presence of a temple. The middle portions of the Vedas talked about *upāsanā-s*, (as noted earlier) which were meant for concentration of mind and meditating on the nature of a particular deity. *Upanishads* like *Chandogya* talk about several such *upāsanā-s*. These involve visualizing a deity in some object in front of the devotee. A special stone named *sālagrāma* can be used to visualize Vishnu, another oval shaped stone can be used to visualize Shiva and so on. This visualization can be in a diagram (called *yantra*) or merely in a verbal form (*mantra*) or as an object in front of the devotee.

It is generally presumed that these symbols gradually became more elaborate depending on the imagination of the devotee or the person who prepared the object for concentration of mind. Gradually the person who made such objects started making these objects in a human form and became a professional sculptor. An elaborate science called *āgama-śāstra* came into existence. These books derived the basic doctrine from the Vedas and elaborated on that. Thus we find different *āgama-s* of different schools. We

have *āgama-s* relating to Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti. These books give meticulous details about the construction of the temple. The temple becomes a symbolic representation of the philosophy.

Every temple has the sanctum sanctorum, called the *garbha gr̥ha* (the womb-house) where the lord is located. Around this there may be three or more perimeter walls on all four sides. The number of walls is also symbolic. Three walls represent the three *guṇa-s*, indicating that we have to go beyond the three *guṇa-s*. Five walls represent the five sheaths in the body, indicating that we have to go beyond the five sheaths and seek the lord. Quite often, the temple priest is the best guide to tell about this, depending on their tradition.

If you see the ancient temples of south India, you find a system called *pañcāyatana* – worship of five deities. If a Vishnu follower were to build a temple, he would keep the idol of Vishnu as the main deity and keep four other deities – Shiva, Shakti, Sun and Ganesha in the four corners. If a Shiva follower were to build a temple he would place Shiva's idol in the center and keep the others in the four corners. This system was perhaps influenced by Shankaracharya who was called the establisher of six systems of worship (see 10.2).

We saw the symbolism of gods, goddesses and their weapons in the earlier chapter. If Lord Venkateswara is standing with one wife on each side, your child should understand that one wife represents wealth (Lakshmi) and the other wife represents the world (Bhudevi). Similarly, other gods and wives have to be understood.

Sometimes the god is seen having four hands. Generally, these four hands represent the four human goals – dharma, *artha* (prosperity), *kāma* (desire) and *mokṣa* (liberation). Dharma

is social order, and this is normally shown as a weapon in one hand. The palm of another hand which gives boons, is shown pointing downwards (called *varada mudra*), symbolizing that it gives the desired boons. Another hand, usually having a flower, symbolizes desire. The fourth hand is called *abhaya mudra*, symbolizing knowledge. As per Vedanta, knowledge alone gives fearlessness. In other words, this hand represents liberation.

13.2. Our Frame of Mind

Gita says that four types of people seek god – those who are in distress, those who needs prosperity, those who are seekers and lastly the realized persons (*jñāni*). Most of us fall under the first two categories. We visit temples when we need blessings for a particular need. With great devotion we convey our anxieties and desires to the god and find solace.

Krishna says that seeker is interested in god because he wants to get rid of the impurities of mind and become eligible for the knowledge of Brahman. Devotion to god keeps him away from impure associations and it is known to be the best means for purification of mind. Similarly, a *jñāni* too participates in worship like any other person though he has no desire, no anxiety whatsoever. He realizes his self as not different from Brahman but yet he worships a deity as a continuance of earlier habit and also to be a role model of others.

We are not expected to be ostentatious devotees. Lord Krishna says that a trifling of a present, like a flower or a fruit or even a leaf given with dedication is enough for the Lord (*Gita* 9-26). However, temples have evolved different types of worship. Unfortunately the system is commercialized in several places. There is a type of worship which sixteen types of services (*ṣoḍaśa-upacāra-pūjā*). This is similar to inviting an honored

guest to your house, make him seated in a respectable seat, offer water, food and several such services till you see him off. This type of worship can be done in a simple way and also in a very ornate and lavish way. In fact Shankaracharya has written about *mānasa pūjā* (silent worship within the mind) of the attribute-less Brahman.

The real *darśanam*, vision, of the Lord is to understand the divine nature and not merely see the Lord's idol from close quarters or touch it or be there for a long time. The real *prasādam* is to attain tranquility of mind and not to eat some delicious offering given to the lord. You may have a look at Shankaracharya's composition called *nirguṇa mānasa pūjā* in this context.

Temples have served the great purpose of being the religious, cultural and educational centers. They were the centers for dance, music and sculpture, besides being places of religious discourses. Ancient temples have elaborate architectural details. Each temple is unique and each tradition is unique. It will be quite interesting if you can take a guide to explain various sculptures in the temples you see. We need not be in a hurry to rush into the sanctum sanctorum and have a mere glimpse of the Lord. Appreciation of the whole temple is a rewarding spiritual experience.

* * *

14

Are We Asked to Work Without Desiring the Fruit?

Yes, but it is for the person who wants to get out of the cycle of birth and death and attain liberation. *It is only commended but not mandated for all.*

14.1. The Meaning and Framework of Karma

It is a common accusation against the Hindu system because of the oft quoted statement which confounds a superficial reader. The *Gita* says:

'karmaṇyeva-adhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana'(2-47).

Krishna asks Arjuna to perform the duty enjoined on him without expecting the fruit of that action. “Do not become the cause for the fruit of that action and likewise, do not give up your enjoined duty”, he adds.

This has to be understood in the overall context of the meaning of *karma*. Though the word '*karma*' literally means 'action', in Vedanta it refers to the actions prescribed or permitted for a person. The line from *Gita* is not referring to secular duties like attending office, performing duty of a technical employee in a multinational, and not expecting his pay slip. It is talking of the religiously enjoined duties on different categories of people.

There are three types of actions described in the scriptures.

Daily and compulsory duties,
Occasional but obligatory duties
Desire-driven actions

The *first* is a compulsory duty, called *nitya-karma*, which consists of self-purifying actions such as contemplation of the Gayathri mantra, giving food to guests, feeding the poor, feeding animals etc. (called the five-fold *yajña*) which have to be performed every day. The *second* type of duty is connected with special occasions like new moon day, or a festival day. There are also special rituals for occasions like birth, initiation to Vedic study, marriage and so on. Sociologists call them rites of passage. These involve certain cooperative practices like giving food to the people, making different types of donations (*dānam*) during such rituals.

The *third* type of action is not exactly a duty, but an action motivated by the individual's desire to achieve more prosperity in this world or in the other world (heaven) by performing rituals recommended in the scriptures. This would result in some result, and to enjoy this, a person may have to take up another birth.

We may know two words here – *puṇyam* and *pāpam*. *Puṇyam* is a sort of spiritual merit accruing to a person because of the above said rituals and other good deeds performed. *Pāpam* is a demerit accruing to a person because of some bad deeds (*adharma*). These *puṇyam* and *pāpam* may give result either in this life or in the later births.

The *nitya-karma* (compulsory rites) and the obligatory rites on special occasions do not result in *puṇyam*, though their non-performance leads to *pāpam*.

The third type of activity, noted above, motivated by individual desire, produces a spiritual merit called *puṇyam*.

Performance of an evil deed or prohibited action causes spiritual demerit. Thus, a person normally accumulates a mixed baggage of merit and demerit over a period of time. This gets exhausted only by experiencing the fruit of the action. If it is not possible in the current life to exhaust this, he has to take up another birth to exhaust it.

Rebirth implies further activities, good or bad, and further accrual of the fruit of such actions. Further rebirths are needed to exhaust such accumulated baggage of good and bad. A person is said to transmigrate from body to body as we noted above. This unending cycle of transmigration is called *saṃsāra*.

14.2. Desire-free Action

We shall now see what is called desire-free action or work done without expecting result. In Vedanta, it is called *niṣkāma* karma.

Desire-free karma is mandated for the person who wants be on the path of knowledge 1) in order to attain purity of mind and 2) in order to get out of the cycle of birth and death. It is not for the one who does not bother for realization.

Karma cannot be avoided by any of us, as it is the driving force for the very existence of human society. Moreover, not doing karma is itself karma, that is, the action of avoidance of duty, and so it entails demerit. Hence, the *person who wants to get rid of the cycle of transmigration* has to think of an intelligent way to do karma and still get out of the cycle of births. For this, *Gita* suggests *karma-yoga*.

If the baggage of karma causes rebirth, the intelligent way to avoid rebirth is to do karma but not claim the result. Do it with an attitude that you are doing it as your duty to society, as an offering

to the Lord, and as your contribution to the collective good (*loka-saṅgraha*, as *Gita* calls it). Then you will not be touched by the result of that karma, says *Gita*. This attitude to work is called *niṣkāma karma*, a desire-free action. (*Kāma* means 'desire' and *niṣkāma* means 'desire-free').

The important result of desire-free action is that it leads to purity of mind, which is essential for self-realization. A person with a bundle of desires can hardly do any self-enquiry. There is a principle of inter-dependence in the whole cosmos and everyone has to play his role. This person engaged in *niṣkāma karma* does his portion of duty as the individual's contribution to the cosmic order. This makes his mind pure and eligible for study of scriptures.

Niṣkāma karma, by itself, will not lead to realization and avoidance of the cycle of birth and death. Why? It is because it can merely ward off the result of karma done in this birth but cannot neutralize the pending baggage of karma-s, good and bad, of previous births.

In order to neutralize the pending baggage there is only one way prescribed in the scriptures. One is asked to pursue scriptural studies and go through the three stages – called *śravaṇam* (grasping the meaning of Upanishidic statements like 'that you are', at an intellectual level), *mananam* (logically analyzing the subject and internalizing it) and *nididhyāsanam* (to be firm in that state of awareness). It is this three level spiritual exercise which finally results in realization of self.

