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# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

FEBRUARY 2005

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Cover: The Renovated Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House and Cultural Centre; inset: Swamiji's Birthplace

उत्तिष्ठत  
जाग्रत  
प्राप्य  
वरान्निबोधत ।

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

Vol. 110

FEBRUARY 2005

No. 2

## Traditional Wisdom

### YOGA BUDDHI: STEADY INTELLECT

व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिरेकेह कुरुनन्दन ।  
बहुशाखा ह्यनन्ताश्च बुद्धयोऽव्ययसायिनाम् ॥

In this (path of yoga), O scion of the Kurus, there is but one-pointed determination. The thoughts of the irresolute, however, are diverse and unending. (*Bhagavadgita*, 2.41)

तेषां सततयुक्तानां भजतां प्रीतिपूर्वकम् ।  
ददामि बुद्धियोगं तं येन मामुपयान्ति ते ॥

To them, ever steadfast and serving Me with affection, I grant the yoga of understanding (*buddhi yoga*), by which they come to Me. (*Bhagavadgita*, 10.10)

भूतैराक्रम्यमाणोऽपि धीरो दैवशानुगैः ।  
तद्विद्वान्न चलेन्मार्गादन्वशिक्षं क्षितेर्व्रतम् ॥

The man of steady intellect (*dhira*) should not swerve from his path even when oppressed by other creatures, knowing them to be under the sway of destiny; this is the lesson I have learnt from the earth. (*Uddhava Gita*, 2.37)

There are two signs of knowledge. First, an unshakable buddhi. No matter how many sorrows, afflictions, dangers, and obstacles one may be faced with, one's mind does not undergo any change. It is like the blacksmith's anvil, which receives constant blows from the hammer and still remains unshaken. And second, manliness—very strong grit. (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 410)

Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life—think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success, and this is the way great spiritual giants are produced. (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 1.177)

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# Towards a Casteless India

## EDITORIAL

Individual freedom, social equality and democracy are considered the defining virtues of modern civilization. They are the benchmarks against which social thinkers judge the progress of nations and peoples. These values are often found to be compromised in the developing world and such areas have provided focal points for intervention by the North. Whether these interventions have been intellectual, socio-economic, political or military, they have invariably been controversial and contested. For, although few intellectuals would argue against the universal desirability of these values, few societies can boast of allowing a free play to these. In fact, numerous extant and vigorous social institutions confound and challenge the universality of these values. Caste is one such institution.

To speak of caste without condemning it is a sure way to invite censure, yet caste as an institution has proved remarkably enduring. If the Constitution of free India abolished untouchability and made caste discrimination illegal, the provision of reservations for scheduled castes and tribes has tended to reinforce the caste identity of at least a large section of the Indian population. Elections in India repeatedly confirm the fact that even progressive and liberal-minded individuals can hardly afford to ignore caste equations if they are to be successful in electoral politics. Caste remains a crucial determinant in a majority of Indian marriages, even when the individuals concerned are well educated and are otherwise little concerned about caste. It has been pointed out by social thinkers that caste served as a social bulwark that protected and preserved the Hindu society in the face of invasions, but the same bulwark also cramped the Hindus with restrictions, thus sapping their

vitality and choking their growth. This paradoxical nature of caste has intrigued scholars and social observers and excited their imagination down the centuries. This has spawned hundreds of writings and observations on the subject without the last word being said yet.

### The Sociology of Caste

Caste is essentially about social divisions and gradations, about the formation of classes and ranks based on differences in lineage, occupation or wealth. In recent times, Louis Dumont's book *Homo Hierarchicus* has popularized the concept of human beings as essentially hierarchical in their social formations. It has been argued that social hierarchy is an inevitable outcome of basic biological differences between humans—both as individuals as well as groups—and these differences are often accentuated by environmental modifiers. That such gradations are natural is supported by their existence amongst a wide range of social animals. Ants, termites and bees provide a striking example of organized division of function and labour. The queens, nymphs, workers, soldiers and drones amongst these insects have very specialized roles and these divisions are therefore termed 'castes' by entomologists.

Most people identify caste with Hindu society, but discerning observers have pointed out that the Hindu caste system is only a special case of a much more general, if not universal, phenomenon of class distinction and hierarchy. Social stratification appeared early in the course of social evolution. The four varnas of Vedic India had their equivalents in other contemporary civilizations. Endogamy, commensality and occupational specialization are taken by social anthropologists to de-

fine caste, and these were virtually the determinants of all social stratification in pre-modern societies.

In modern societies, occupational diversity, increased social mobility, loosening of family ties and economic expansion have led to the replacement of the traditional determinants of caste by economic status as the sole determinative of social difference. We now have economic *classes*—the upper, the middle and the working—that are in no way less hierarchical than the traditional caste or the ranked feudal order. What differentiates the modern class from its medieval or ancient counterpart is the theoretical lack of exclusiveness and the individual as the unit of stratification. Unfortunately, in practice, not many individuals manage to rise from the lower ranks of society to its higher echelons, and so class divisions are not as labile as one would otherwise expect them to be.