Niṣkāma karma is thus a *strategy* and the first step for those who are in the path of self-realization. It is a step in the long process of self-purification.

A person who has this attitude to work is called a *karma yogi*. It is called *yoga* because it is a means to unite the individual

with the universal self and this karma yoga is a preparatory step for such union. This is what *Bhagavad Gita* is all about.

14.3. Dead-lines and Desire-free Action

How is a modern man bogged down with dead-lines related to this desire-free action?

This idea had a particular relevance for Arjuna who was about to plunge into war. However, it does not mean that it cannot be applied to present day secular work. In secular work too, one can be a better performer if one works not merely for the pay slip, but for the good of the organization, which is ultimately for the good of society.

Gita says that even day-to-day activities can be done with the awareness of the divine in us and as an offering to the collective (5-9). This attitude becomes more relevant and applicable where the action has a public interface and where one is capable of doing more service. This is possible both in a private sector functioning and in the government departments.

One who merely does this *niṣkāma-karma* is surely avoiding the fruit of actions done in this life, but the karmas of previous lives may be pending. If he wants to get rid of them, he has to attain knowledge of the self, through the three-level discipline of study, affirmation and bringing it to experience.

To sum up, you may like to leave the fruit of action if you want to come on to the path of knowledge, that is, if you are a seeker. But if you want to enjoy, you may do so and continue to stay in a transmigrating existence.

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Does Hinduism Advocate Fatalism?

15.1. What Vedanta Says

This is a common misconception about Hinduism. Fatalism is the belief that everything is predetermined by the unseen hand of God and that man has no role in shaping himself. This is not what Hinduism says.

Our actions give results, good, bad or mixed, as we have seen above. These results may befall either in this very birth or in a later birth. A person who is born is thus a result of a previous action. This rule applies right from an ant to the largest living animal and from a blade of grass to the tallest tree. (In our tradition animal life and plant life are also due to the *karma* of an individual during this human existence).

Animals and trees have no chance of doing *yajña-s*, *upāsana-s* or *karma-yoga*. It is only the human who can do these. Scriptures exhort a person to do good deeds and neutralize the bad effects of earlier deeds. Scriptures talk about *puruṣakāra*, human effort in order to get rid of the effects of bad *karma* and progress spiritually. All scriptures would lose their relevance if we do not accept that the human being can change the course of his life.

15.2. Human Being – A Doer and Enjoyer Both

Thus while being born as a lower animal or as a human being, a living being is experiencing the fruit of previous action.

It is called *bhoktā*, the one who is eating the fruit of action. The human being, on the other hand, is a *kartā*, actor too. He has got the liberty, intelligence and guidance from the scriptures to choose his course of action.

When a person is born, he or she is born with some inbuilt tendencies, predispositions called *vāsanā-s* in Vedanta. This is like an arrow shot from a bow and which cannot be taken back. It has given a particular result. As the human being grows, his exposure to scriptures will give him an opportunity to change the course of his earlier dispositions. All spiritual discipline described by various systems of Yoga and Vedanta relate to this purification of dispositions. Human effort for betterment is like an arrow which is cocked on a bow and kept ready for release. He may release it in whatever manner he wants.

Why someone is born poor and someone rich? Is god partial to some? Scriptures have proposed the idea of *karma* in order to explain the diversity in the world we see. Some are born in a royal family, some in a poor hutment, someone is born with a sound body but some other is born lame and so on. We have to say that god is partial in his creation if the idea of *karma* were not to be accepted. Diversity shows that the human being is responsible for his actions.

Scriptures also say that actions like *karma yoga*, devotion to god, meditation and other practices of Yoga will lead to purification of mind. This becomes meaningful only when we accept that the human being has a free will to choose his action. Scriptures repeatedly say that a person has to strive for the highest goal. In fact *Gita* enumerates several paths (actions) to attain that goal. A person can choose a path which is ideal to him.

15.3. Karma Bhūmi

There is a general misconception that the landmass of India is *karma bhūmi*, a sacred place where alone all our rituals and prayers fructify. No doubt our land is sacred because of so many sages who have taken birth, so many sacred places and rivers existing in it. However, it is only an idea from the *purāṇa-s* to extol the greatness of our land.

The student of Vedanta knows that the human being alone is capable of performing actions, good or bad. All *yajña-s*, austerities, penances and charitable activities can be done in the human life only. Vedanta says that it is the human life which is the *karma bhūmi*. We need not, however, dispute with those calling India as a *karma bhūmi*, but such contenders have to recall that what was called Bharata varsha is not the delimited India we see today. Bharata varsha extended up to Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma. People of these lands may not bother to call their land *karma bhūmi*.

Do our rituals give result outside India?

Hindus living abroad are in a dilemma about this sometimes. When we understand that the human life (and not India) is the *karma bhūmi*, we will also realize that rituals, worship and meditation would give result anywhere in the world. A proper study of *Gita* would dispel all our doubts.

Coming back to the topic of fatalism, we see that scriptures recommend *karma-s* to get rid of the bad effects of earlier *karma*. This is nothing but free will. To start with we see the operation of fate but later we see the operation of free will to steer in one's own way. In other words, we have a mixture of what we may call determinism and free will in our tradition.

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16

Are We a Caste Bound Society?

Upanishads talk only of *varṇa*, which, in later times, got fossilized as caste.

Hindu society suffered a great deal and continues to be under great attack mainly on this issue. We have to see what the primary scriptures talk about this.

16.1. Vedas – Varna Based on Qualities

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (of *Shukla Yajurveda*) gives this account. “In the beginning there was only one *varṇa*, that is, Brahmin. It was not able to fulfill the needs of society and so it created *kṣatriya*, the warrior wing” (Br.U 1-4-11). “Even this was not adequate and so it created the trading wing called *vysya*. When this too was not complete, it created the wing of the working class which was called *śūdra* and also Pushan, which means one who feeds and nourishes the society. (Br.U 1-4-12 & 13).

We studied the idea of the cosmic being in an earlier chapter. The Rig Veda visualizes the whole cosmos as a living being (*virāt*) and says this:

“Brahmin became the mouth (spokesperson for the society), *kṣatriya*, the warrior became the shoulders, the *vysya* became the thighs (the support structure) and *śūdra* formed the feet (for different services)” (Rig Veda 10-).

This is the normal division of work in any present day society. It is the so-called intelligent minority who become the spokespersons and policy makers. These positions are attained by the individual aptitude and caliber.

The oft quoted line from the *Bhagavad Gita* says this:

cāturvarṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭam guṇakarma vibhāgaśaḥ (4-17).

Krishna says clearly that the categorization into *varṇa* and allocation of duties is according to *guṇa*-s. This is repeated by Krishna in the eighteenth chapter (18-41) where he says that the duties of persons are decided by their *guṇa*-s, the built-in aptitudes and qualities. The commentators, particularly, Nilakantha is very emphatic about the *guṇa*-s. He says that if a Brahmin does not possess the qualities as defined for him, he should be deemed a non-Brahmin and put in the appropriate category. If a *śūdra* has the merit and qualities expected of a Brahmin, he should be categorized as Brahmin.

This was the arrangement as we find in the Vedic texts. The division of people into different varnas was based on their basic aptitudes, tendencies or dispositions called *guṇa*-s. We saw this word ‘*guṇa*’ above. The three *guṇa*-s, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* which are the building blocks of *prakṛti* (*māyā*), are also the building blocks of every sentient and insentient thing on earth.

The *guṇa*-s mix in infinite number of proportions to evolve into the world of diversity we see. There is predominance of one *guṇa* or the other in all things in nature (which is the basis of the Ayurveda – the Indian system of medicine). In the case of human beings, those who have predominance of *sattva* are those who will be truthful, righteous, humble, compassionate, generous and contented. These are the persons who are the intellectual mentors of a society. Those who have predominance of *rajas* have two distinct tendencies i.e. (a) aggressive, valorous, bold, violent

and dominating tendency and (b) acquisitive, creating wealth, trading nature. These were called *kṣatriya* and *vysya* respectively. Lack of initiative, sloth and dullness are the characteristics of *tamas*. Those who had such qualities were called *śūdra*-s.

16.2. Clarified in Mahabharata Too

In the beginning, categorization of people into different *varṇa*-s was decided basing on the innate tendencies of persons due to interplay of *guṇa*-s in them.

The problem arose when the descendants of these persons claimed to be in those categories whether they had merit or not. Society cannot agree for a bureaucrat's son claiming to be a bureaucrat and an army general's son claiming to be a general.

Mahabharata, the great epic, has several passages (particularly in Shanti Parva) supporting the above points. It appears that even by that time there was dilution in the character of Brahmins and they became pleasure seekers and power mongers. Such people became *kṣatriya*-s. By their unbecoming and uncleanly conduct, they also became *śūdra* (*Shanti Parva*, Ch 188, 11-18). The commentator Nilakantha, on the authority of the Vedas, concludes emphatically that conduct and qualities define *varṇa*.

16.3. Concept of Dwija

One word which has to be correctly understood is '*dwija*', meaning 'the twice born'. Out of the four *varṇa*-s, the first three, that is, the Brahmin, *kṣatriya* and *vysya* were collectively called '*dwija*', because they all underwent the initiation ritual, which was treated as a second birth for them and they studied Vedas. *Gita* defines *vysya* (who is also a *dwija*) as follows:

kṛṣi gorakṣa vāṇijyaṃ vaiśyakarma svabhāvajam

It means that all those who are involved in agriculture, cattle rearing and any type of trade, were called *vysya-s*. All these were called *dwija-s*, the twice born. Most of the present day lower castes are really to be called *dwija-s*.

Hindus worship Lord Krishna as one of the highest deities. He was a cattle-herd and was a *dwija*. However his descendents consider themselves as *śūdra-s* because some time during history they have given up Vedic learning just as most of the Brahmins have done now.

Sage *Vyasa*, born to a fisher woman is worshipped as the reincarnation of Vishnu. He re-organized the Vedas, wrote Mahabharata, wrote several *purāṇa-s* and is treated as the first Guru of mankind. His birthday celebrated as the Guru's day (*guru-pūrṇimā*) in India. Similarly sage Valmiki, the author of Ramayana, belonged to the hunting tribe, but he is revered as a great sage by all the pundits. Suta, the narrator of all our *purāṇa-s* and writer of the Vedanta text Suta Samhita is a person of lower caste. His book was read by Shankara before writing the commentary on the Brahma Sutra.

We also see that till recent years, most of these persons wore the sacred thread and performed the daily rituals just like Brahmins. Social change in modern India has been so fast that these castes are gradually forgetting their traditional learning and are distancing themselves from the mainstream.

16.4. Varna and Caste – Examples of Later Teachers

Varṇa is not the same as caste. *Varṇa* is mentioned in *Upanishads* but not the caste. *Varṇa* is because of the manifestation of characteristics of sattva, rajas and tamas, whereas, caste is because of the trade with which a person or a group of persons

were involved. India, till recently, was mostly a rural society and a village was an economically self-contained unit where the weaver produced the cloth, the ironsmith produced implements, goldsmith gave ornaments and so on. Expertise in these trades consolidated in the form of castes and resulted in marriages within those groups to preserve and promote such expertise.

Various occupations and trades are mentioned in Sri *Rudram*, the most ancient portion from *Rigveda*. However, all those trades come under the definition of *Vysya*. By the time of Mahabharata castes seem to have come into existence, because of transformation of *varṇa* into caste because of inter-marriages among different *varṇa*-s. The *Manusmriti* and other *Smritis* give some details of these castes.

The most controversial subject is untouchability of the so called *caṇḍāla*-s. Great sages like Shankara, Ramanuja and others have always approached the issue truthfully and honestly. There is an episode of Shankaracharya which runs as follows.

Once, when Shankaracharya was walking in the streets of Varanasi (Benaras), a *caṇḍāla*, a person of the lowest caste came across his way. Shankara seems to have initially asked him to give way and move aside, as it was the practice in those days. The *caṇḍāla* seems to have questioned Shankara to clarify as to whether the body has to move away or the consciousness. Shankara realized his mistake and then bowed before the *caṇḍāla* and said “*caṇḍālo’stu sa tu dwijo’stu gururityeṣā maṇiṣā mama*’.” ‘When a person realizes that he is none other than the Supreme Consciousness it is irrelevant whether he is a *caṇḍāla* or a *dwija* (the body mind complex is irrelevant) and he has to be revered as a guru’ – said the *acharya*.

Sage Ramanuja, in a similar vein, taught the Narayana mantra from the rooftop of the temple when all the priestly class held that it was a blasphemy to reveal the mantra to people of all castes. He seems to have said – “If I have to go to hell by revealing the mantra to all, I would happily go, but all others would attain heaven by knowing the mantra”. Such has been the approach of all thinkers.

The core ideal in Hinduism is collective good and hence it provides for changes in social customs which are the external aspects of dharma. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* (1-11) refers to the standard behavior of wise, impartial, self-less and truthful persons as the ideal to be emulated. This becomes the ideal for all others whenever there is a doubt. Largest good for the largest number is the idea implied. Shankaracharya himself, in his commentary on Brahma Sutra mentions that whatever is deemed right at a particular time, context and place may not be right in another time, context and place. *What is truth and what is right are to be distinguished.* Truth remains changeless whereas what is perceived as right changes according to context. Untouchability which was held right at some time is definitely not right at all times. It conflict with the truth of equality of all beings.

The upper *varṇa* society seems to have developed a vested interest in perpetuating the discrimination. In some cases it was due to ignorant notion that their superiority was god-given. There was no economic exploitation as in the case of slavery in the western world. There was no buying or auctioning of persons and no one was kept in chains. The study of scriptures was denied to them and certain menial and unclean jobs were assigned and physical segregation was practiced.

Social inequality and spiritual inequality existed simultaneously.

Hindu society rectified the mistake of social and political inequality by prohibiting untouchability and making it a seriously punishable offence. This was done as soon as the Hindu polity came to power after thousand years of social turmoil due to foreign invasions and rule. Political and social equality was thus ensured.

Spiritual inequality is as undesirable as social inequality. This has now disappeared in practice, as the Governments have introduced study of scriptures for all castes and it is not objected to by the Hindu leaders. However, the Hindu religious leadership has not formally come out actively supporting this. This could not be done as the Hindu religion does not have any organizational structure like other religions. There is no decision making body in order to address this issue. It is, however, possible for Hindu organizations to evolve a credible body of religious heads and put an end to this stigma on our noble and egalitarian dharma.

Admission of spiritual equality should not cause fears in the orthodox, as it does not mean that the orthodox have to give up study of scriptures and disinherit themselves from tradition. It only implies that the knowledge would be willingly shared by all and better synergy is built up in society. As we saw above in the comment of Nilakantha, all those who have the qualities mentioned for a Brahmin should be treated as such.

Critics of Hinduism took great advantage of this fault-line and denigrated Hinduism. A great deal of guilt is heaped on the so-called upper castes of Hindu society, forgetting human conduct throughout the world.

16.5. What History Shows

History would show that the burden of guilt has to be shared by the whole of humanity for atrocities on fellow citizens throughout the ages.

The ancient Greek and Roman societies had slavery as an established institution. In fact the spread of Christianity in the initial days was among the slaves in the Roman Empire. During the middle ages the western society was divided into three classes – workers, soldiers and the clergy. Some form of stratification existed in China, Japan, Egypt and such ancient cultures.

History shows how the Spanish inquisition initiated one of the most hideous crimes perpetrated in the name of religion. The most pious religious leaders invented the most horrible torture mechanisms and killed hundreds and thousands of people from middle ages down to 18th century.

Over centuries, the Africans were physically abducted, chained, turned into slaves and auctioned in open markets throughout Europe and America till 19th century. Abraham Lincoln had to lay down his life for this cause. The blacks did not have even voting rights till 1960s in enlightened western countries whereas voting rights were given to all in India the moment India got freedom in 1947. There have been black churches and white churches in the western society till recent years.

Gandhiji was thrown out by a white British, while he was travelling by train in the first class in South Africa. Non-whites were prohibited from travelling in the first class.

Millions of Jews were killed in the enlightened twentieth century in Europe by highly religious persons.

In contrast, we find that there was no slavery whatsoever in India and there was no torture of the untouchables from any account of history. The so-called upper castes merely went home, bathed and muttered a few mantras if they touched a *caṇḍāla*, but there was never any persecution.

The reformation of Hindu society will be possible by evolving a religious authority by educated Hindus and reiterate the spirit of the Upanishads in order to bring about harmony in society.

Parents may be aware of:

- World History
- The History of Slavery,
- History of Genocide
- Spanish Inquisition

* * *

The Four Human Goals

17.1. The Ambit of Human Activity

A modern student is aware of the hierarchy of human needs, explained by Maslow. As a social animal, the human being has certain basic bodily needs and certain emotional needs. Society gives scope for everyone to achieve his potential while satisfying his needs and fulfilling his ambitions.

The ancient Hindu tradition (right from the Vedic times) had identified four human goals or objectives – called *puruṣārtha-s*. The word *puruṣārtha* means that which is desired by a person and that which is to be achieved by a person. These are:

dharma – universal ethical and social norms to be followed,

artha – wealth needed for fulfilling economic needs,

kāma – sexual needs, by way of marriage,

mokṣa – enquiry into the nature of the Supreme Reality leading to liberation.

The first three relate to worldly advancement. The last one is the highest goal, which is freedom from the worldly actions and this is attained by the path of knowledge.

The first three are mandatory for all persons in society. The last one, liberation, is only commended to all but not mandated. We may note that *artha* and *kāma* are sandwiched be-

tween dharma and *mokṣa*. It means that the most fundamental requirement is dharma, without which there cannot be social order.

The word dharma cannot be easily translated into English because it is a highly comprehensive word including three aspects – religion, philosophy and ethics. The word literally means ‘that which holds the society from falling apart’ (*dhāraṇāt dharma ucyate*). This is a comprehensive code of conduct evolved from the teaching of the Vedas, arising from an awareness of the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm (as we noted earlier). It is the cosmic law of harmony. There is a famous adage – ‘*Dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*’ which means that dharma, if protected, will protect us all. How does it protect us?

Dharma is not like law, which is enforced by the state. If you do not follow the road rules or some other rule or law you can be prosecuted. It is not so in the case of dharma. Our body falls sick if unhealthy food is taken but there is no rule that we have to avoid fatty foods. There is no rule that we should not abuse nature, but if we do so, it will lead to ecological disorders. Similarly, social harmony would deteriorate if dharma is not followed. If you do not respect your parents or your elders, no law can punish you, but the dharma will retaliate in the long run. We can see the collapse of family values, particularly in the western societies, and the consequent social and economic problems. This is due to neglect of dharma.

The concept of ‘dharma’ is central to Hinduism. The four human goals are so designed that the human being is allowed to pursue his needs in accordance with dharma, while being on the path of *mokṣa*. That is the reason why dharma is mentioned first. The central theme of Mahabharata is dharma. Its hero is Dharma-Raja, born to *Kunti* by the boon of the god of Dharma. Throughout the text we find several discussions on dharma.

Hinduism has prescribed certain duties (*karma-s*) for all people, as we saw in an earlier chapter. Social behavior will be erratic if there is no direction. Hence the religious texts have prescribed certain compulsory duties and other activities like *yajña*. All these come under the fold of dharma.