Marxism represents a modern ideological attempt at developing a classless society. However, the inevitability of class struggle and the rule of the proletariat as predicted by Marx never really materialized in the industrial nations of Europe. Capitalist societies circumvented this problem through welfare measures and 'class cooperation'. Marxism succeeded as a political movement in agrarian societies through dictatorial measures that not only curbed individual enterprise and democracy, but also led to the replacement of the feudal hierarchy with its bureaucratic communist counterpart.

A more sinister form of social division is the one on racial and ethnic lines. At a global level this is currently one of the leading causes of conflict. Even after the abolition of slavery and apartheid racial bias in subtle forms remains apparent in affluent societies, while in almost all recent large-scale armed conflicts ethnic issues have played a significant role.

Caste, then, as it is found in India, is hardly unique. Yet it has distinctive features that deserve attention. When the Portuguese first

used the term caste they derived it from *casta*, meaning 'pure or unmixed'. They were probably impressed by the rules segregating the castes and the prohibitions against inter-marriage. That a series of Smriti texts down the centuries had been formulating rules to regulate social organization, and in the process routinize and perpetuate the existing segregation, is also unique to India.

### Evolution of Castes

Interestingly, the origins of the varna divisions as found in the *Rig Veda* appear to be racial. Early verses of this Veda speak of two varnas, the *arya* and the *dasa* (or *dasyu*), as two distinct and inimical groups, differing in physical features, skin colour and culture. The *dasas* were later conquered and assimilated even as the four varnas with their traditional duties as known to us crystallized by the later Vedic period.

Although according to texts like the *Bhagavadgita* varna divisions are based on individual character traits (*guna*) and occupation (*karma*), these divisions had turned hereditary in the late Vedic period itself, even as occupations became hereditary. Here it may be worth noting that even in modern societies the likelihood that children will choose the vocation of their parents, or a related vocation, is quite high. That occupations should be hereditary in ancient times was, therefore, only natural.

Despite the restrictions imposed by the Smritis on inter-varna marriages, caste divisions in ancient India remained fairly fluid. In the *Mahabharata* we find Yudhishtira commenting: 'It appears to me that it is very difficult to ascertain the caste of human beings on account of confusion of all varnas ... hence the wise consider character the principal desirable.'<sup>1</sup> Acharya Shankara echoes a similar view about the then existing caste structure in his *Brahma-sutra-bhashya*.<sup>2</sup>

The proliferation of vocations and inter-varna marriages led to the formation of numer-

ous occupational groups, each of which became, by the medieval times, a caste or a sub-caste called *jati* which, as the name itself implies, was hereditary.

### Caste and Privilege

If social hierarchy is universal and if caste is simply one form of social hierarchy, what has made the Indian caste system an anachronism and anathema in modern times? For one, as stated earlier, economic factors are the prime determinants of the social order—the social and political relations, and the class divisions that characterize modern societies. The rise of ‘vaishya power’, as Swami Vivekananda put it, was coincident with the Industrial Revolution and has been the chief driving force for capitalist societies both in the colonial and the post-colonial era. The *jati* hierarchy, however, is not consonant with economic status, and has often been at odds with the rising economic order. Second, the free market capitalist economy always leaves room for upward socio-economic mobility, although in practice such rise may not be common. The predetermined nature of *jatis*, however, tend to discourage social change. Finally, it was the prescription of hereditary privileges and social discrimination, manifesting in its worst form as ‘untouchability’, that really made the caste system an eyesore.

Interestingly, scholars have argued that the crystallized caste system as it obtained in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was ‘neither an unchanged survival of ancient India nor a single system that reflected core cultural values’. Rather, caste as a modern social construct is ‘the product of a concrete historical encounter between India and British colonial rule’. Not only did the British privilege caste distinctions over all other forms of social identity but they also played upon caste identities to ensure colonial control. The significant changes ushered into Indian society after independence both through constitu-

tional and social measures provide some support for this view.

### On Breaking Privileges

Class, caste and privilege happen to be closely linked entities. It is this link that is the source of all discrimination and oppression. As Swami Vivekananda put it succinctly, ‘Caste is a natural order. ... That is the only natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go, there will be caste. But that does not mean there will be these privileges!’<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, privileges are as pervasive as caste. ‘Privilege is the bane of human life,’ said Swamiji, while analysing its dynamic relationship with the social order in his famous lecture on ‘Vedanta and Privilege’:

Two forces, as it were, are constantly at work, one making caste, and the other breaking caste; in other words, the one making for privilege, the other breaking down privilege. And whenever privilege is broken down, more and more light and progress come to a race. This struggle we see all around us. Of course there is first the brutal idea of privilege, that of the strong over the weak. There is the privilege of wealth. If a man has more money than another, he wants a little privilege over those who have less. There is the still subtler and more powerful privilege of intellect; because one man knows more than others, he claims more privilege. And the last of all, and the worst, because [it is] the most tyrannical, is the privilege of spirituality. If some persons think they know more of spirituality, of God, they claim a superior privilege over everyone else. (1.423)

Swamiji was in full agreement with the educated, reform-minded individuals of his time about the necessity of a thorough overhauling of society, for he felt that the narrow, restrictive and separative caste distinctions were a barrier to India’s progress. But his plan was not destructive. He believed that each society followed its own line of growth and all that needed to be done was to remove barriers that impeded

this natural evolution. He noted that the introduction of 'new modes of education', the opening of 'new channels for the coming-in of wealth', and modern competition, especially trade competition with Europe, had already broken down caste barriers to a great extent. What he wanted to add to this process was the introduction of ideas, for he was confident that caste distinctions will 'crumble before the advance of ideas'.