An important lesson in the Upanishad is that you have to obey the law of the land wherever you go. ‘Whenever in doubt, follow what the righteous, self-less and enlightened men do in a society’, says the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (1-11) to the student at the time of graduation.

The second objective is *artha*, wealth. This is essential for any society. Our texts say that one should pursue wealth and knowledge with the notion that one has no old age and death; thereafter, one has to follow dharma with the notion that death can overtake him in any minute. This tells us that acquiring wealth is very important but at the same time it has to be in accordance with dharma.

Wealth is not an obstacle in the path of self-realization. We saw the examples of philosopher kings earlier. They were kings, having enormous wealth, but they were wise persons with no sense of clinging or attachment to wealth.

It is wrong to assume that Hindus did not give importance to *artha*. In fact, Hindus were the best traders till middle ages (till the invaders ravaged the land) and they spread Hindu culture in the whole of South East nations. All our literature tells about the importance of generation of wealth. The well known text *Subhashita* of *Bhartrihari* devotes a whole chapter on the importance of wealth. Lord Krishna asserts that wealth is a manifestation of the divine (*Gita* 10-23).

This rule holds for *kāma*, desire (including sexual desire). No religion can frown on sexual desire which is natural to any living being but this too should be in accordance with dharma. Krishna says – ‘I am *kāma* which is in accordance with dharma’ (*Gita* 7-11). Desire is divine when it follows dharma.

The Hindu tradition has given the most pre-eminent place to the fourth objective *mokṣa*, liberation. The human mind is full of anxieties, bondages, love, hate, pride about one’s own achievements – all of which perpetually bind a person. Liberation is to become free from all these things. Mere renunciation is not the remedy but it is renunciation associated with knowledge of the Supreme. Knowledge alone liberates a person from his notions of limited self.

The first three goals have to be properly followed by the human being as they involve self-discipline and purification of mind. They are needed for social stability. Thereafter, a person becomes eligible for pursuing the highest goal. He would be having adequate spiritual maturity to pursue the path of knowledge. One cannot directly appreciate the path of knowledge without the preparatory discipline.

17.2. Difference between Heaven and *Mokṣa*

Religions usually talk of heaven and stop with that, but Hindu texts talk of *mokṣa*. What is the difference?

Hinduism too talks of different heavenly worlds, such as Vaikuntha (the abode of Vishnu, attained by the devotees of Vishnu), Kailasa (the abode of Shiva, attained by his devotees), Swarga (the abode of Indra) and so on. The abode of Indra is the heaven generally referred to. It is the result of good deeds like *yajña* or charitable activities. Vedanta says that heaven is an

idealized experiential state where all your desires are satisfied. You have good food, drinks and all sensual pleasures you can imagine. In short, it is an extension of sensual pleasures. But according to Vedanta, this is a reward for the righteous life led in this world. Like all rewards, it has a time limit. One who goes to heaven has to return to earth after the exhaustion of the *punya*, which we saw in an earlier chapter.

Mokṣa, on the other hand, is the state of realization that the individual is not different from Brahman. It is not a place to attain, but it is a frame of mind. At this stage there are no desires, as the individual has no sense of inadequacy in him. He is the all-pervading consciousness in which all heavens manifest as petty achievements. This stage is due to knowledge of Self and so it is eternal.

Heaven which is defined in religion is limited in time, but *mokṣa* is eternal. The path of dharma leads to heaven, but it can lead to *mokṣa* only when associated with *jñāna* or self-enquiry.

Religions normally tell a person to be a believer, a follower of faith, a defender of faith and a soldier of God who is advocated by a religion. This idea is alien to Hinduism as the Vedas do not advocate any particular god form or belief system but permit all god forms as a lower level of truth and admit the Supreme Consciousness as the absolute level of truth. The individual is told to know truth, which is Brahman.

17.3. The Realized Person

The Vedas advocate a religious life to start with. After a person is disciplined in religion and after attaining spiritual discipline like restraint of senses, truthfulness, equanimity etc. he is asked discover his Self through a process of enquiry.

How is this done? We noted above that the *jīva* is nothing but consciousness and existence, appearing as though delimited by the body mind complex. When a person identifies himself with the body mind complex and develops an identity such as belonging to a caste, a race, religion, sex, etc., he develops so many binding factors around him. Vedanta asks him to know his real self by negating all these imposed identities. He has to first get rid of the external identities like caste, religion etc., and then slowly get rid of the internal identities such as the body, mind, and so on. This knowing is through a long process of self-purification and contemplation, described in texts.

Getting rid of identities will leave him as nothing but existence-consciousness principle, which is the same as Brahman. Just as Brahman has no doer-ship in it, so is the *jñāni* who has no doer-ship in him. He may be performing some duty, but he does it as an actor in a play.

For him, religion, caste, sex, nationality, etc, (which define our identity) are only details of a temporary address. His real address is that he is none other than the existence-consciousness principle.

Such a person is said to have gone beyond the Vedas – ‘*yatra vedā vedā bhavanti*’ – says the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Vedas cease to be relevant at that stage because they talk more of the worldly man. A realized person has gone beyond worldly attachments. *Bhagavad Gita* tells the same. Krishna tells Arjuna – ‘Vedas are like a small puddle of water to a person settled in the knowledge of Self, which is like the huge sea’ (*Gita*, 2-46). Vedas exhort a person to become a *jñāni*, the realized one. Krishna calls him a *sthita-prajña*, one with right understanding.

Vedanta also says a *jñāni* is equal to Brahman itself. A person who knows a pen does not become a pen and one who knows a book does not become the book but the scripture asserts that one who knows Brahman becomes Brahman.

17.4. He Goes Beyond Caste and Creed

It is natural that he goes beyond social identities. That is why *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* calls him '*ativarnashrami*'. He is the one who transcends the varṇa and *āśrama*. He is neither a Brahmin nor a person of any other varṇa or caste. He goes beyond the *āśrama-s* – the four stages of life. Though he is not bound by the duties enjoined on these categories, he may still perform those duties in order to set an example for others. Krishna calls it '*loka saṅgraha*'. If a wise man does not perform actions, all others would follow suit, and there will be chaos in society. Hence though the *jñāni* transcends the level of religion, he still performs rituals etc., for the sake of others, to be a role model for others. In other words, *jñāni* is one for whom morality and discipline are his very nature.

A *jñāni* may cease to perform rituals when he takes up the position of a monk, and renounce all worldly activities. This stage is called *saṁnyāsa*.

Vedanta also says that *jñāni* goes beyond good and evil. It does not mean that he can do anything and get away. It only means that his actions are so purified that he will never do any prohibited action and for all other actions he will not be attracted by the fruit of those actions.

Does the result of actions affect a *jñāni*? In cases where he has a societal role to play, as in the case of king Janaka, he may perform action. Krishna exhorts Arjuna to emulate Janaka, who was a *jñāni*. What happens in such case?

In the case of *jñāni*, there is action, but there is no actor, says Vedanta. He has no sense of ownership in whatever actions he does. He is well established in the idea that he is nothing but mere existence-consciousness (which is Brahman), and that all activity is that of the body-mind-complex, which is a product of prakṛti. Hence, a *jñāni* may be fully engaged in activities, but the fruit of actions do not stick to him. The difference between a karma yogi and a *jñāni* is that the sense of doer-ship (idea that ‘I am the doer’) exists in the case of the former but does not exist in the latter.

This is what Krishna tells about the tradition of philosopher kings who had realized Brahman but at the same time conducted their worldly duties for the welfare of humanity (*Gīta*, 4-2). A modern example is that of Nisargadatta maharaj who was said to have lived by running a petty shop while being a great *jñāni*. Throughout Indian history, the realized persons were revered by the society and mighty kings bowed before them.

* * *

Bhagavad Gita

“It (Gita) calls upon us to dedicate ourselves body, mind and soul to pure duty and not become mental voluptuaries at the mercy of chance desires and undisciplined impulses”

.... Mahatma Gandhi

“In the philosophical teaching of the Gita, Krishna has all the attributes of the full-fledged monotheistic deity and at the same time the attributes of the Upanishadic Absolute”

.... Ralph Waldo Emerson

“The Bhagavad Gita is the most systematic statement of spiritual evolution of endowing value to mankind. The Gita is one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the spiritual thoughts ever to have been made”

.... Aldous Huxley, the British writer

18.1. The Divine Charioteer

Bhagavad Gita has been acclaimed by several philosophers all over the world as the most comprehensive religious and philosophical text of mankind. This is a single text which can clarify most of our primary questions.

Most of us have seen the portrait of the teaching of *Gita*. *Arjuna* is seen sitting at the base of chariot, having dropped his bows and arrows. Krishna, the chariot driver is seen standing and giving the message of *Gita*. *Kathopanishad* has a mantra

which describes this in a symbolic manner. The *jīva*, traversing in this world is the master of the chariot. The chariot itself is the body; the intellect is the driver whereas the mind is the reins. The five senses which pull any being towards external objects are the five horses. The goal of every human being is to attain knowledge and for this the intellect (chariot driver) has to be competent. In the case of *Gita* Lord Krishna is himself the driver who is leading Arjuna to his goal.

18.2. The Context of Gita

In all the above chapters, I have been citing from the *Gita*. As we know, Gita is a conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, the Pandava prince, who was in a dilemma about his duty. It is a tiny portion of only about 700 verses out of 100,000 verses of Mahabharata, written by sage Vyasa. During the course of conversation, Krishna gives a comprehensive picture of human activity (karma), the fruit of that karma and the spiritual disciplines which one has to undergo to graduate to the level of knowledge. Krishna's main teaching is that every person, placed in any *varṇa* or *āśrama* (a stage of life such as, bachelor, householder, spiritual seeker and renunciate) has a duty enjoined by dharma and that duty has to be performed. Thereafter, it is also his duty to strive to know the Supreme Reality.

The word 'Gita' literally means 'that which is sung'. It is metaphorically used to any passage in the ancient texts like Mahabharata, *Srimad Bhagavatham* or *purāṇa-s* where the nature of *jīva*, Iswara and Brahman are discussed in a comprehensive way. There are several Gitas in our tradition such as, *Uddhava Gita*, *Dattatreya Gita*, *Ashtavakra Gita*, *Parasara Gita*, *Sruti Gita* and so on. Of all these, the most comprehensive is the *Gita* we are talking about.

Gita is not a book for the old and retired persons. It does not advocate pessimism or withdrawal from action or total renunciation. It does not also advocate war.

The teacher and the pupil in *Gita* are householders both, warriors and men of action. The place of discussion is the war field. It is about a dilemma which everyone has about performance of one's duty or dharma. Most of us are persons of the world and whatever we read should be relevant to us. Krishna takes care of this and tells about the *pravṛtti* dharma, human activity for a successful worldly life. Arjuna is merely an incidental character, but the message is intended for all of us. Many other issues relating to nobler aspects of life – like pursuit of *jñāna* path, the nature of divine, exercises in self-purification and so on are told in pursuance of answering some of the doubts and queries raised by Arjuna. Thus the book covers two paths – the path of action and the path of renunciation.

The context of *Gita*, as we saw, is Arjuna's despondency. He sits in his chariot, totally grief-stricken, having put down his weapons. He gets into a moral dilemma that he had to face a bloody war which would result in a lot of bloodshed of his own kith and kin besides death of several others. But it was Arjuna who took the lead in making all preparations for war, personally requested Krishna to help him in the war and to be his chariot driver. Krishna has merely come on Arjuna's request only. Hence, Arjuna's despondency perplexes Krishna who starts reminding him about his dharma.

In the course of conversation, he had to give a large picture of the nature of dharma, the nature of Divinity and duties of human beings in different situations. Krishna's teaching is a sort of counseling. While doing so, Krishna is not encouraging war but is only reminding Arjuna of his forgotten duty. Sri

Shankaracharya, while commenting on *Gita*, clarifies this – ‘in this passage Krishna is not prescribing war but merely removing the delusion in Arjuna’s mind about his duty’ (2-16).

18.3. An Outline of Gita

The seven hundred verses of *Gita* are divided in eighteen chapters. The first chapter is about Arjuna’s grief as shown in the above paragraphs. *Arjuna represents everyman and hence his grief and dilemma are universal.*

Krishna starts giving a philosophical picture of the nature of self. This forms the second chapter. This is also called the path or yoga of knowledge. One may wonder why Krishna started telling Vedanta in the battle field. We have to know that Arjuna belonged to a warrior clan and his study included Vedas besides statecraft. A comprehensive picture of dharma was known to him at least theoretically. Hence Krishna teaches him on the same level. He says ‘atman is neither born nor dies. It is eternal. Perform your duty as a warrior and fight’. In this context we see the most popular passage of *Gita*, that which relates to *sthita-prajña*, a person of equanimity.

The third chapter tells another important concept – karma yoga. It talks about desire free action. We read about this in an earlier chapter. This is the most relevant message to all of us.

- *Karma yoga is a strategy to avoid the fruit of action, that is, rebirth.*
- It is a surrender of the individual effort (*vyasṭi*) to the welfare of the collective (*samaṣṭi*)
- Krishna calls it *loka saṅgraha*, preventing normless behavior in society by being a good role model.

- This involves a proper understanding of the cosmic scheme of inter dependence.
- Karma yoga does not mean that the person performs duty in a perfunctory manner. A karma yogi does his duty with greater zeal and vigor.
- Karma yoga is a means to purify the mind and prepare a person for the next higher level, the path of knowledge.

In any social set-up, it is the duty of the state to establish order. This is told by Krishna in the beginning of the fourth chapter. From the time of creation, this eternal philosophy is being transmitted through a long lineage of philosopher-kings (*rājarṣi*). The commentators say that the objective of this yoga is to invigorate the *kṣatriya* dharma which is essential for the protection of the whole world.

This chapter also interprets the word *yajña* in a broader sense to include any noble activity done for the betterment of society. *Yajña* is not a mere fire sacrifice organized by a group of Vedic scholars. Whatever karma that is done for the welfare of humanity is called ‘*yajña*’. Krishna talks of different types of *yajña*-s – those involving charity, welfare activities, exercises in self-purification, enquiry into nature of divine. *Yajña* is an activity for social good. One who has not attained the maturity for self-enquiry will have to initially perform socially useful actions for self-purification. The highest *yajña*, however, is knowledge.

Chapters five and six give more details of the path of knowledge and of the path of action. Spiritual practices of self discipline, concentration, meditation and Patanjali yoga are discussed in these.

The six chapters starting from seven to twelve describe the nature of god at two levels – the level of Brahman without

attributes and the level of a god with name and form. We learnt about these two levels in the earlier chapters. Human being is comfortable with a god with attributes, a god who listens to his prayers and answers them.

The tenth chapter tells that whatever magnificent manifestation we find in the world is merely a glimpse of the magnificence of Brahman. The seekers can worship these forms in order to understand the glory of Brahman.

The eleventh chapter describes *viśvarūpa*, the cosmic form, which is familiar to most of us. This is quite symbolic. Arjuna sees gods, demi-gods, demons, humans and all living beings in that cosmic form. The cosmic form is symbolic of the function of dissolution (*laya*). To symbolize dissolution, the cosmic form is shown as having innumerable mouths devouring all the beings. All beings are seen being crushed under the mighty teeth of that cosmic form. This is similar to the dance of Shiva or the dance of Kali at the time of dissolving creation.

In the twelfth chapter, Krishna makes an important point. Those who follow the path of knowledge attain Brahman on their own, whereas those who follow the path of devotion to a god form are assisted and helped by god to attain the Supreme goal.

Study of Vedanta is not an intellectual exercise but it is an exercise in self-transformation. Vedanta says that the *jīva* becomes Brahman by understanding Brahman. This understanding is explained from chapter thirteen onwards. These chapters tell us how to distinguish the real from the unreal, the sentient from the insentient. In modern terms they tell about matter versus consciousness.

Gita devotes a whole chapter (fourteen) to describe the three *guṇa-s sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* and their interplay which creates the whole universe. Later we also find the divine versus demonical nature in the subsequent chapter. Chapters fourteen

to seventeen are of great interest to a student of psychology who would like to know different traits of human behavior, personality types and personality improvement.

The final chapter reviews all the concepts relating to the path of action and the path of knowledge and urges Arjuna to follow the dharma enjoined on him.

All the eighteen chapters of *Gita* bear the name 'yoga'. This should not be mistaken for the eight-limbed yoga of Patanjali (which, of course, is the subject-matter of the sixth chapter). The word 'yoga' means 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. The purpose is to unite the *jīva* with the divine and in this sense all the disciplines told in the *Gita* are an endeavor towards that union.

In this text, there are several places where Krishna refers to Himself. In all these, whenever he says 'I', the 'I' does not refer to the Krishna, the Yadava king. It refers either to the Supreme Brahman (which we discussed in the beginning of the book) or to Iswara, the *saguṇa* form of Brahman.

Krishna is an *avatāra* or a special manifestation of the divine for a larger social purpose. The meaning of *avatāra* is also mentioned in chapter four. Manifestation of divine is to restore social order whenever evil overwhelms and undermines the good. It is a cosmic design to restore order.

18.4. What is Spiritual Learning?

There are three stages in what we call spiritual learning. The first level is to understand what the primary texts (Upanishads) tell about the nature of *jīva*, Iswara and Brahman. In Vedānta this is called '*śravaṇam*'. The next step is to logically evaluate this with the help of a teacher. This level is called '*mananam*'. The third and final level is the internalization and assimilation

of what is learnt. For instance, the Upanishad says – ‘that you are’ and ‘I am Brahman’. Assimilation means to experience these statements. One has to achieve self-purification of highest level in order to experience this. The seeker has to come out of his identification with the body-mind complex and identify with the Supreme Consciousness which is the main illumining factor in the whole universe.

Gita is like a how-to-do-it guide for these spiritual practices. To start with, one has to purify one’s actions through *karma-yoga*. This has to be followed up by other techniques of mind-discipline. *Karma yoga* leads to purification of mind, to some degree only and hence it has to be followed up by meditation. Such meditation can be on a *saguṇa* form of god or on the *nirguṇa* Brahman. A person gradually gives up *karma yoga* before he gets on to this module of meditation. Meditation involves controlling the base impulses of mind and withdrawing sense organs from sense objects. *Karma yoga* gives the internal strength to move on to this level. Controlling of impulses is possible only by proper discrimination (*viveka*) and understanding what is real and what is unreal, what is eternal and what is ephemeral.

At the primary level, when a person is in *karma yoga*, he is the doer, though he is not the enjoyer of the fruit of *karma*. The next level is that of devotion to some god-form, where a devotee surrenders his acts to the God and works merely as an instrument. At the final level, the *jñāni*, a realized person, knows that he is one with the Supreme Consciousness which is untouched by any activities of the body mind complex. He is neither the doer nor the enjoyer. He knows that it is the body mind complex which is the doer of all actions and whatever such a realized man does is for the welfare of the cosmic order or *dharma*. *Gita* gives examples of philosopher kings like Janaka.

Controlling the mind is the toughest task. Concentration of mind is focusing the mind on a particular thought just like focusing a beam of light through a convex lens. The body and mind are interdependent and a conscious control of body will be useful for control of mind. This is the secret of yoga. This helps us to move on to the next level, which is meditation on Brahman. Meditation is a flow of similar thoughts and avoidance of all dissimilar thoughts. In this process, the physical habits of the seeker also play an important part and hence *Gita* gives several tips about what type of posture one has to adopt, what food to be eaten and how long to sleep. The aim is to get into a harmonious way of life, conducive to dissolve the ego-mind and remain as Consciousness Supreme.

Gita makes a brilliant analysis of human nature. Human nature is one which does not change with change in technology or globalization. Behavioral patterns and social institutions may change but not the essential qualities of mind – love, hate, desire, determination, fear, courage, anxiety and such. These are determined by the three *guṇa-s* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, which are the constituents of every being. *Gita* makes a study of all these. Krishna gives a call to come out of the influence of the three *guṇa-s*. One who comes out is a *jñāni*.

Similarly, fortitude and application to duty depends on the *guṇa* of a person. Some are *sāttvic*, pursuing noble objectives while some are *rājasa*, pursuing material achievements in an aggressive way. Some others who are in *tāmāsa* nature may be pursuing ignoble activities and following ignoble methods. All human behavior is determined by the predominating *guṇa-s* in a person. A person's spiritual achievement is also determined by the same. *Gita* makes an analysis of the divine wealth which is harmonious with yoga and the demoniac wealth which is an

obstacle to yoga. It works as a hand-holding guide to spiritual progress.

Gita portrays a vast canvass, addressing people of all walks of life. A selfish person may continue to do selfish actions but *Gita* warns that such a person is eternally caught in the cycle of transmigration. It advises him to perform action as an offering to the collective.

Thus, *Gita* tells about the nature of the absolute and the nature of the *jīva* and shows the unity of both. The highest human goal, liberation is a state of internal transformation which is achieved by removing the dross of the mind, the notion of ego and the factors of identity which a person superimposes on himself. *Gita* is thus not something to be known at the intellectual level, but that which attempts to change our personality. It is to discard our lower self and identify with a higher self.

Parents may see:

- The author's articles under the series "*Learners' Guide to Gita*" in the website – www.advaita-academy.org
- Also see <https://www.youtube.com/user/advaitaacademy/KarnamAravindaRao> for classes (in English) on the *Gita* along with Shankara's commentary

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19

Yoga

19.1. Yoga is Universal

An important aspect of Indian culture which has now become universal is Yoga. Yoga is as old as the Vedas. We have seen that the Vedas talk of *upāsanā*, meditation, as a preparatory step for inquiry on Brahman. Other schools of Indian philosophy – such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sankhya had their own versions of Yoga. The most exclusive Yoga tradition is that of Patanjali, whose classic work Yoga-Sutra is now universally known. Patanjali's system accepts the authority of Veda whereas the Buddhist and Jain systems do not accept. Thus both the pro-Veda and anti-Veda schools have acknowledged the usefulness of yoga. Yoga seems to have travelled to China and other south Asian countries through the Buddhist monks who spread Buddhism in those countries. All these countries have their own Yoga traditions now.

Our normal understanding of Yoga is that it involves flexing the body in several odd shapes and control breathing in several odd manners. It is, however, a more serious and philosophical issue than we think. The word 'Yoga' comes from a *Sanskrit* root *yuj* which means 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. It means a process of uniting the individual self (about which we read in earlier chapters) with the universal self.

19.2. Body and Mind Work Together

Yoga works on the understanding that the body and mind interact on each other. If the mind is brought under discipline, the body too will be good. Likewise, deliberate control of bodily actions and impulses will have an impact on the mind too. This leads to a habit formation. The mind is required to have proper dispositions in order to receive the knowledge of scriptures. The sages of old have discovered that a conscious control of our sense organs would lead to controlling the tendencies and dispositions of the unconscious mind. It is a slow process but a very effective process.

This process of uniting the individual self and the universal self is not through any activity like *yajña*, but by a mental process of realization. We saw that according to Vedanta the *jīva* is not different from Brahman but we are unaware of this. If we want to become aware of it there are two levels – 1) knowing at intellectual level by study of scriptures and 2) experiencing the same. The first level is possible if we seriously sit on it. The second level demands a lot of internal transformation. Yoga helps in achieving this internal transformation.

The body is like a chariot for you and me who are the masters, the five senses are horses which are dragging the chariot to whatever is attractive outside and the mind is the reins, controlling the horses. We saw this imagery in an earlier chapter on *Gita*. But this mind itself is like a monkey, the books warn, and we too know. It moves all around. Controlling the mind is a difficult task. This is the subject matter of Yoga.

The body and mind are constantly after several external objects and hence drive a person to take up several activities. Letting loose our sense organs leads a person to his downfall. There is a need to control them.

19.3. The Cleaning Process

If we have to clean a dirty pond, we need to flush it with a lot of pure water. An impure mind is a flow of unrestrained thoughts, like a flow of dirty water. Some noble thoughts have to be introduced in the mind and these thoughts should continue as a permanent stream. The thoughts should also be single pointed and focused, like the light waves in a laser beam.

How to achieve this level? We have to start with deliberate control of the body and mind. Patanjali gives a step by step guidance on how to control the external organs, how to control the sense organs and the mind and how at a later step, bring the wandering mind to focus on a single object.

Patanjali has given what is known as eight-limbed Yoga –a system with eight progressive steps, each leading to a higher level. Conscious control of the body and mind, placing the body in several postures etc., are the initial stages which are the external steps. Success in these stages will gradually lead to higher stages like meditation which are the internal steps.

The first internal step is concentration of mind on an object. This can be on an object in front of us or on some part of our own body like heart or the center of eyebrows (chakra-s as they are called) or on a *yantra* or an idol. This has to be combined with *prāṇāyāma*, regulation of breath.

The next step is meditation. This implies a continuous stream of thoughts on a particular idea. The commentator Vyasa called it a *citta-srota*, a stream of consciousness. It should be a stream of similar thoughts, undisturbed by dissimilar thoughts. The statements of the scriptures, such as ‘That you are’, ‘all this is Brahman’, and such others are the subject matters for meditation.

What we noted above as *upāsanā* comes under this type but that was on a particular deity, quite often with the objective of seeking a boon. This is because meditation can be on a god with attributes or on Brahman devoid of attributes. The seeker of self-knowledge, however, does meditation on the Brahman devoid of attributes.

19.4. How to Start

Yoga has to be learnt through someone who knows the tradition, a teacher who knows not only the physical aspects of yoga but the philosophy of yoga. To start with, it may be enough for your child to practice the physical aspect of the Yoga. However, at least a theoretical knowledge of Patanjali's text will be of great use for the parents. We know that the highest goal for Yoga is self realization through internal transformation. A modern man is usually content with the simple objective of attaining better health and overcoming anxieties. Psychology has adopted several ideas from the Yoga systems and has achieved good results in the field of medicine.

* * *

Customs and Beliefs

20.1. The Secondary Questions

We have now come to the secondary questions. As I said in the introduction, the primary questions were about the number of gods, idol worship and such. The secondary questions are about day to day customs and beliefs. What is the significance, we ask, whenever our elders ask us to put on a dot of vermilion on the forehead, when you are asked to wear a sacred thread, when you are asked to go round the temple or follow some such custom.

Several things in the world cannot be scientifically validated. However, their usefulness is seen. For thousands of years and all over the world human ancestors had observed nature and natural phenomena and discovered certain useful practices. There is a lot to learn from the tribal culture, which we usually look down on. There is a lot of medical knowledge there unexplored. All these are empirical truths. This is similar to the modern practice of experimenting the new medicines on rats and pigs before giving them to humans. This is also an empirical method.

Customs and beliefs are common to all societies and not merely to Hindus. The Hindu beliefs can be broadly categorized as those connected with a religion, those connected to give strength of mind, those connected with good habits and those which have medical value.

20.2. Rationale

People observe customs more willingly if they are told as part of religious practice. Some examples are – the age old practice of massage of body with oil on festival days, applying turmeric paste (by women) on face, hands and feet, use of neem leaves during festivals, storing and drinking water from copper vessels, wearing the garland of beads, eating the basil leaves and using them during worship and so on. Orthodox people take bath thrice a day and do their compulsory prayer (*sandhyā-vandan*), associated with regulation of breath (*prāṇāyāma*). This contributes to good health.

Some customs have a philosophical meaning. For instance, a sacred thread around the body is worn by the *dwija-s* (the three communities, as we saw in the chapter on caste). This contains three long threads joined as a loop and worn by people. The three threads symbolize the three *guṇa-s*. A person is expected to meditate on the Gayatri mantra and transcend the three *guṇa-s*. Another practice relates to the monks of the dualist order. They carry three thin sticks tied as a bundle. This is called *tridaṇḍa* and the person who carries is called a *tridaṇḍi*. The stick symbolizes control. The person who is a *tridaṇḍi* is said to have controlled his mind, speech and the body, which are the three important organs to be controlled by a saint. Another practice is about the vertical vermilion lines on the forehead by people of one sect and the horizontal white lines by people of another sect. This has philosophical meaning. The red vermilion dot is to be put on the forehead by both men and women. The point at which the dot is placed is said to be an important chakra (*ājñā chakra*) as per the Yoga system. Lord Shiva is said to have his third eye – the knowledge eye – at this place.

Some other beliefs are meant to give confidence and courage to a person. For instance worshipping Lord Hanuman leads to *sankata mocan* – release from all troubles. Worship of Lord Ganesa removes all obstacles. You are advised to read the *Sundara kanda* (a part of Ramayana) for smooth success in any endeavor. In case of drought people perform the worship of Shiva or recite the *Virata-parva* (a part of Mahabharata). This may result in rain or not but the community is engaged in some form of worship without getting disheartened. Our texts say - *yūḍḥī bhāvanā yatra siddhirbhavati tāḍḥī* – the result of prayer will depend on the strength of your prayer.

Some other customs are meant for good conduct in society. Some are mere eulogies, meant to praise a particular habit. You will have a long and healthy life if you wake up before sunrise. Intercourse during the day will result in evil minded children. Salutations to Sun (*Surya-namaskara*) along with the mantra will result in spiritual merit. There are six different *āsana-s* in the above practice. They contribute to good health.

Hindus have sixteen *saṃskāra-s* – purifying rituals – starting from the time a person enters the mother's womb till death. The first ritual starts even when a child is in the womb. There are rituals after child birth, ritual when the child undergoes initiation into studies, ritual relating to marriage and so on till the last ritual relating to death of a person. The sociologists call these rituals the rites of passage. There may be some regional variations in different parts of the country but the mantra-s are drawn from the same Vedic passages. All variations should be taken as equally valid. A person can follow a tradition which is handed down to him by his parents.

For Hindus the daily dinner has to be visualized and performed as a *yajña*. The cosmic being (Virat, which we saw in an earlier chapter) is present in the form of fire in all living beings. The food we eat is like the offering to that fire. The air we breathe has five different functions in the body and they are said to be associated with the fire in the body. When we start our dinner, we offer five small morsels to the five different airs in the body, reciting mantras like *prāṇāya-svāhā*, *apānāya-svāhā* and so on. These are like the oblations put into the fire during the *yajña*.

There is a general impression growing in present times that all Hindus are vegetarians. It is not so. In the Vedic rituals there was a practice of offering animals during the *yajña*. Meat eating was restricted to such occasions only. In the story of sage Agastya, we see that goat meat was offered to him as part of a ritual. Lord Rama is said to have given up eating meat during the absence of Sita. Hanuman tells Sita about this when he meets her. Bhima, (the Pandava prince in Mahabharata) distributes meat to his brothers and to his wife Draupadi. There are several such examples. Ayurveda, the science which draws its spirit from the Vedas, advocates meat eating for bodily strength. The *Manusmṛiti* devotes a whole chapter on what can be eaten and what should not be eaten. In the light of all this, one can safely follow the family tradition without any notion of guilt.

Sacrifice of animals during the *yajña-s* seems to have been given up sometime after the advent of Shankaracharya. This was also due to the criticism from the Buddhists. Brahmins in most parts of the country became vegetarians and led a very restrained life. They can continue the same without looking down on others.

* * *

21

To Sum Up

What all I have presented in this book is from the teaching of Vedanta by renowned teachers of the mainstream traditions. Those familiar with Hindi may listen to the talks of Swami Akhandananda Saraswati in www.maharajsishri.net. Those who wish to know through English may listen to Swami Paramarthananda in www.vedantavidyarthisingha.org or www.avgsatsang.org or any other teacher learned in the scriptures.

We saw the following as the broad features of Hinduism.

- It is the most ancient surviving religion in the world, dating back to at least five thousand years.
- It was not started by a single prophet. The ancient seers, whose practice was to renounce the world and spend their time in contemplation, had revealed certain eternal truths.
- It did not originate in a strife situation. It evolved in a peace situation, in a well developed civilization when philosopher kings ruled.
- As someone put it, Hinduism is not comparable to a building built by one person but it is like a banyan tree which grew up over a period of time with several branches and aerial roots.
- It is a unique religion (apart from Buddhism and Jainism) where religion has evolved from philosophical reasoning.

- Unlike any other religion it talks of the evolution of universe, formation of the living beings and the formation of mind and senses.
- We do not agree with the view of Biblical scholars that the universe was created in 4004 BC. Instead, our texts talk in terms of billions of years and several cycles of creation.
- It is probably the only religion which urges a person to go beyond religious texts and discover one's self.
- Hindu child can be proud that as per Hinduism all religions are equally valid and there is no blasphemy if someone visualizes one's own deity in any manner.
- God can be worshipped in any form i.e. in the shape of a yantra (a diagrammatic representation on a metallic sheet), mantra (spoken words), idol or symbol of any type. These are only a medium for achieving concentration and purification of mind, and for contemplation.
- We do not worship different Gods but contemplate on the same truth in different forms.
- God is not vindictive or jealous, and does not have any favorite race or tribe.
- Hinduism does not stop at a mere intellectual level of understanding of reality but it involves internal transformation, total negation of the ego and becoming Brahman oneself. At the philosophical level it says that the individual is nothing else than the Supreme Brahman.
- Religion and ritual are accepted as a lower degree of reality whereas philosophical doctrine and knowledge of the Self are the highest degree of reality.

- Dharma, though called eternal ethics, is not inflexible. There are certain unchanging aspects of dharma like truth, compassion, non-violence, etc., but there are changing aspects in human behavior in different situations. This was explained in the context of untouchability.
- Hindu society had different texts of dharma for different periods. The Manu smriti (code) was for the earliest times called krita yuga and it was not even followed in the last several centuries. The British highlighted some of the portions of it in order to portray a negative picture of Hinduism. The smriti for kali yuga is known as 'Parasara smriti' and even this is subject to change. The eternal doctrine of Vedanta about jīva, Iswara and Brahman are untouched by these changes in dharma which relate to social conduct.
- We are not a converting religion, because the Vedas admit of different forms of worship. Hence we never invaded any land nor forced our religion on them.
- A Hindu child can be proud to say that Hinduism can never be fundamentalist in nature. It does not claim to be the only path for liberation. (To say that one's own faith or belief leads to liberation is mere ignorance or fundamentalism. It would mean that before such religions originated, those billions of people who were born and died did not have salvation. Imagine how peaceful the world would be if all religions said that there can be different paths to the same goal).
- It is a religion (along with other Indian religions Buddhism and Jainism) which does not have confrontation with any other religion.

Parents may see:

- 'All about Hinduism', by Swami Sivananda, at www.swamisivananda.org
- www.maharajshri.net for the talks of Swami Akhandananda Saraswati Maharaj
- www.avgsatsang.org for talks by Swami Dayananda Saraswati and others

* * *

A Word on Sanskrit

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification - T.S.Eliot in After Strange Gods

The Sanskrit language, whatever may be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than the either - Sir William Jones, Chief Justice of India under the British and founder of the Royal Asiatic Society.

If I was asked what is the greatest treasure which India possesses and what is her greatest heritage, I would answer unhesitatingly that it is the Sanskrit language and literature and all that it contains. This is a magnificent inheritance, and so long as this endures and influences the life of our people, so long will the basic genius of India continue.

- Jawaharlal Nehru in 'Discovery of India'.

22.1. Sanskrit – Once the Link Language of India

Very rarely do we realize that Sanskrit was the link language in the entire Indian subcontinent for millennia. It was the language of all educated people just as English is today in India. The whole culture of ancient India is known only through Sanskrit.

Just as the word English does not mean Christianity, Sanskrit does not mean Hinduism. Hence, it was not merely the religious texts, but all works in sciences, astronomy, mathematics, literature and arts were written in the same language. It was the lingua franca, staying side by side with the mother tongue of the region.

All the scriptures of all Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism) are written in Sanskrit, not for the reason that the common man should not know them, but for propagating their ideas all over the country and for preserving them for posterity.

Vedas, the basic texts of Hinduism were studied by all scholars from Kashmir to Kerala. The Buddhists, who disagreed with the Vedas, had initially tried to write in Pali, a regional language, in order to reach out to masses, but their sphere of influence was getting narrow. Hence they switched over to Sanskrit in order to spread their message. Thus we find Buddhism spreading all over the country in later years. Hundreds of volumes of Buddhist and Jain works are thus found written in Sanskrit.

Interaction of scholars all over the country was naturally in Sanskrit just as it is in English now. We saw the example of Shankaracharya, the noted teacher from Kerala, who moved all over the country up to Kashmir, held discussions with the scholars, and propagated the Upanishadic doctrine. Many scholars from all over the country have commented on what Shankara has written. The universities of Nalanda, Takshasila, and the traditional schools of Kashi and Kanchi had scholars from different parts of the country. The books of Kalidasa were commented upon by Mallinatha Suri, a scholar from Telengana. Jagannatha

Pandita of Godavari region was the pre-eminent scholar in the Moghul court. The works of the Buddhist writer Aswaghosha were discovered during the British rule in Afghanistan. One can enumerate several such examples.

Sanskrit continued to be the link language even after the middle ages in spite of Muslim invasions. However, social change has been more rapid ever since the Europeans arrived. This coincided with industrialization and consequent modernization. Added to this, the colonial masters had an agenda of denigrating and ‘uprooting’ (to use the word of Max Muller) the local cultures in the countries they ruled. Modernization has brought positive social change in several fields, but growing dissociation with Sanskrit is producing a culture lacking in self-confidence and a culture disinherited from its roots.

22.2. Antiquity and Uniqueness

Vedic Sanskrit existed at least three thousand years prior to Christ. Rig Veda is acknowledged to be the oldest written document of mankind. The language is clearly distinct from the later day Sanskrit, which was called classical Sanskrit. The language of the Mahabharata is known as classical Sanskrit.

The uniqueness of Sanskrit is its unchanged structure over the millennia.

If you take a text of 10th century English, you cannot make head or tail of it. Even Chaucer’s English is fairly inscrutable. It is so with all languages including Indian languages. Languages do change over a period of time, but miraculously Sanskrit has been preserved in an absolutely unchanged form for the last at least three thousand years.

The great grammarian Panini who lived around 600 B.C. (near a village named Shalatura near Lahore, in present day Pakistan) composed certain rules of grammar in his book 'Ashtadhyayi', which means a book in eight chapters. He has noted that prior to him there were several other grammarians whose rules he cites, but those books are lost for us now. It was the greatness of Indian scholars that they meticulously followed the rules of grammar, rules regarding formation of words and sentences and preserved the language till date. The Ramayana and Mahabharata which were written about three thousand years ago can be understood by the present day student of Sanskrit if only he learns the language.

Vedic Sanskrit is a bit different. The language is much older and the teaching was through oral tradition. Some portions of Vedas would have been totally inscrutable but for the commentaries of sage Vidyaranya of 15th century.

22.3. Sanskrit and Indian Languages

Some have a wrong understanding that Sanskrit was the language of the priestly class only. It is totally incorrect. It was the language of the whole society. A story goes that King Bhoja had declared that whoever could not compose poetry in his land had to leave the land. Soldiers looked around and took a weaver to the king saying that he was one unlettered person in the land. When questioned, the weaver came out with a poem and the king was happy. It is a mere story to illustrate how prevalent Sanskrit was. Most of the writings on matters of science, astronomy, astrology, language, medicine, architecture, statecraft and other science were obviously written by professionals in those fields and not by the priests.

Till recent years we saw renowned scholars in Sanskrit from all sections of society. Social change has made people to switch over to English and other modern studies. As a result, only those who are connected to priestly work are now seen reciting Sanskrit. This is the reason for our wrong idea that it is the language of the Brahmins. A look at the Sanskrit catalogues would open our eyes to the wealth of knowledge in Sanskrit.

Almost all Indian languages, except the Dravidian languages, have originated from Sanskrit. The diction of even Dravidian languages is of Sanskrit origin to a good extent (up to about 50%). Several stone inscriptions in Sanskrit are found in several places in the entire country. All regional religious literature is derived from the Sanskrit texts with some minor changes. If you know Sanskrit, you will have better knowledge of literature in your own mother tongue, be it a north Indian language or a Dravidian language.

However, all regional languages like Hindi, Telugu or Gujarati have undergone a lot of change over the centuries and the old books are now intelligible only to native scholars. A serious student who wants to know the Indian or Hindu or Buddhist or Jain tradition will know more through the books in Sanskrit than through the regional language works, which are translations or adaptations of the Sanskrit works, the language of which has undergone a lot of change in time. The easier and appropriate way for a modern scholar is to study Sanskrit in order to know the primary sources of our religion and culture.

22.4. Sanskrit, Around the World

Hundreds of western scholars have studied Sanskrit in the last four centuries alongside Latin and classical Greek, because

of the similarity in structure and diction. It gave birth to a new discipline called linguistics, the roots of which can be seen in Panini's grammar. Even today, several European and American scholars are continuing the study of Sanskrit, treating it as a language of international heritage. If you know Sanskrit, you can also know any of the European languages in a much thorough way, as they are mostly derived from Latin. Japanese scholars too are proficient in Sanskrit as a lot of the Buddhist literature is in Sanskrit.

Social change has given an unexpected advantage to Sanskrit. We all want that our children should know something about our culture but we presume that our kids have to know our mother-tongue in order to know our culture. But the present day literature or media in our regional languages hardly represent our culture. In fact, they are poor imitations of the western social norms, and are thus far removed from our culture. Our culture, no doubt, was preserved in regional languages by writers a few centuries ago, but that literature is pretty old by now. Tulsidas or Surdas in Hindi or Kamban in Tamil cannot be understood by a modern child, as the languages have undergone a lot of change. The only Indian language which remains unchanged is Sanskrit.

Besides, when we visit a temple, whether in India or USA or UK or any other place, the priest would chant the prayers in Sanskrit. The chants are common whether it is a south-Indian temple or a north-Indian one. You may be a Bengali, or a Tamil or a Gujarati, but the chants are the same. A simple course in Sanskrit would enhance your temple visit or enrich your knowledge of our religion and tradition.

Parents may see:

- Samskrita Bharati, an organization dedicated for modern methods of teaching Sanskrit. (Google search and see Wikipedia)
- You Tube videos produced by Rashtriya Samskrit Samsthan, New Delhi.
- “Empires of the Word – A Language History of the World” (2005), by the British scholar Nicholas Ostler. The book is available in pdf form in Google search, and it is a compulsory reading to know the glorious and peaceful spread of Sanskrit throughout South East Asia.
- Sri Sripada Abhayankar is doing extraordinary work in teaching Sanskrit.

His sites are:

संस्कृताध्ययनम् | <http://slabhyankar.wordpress.com/>

गीतान्वेषणम् <http://study1geetaa2sanskrit.wordpress.com/>

उपनिषिदध्ययनम् <http://upanishat.wordpress.com/> <http://slez-musings.blogspot.com/> संस्कृत-प्रसूतिः <http://sanskritapras-ruti.wordpress.com/> सरलं संस्कृतम् <http://simplesanskrit.wordpress.com/>

संस्कृत-व्याकरणस्य अध्ययनम् <http://grammarofsanskrit.wordpress.com/>

- A few other Sanskrit/Hinduism related websites:
arshavidya.org
atributetohinduism.com

chinmaya.org

hinduismtoday.com

himalayanacademy.com

a library of Sanskrit texts

online Sanskrit dictionary

online Sanskrit documents

sivananda.org

sanskrit.org

Sanskrit on the radio

chitrapurmath.net “Learn Samskritam Step by step”

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23

A Word to Parents

23.1. Understanding Social Change

It is a truism to say that social change is going on at an accelerated pace. Religious and cultural institutions are under pressure because of this change and because of the advent of social media and other technological changes.

We cannot stop social change, but we should only learn to cope with it while preserving the basics of our religious tradition and values associated with that. Inability to cope with technological change will have impact on our culture. The western society has been talking about coping with social change for a long time. Alvin Toffler wrote a book named 'Future Shock' about fifty years ago on this subject and what he observed is relevant even now. The western societies too seem to be grappling with the issue.

As I said in the introduction, there is a competitive environment between the two dominant religions for global domination. They have been aggressively trying to defeat each other. The struggle is seen in several forms like terrorism or fundamentalism across the world. The European nations are worried about demographic change which is likely to hurt their culture. They are intent on spreading their religion in free and liberal societies like India. The most civilized way to proselytize

is to portray the targeted religion wrongly, misrepresent the religious texts and create divisions in society. I had briefly referred to this in the earlier chapters.

Religion, like all other issues, is thus globalized. While other religions are fighting for domination, Hinduism is fighting for survival. We are not a converting religion. There can only be outflow from Hinduism. Hence, as Swami Chinmayananda once remarked, the Hindus should be first converted as Hindus. What the swami means is that Hindus in general do not bother to know about the religion. Most of us are innocent followers of rituals. We will be able to survive only when we know our roots properly and feel proud about it.

Hindu texts are like an ocean and I have given a mere glimpse of them. My effort is to give a perspective to the modern parent and student.

23.2. What We Can Do

- The parents have to gain knowledge of the fundamentals of Hinduism. This is essential to answer our kids. Books like 'All about Hinduism' by Swami Sivananda are to be read. Such books are available on the Internet.
- We have to be aware that a lot of adverse literature is being produced by writers (particularly western writers) vulgarizing Hinduism. Hence it is needed for parents to have some idea of the secondary texts too.
- Let religion be not a burden on your child. It can be fun. Visiting a temple, listening to some stories etc., can be done in a casual and natural way. The idea is to build up

the right *saṃskāra*-s. The word *saṃskāra*, besides meaning a purifying ritual, also means a disposition or tendency. This is built over a period of time.

- The child need not be burdened with knowledge of names of characters in Ramayana or Mahabharata. Let them know about them slowly. You may have some introductory books like the books written by Rajagopalachar for children.
- Children imitate the parents. It follows that we too should have some religious regimen at home. Hindu houses normally do have a prayer corner. At least a few minutes a day can be earmarked for prayer.
- We may not be good in chanting prayers and mantra-s. Still we may keep the booklets which we normally get from the Ramakrishna Mission, Chinmaya Mission or T.T.D., and try to know them.
- Every household can have (at least in prose texts) Ramayana, Bhagavatam and Mahabharata. Children will look into it at some point of time if there is no conscious pressure on them.
- While watching programs on TV we may watch devotional programs at least for sometime so that the children too may watch by default. Likewise a couple of devotional journals can be on your table.
- It is also good for parents to practice some yoga and *prāṇāyāma*. In the long run the children will try to follow.
- It will also help if you can teach some verses (from the *śataka literature*) to children. They may not immediately know them fully but in course of time these verses will help in building a strong character.

- We need not introduce too many tales from purāṇa-s. They are allegorical and the children may not appreciate them. Instead, the stories from Panchatantra can be told in order to introduce the idea of symbolism.
- Children will grow with self confidence when they know the basic philosophical ideas of our religion. A modern child will understand philosophical ideas more easily than the stories.
- Too much of orthodoxy on our part may create negative tendencies in the child. We need not be too strict about religion.
- Know your child. The impact of fellow students and the teachers will be high. The child will trust us and share with us only when we are friendly. This friendly relation will help us in giving proper advice.
- A broad study of world history is also helpful to know the evolution of different religions and to realize the glorious tradition of Hinduism.
- Knowledge of Sanskrit will enable the child to understand our egalitarian tradition.

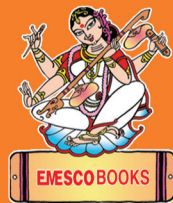
Parents may see

- *The Wonder that was India* – by A.L. Basham
- *All about Hinduism* – by Swami Sivananda
- *Breaking India* – by Rajiv Malhotra and Aravindan Neelakandan. The talks of the writers are found on You Tube.

* * *

The author, Dr. Aravinda Rao, who holds a Ph.D in Sanskrit, formerly worked in the security establishment in the Government. After retirement he has been teaching and writing on Vedanta. The present booklet is to give the the modern students and parents an appreciation of the astute philosophical inquiry, universal values, and pluralism of Hinduism and enable them to look at their own religion with esteem in the present competitive environment.

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