By 'ideas' Swamiji did not mean modern scientific and liberal social ideas alone. For, although most progressive modern societies are built upon these ideas, they have not proved sufficient in breaking down barriers and privileges. What is needed is Vedanta, and a culture based on the Vedantic spirit. This is because 'none can be Vedantists, and at the same time admit of privilege to anyone, either mental, physical, or spiritual; absolutely no privilege for anyone.' Vedanta proclaims that 'the same power is in every man, the one manifesting more, the other less; the same potentiality is in everyone. Where [then] is the claim to privilege?' (Ibid.)

The Vedantic message, when it spreads among the lower ranks of society, ensures bottom-up reform, for 'if you teach Vedanta to the fisherman, he will say, I am as good a man as you; I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher; but I have the same God in me, as you have in you.' (3.246) All grass-root workers can testify to this potent transforming effect of Vedantic culture. In fact, Swamiji was categorical that when everyone was taught that divinity is within, everyone will work out his own salvation. (Ibid.)

### *Shudra-jagarana: The Rise of the Shudras*

To Swami Vivekananda the varnas were not simple descriptive categories of the Indian social order. He used these categories to represent Indian history, to conceptualize the evolving world order, and even to make historical predictions. In one of his letters to his American host Mary Hale he writes, 'Human

society is in turn governed by the four castes—the priests, the soldiers, the traders, and the labourers', and after a brief discussion of the characteristic features of each of these states he observes, 'Last will come the labourer (shudra) rule. Its advantages will be the distribution of physical comforts—its disadvantages, (perhaps) the lowering of culture. There will be a great distribution of ordinary culture, but extraordinary geniuses will be less and less.' (6.380-1)

In the seminal essay 'Modern India', he dwelt more elaborately on this issue and suggested:

A time will come when there will be the rising of the shudra class, *with their shudrahood*, that is to say, not like that as at present, when the shudras are becoming great by acquiring the characteristic qualities of the vaishyas or the kshatriyas; but a time will come, when the shudras of every country, with their inborn shudra nature and habits—not becoming in essence vaishya or kshatriya, but remaining as shudras—will gain absolute supremacy in every society. (4.468)

The last few decades have seen a significant rise in social and political awareness among the underprivileged sections of Indian society as also in their attempts at self-empowerment. In his latest book *The Silent Revolution*, the French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot argues that this trend constitutes a genuine 'democratization' of India and that the social and economic effects of this 'silent revolution' are bound to multiply in the years to come.

This assertiveness has also brought into focus the problem of class conflict especially in areas where ultra-left ideologies have been dominant. Swamiji had warned against conflict for two reasons: one, it would further divide an already heterogeneous nation; two, it would prevent the diffusion of culture to the lower strata of society. The latter is crucial because culture is indispensable for any group to be sustainable, for 'it is culture that withstands shocks, not a simple mass of knowledge.' Swamiji therefore laid great emphasis on the diffu-

sion of culture. In his famous Madras lecture on 'The Future of India', he exhorted: 'Teach the masses in the vernaculars, give them ideas, they will get information; but something more is necessary, give them culture. Until you give them that there can be no permanence in the raised condition of the masses.' (3.291)

It is worth noting that the shudras always had their own culture. In his monumental work *History of Dharmasastra*, P V Kane observes that if the shudras laboured under certain grave disabilities they had certain compensatory advantages too. They could follow almost any profession except the few especially reserved for the brahmanas. They were free from the daily round of rituals mandatory for the other varnas, they had to undergo no samskaras except marriage, no penances were necessary for them in case of moral lapses and they had no restriction to observe regarding food and drink or *gotra* and *pravara* (in marriage). They were entitled to *purta-dharma* (charitable acts) and also the *pancha mahayajnas*.<sup>4</sup> Swamiji not only endorsed most of these cultural features but actually prescribed them for everybody, irrespective of caste. He was as much against meaningless ritual as he was in favour of inter-caste marriages. He was all for freedom of choice in matters of food and occupation; and service as envisioned in *purta-dharma* and the *pancha mahayajnas*, he considered mandatory for all. But Swamiji also wanted the masses to appropriate the Sanskritic culture that had all along been the privileged possession of the upper castes, for Sanskrit had been the source of the power and prestige wielded by the upper classes. Of course, by Sanskritic culture Swamiji meant the life-giving ideas contained in the Upanishads and related texts, and not the 'mass of superstition' that often passed as Hinduism.

Despite all the recent changes and upheavals, legislations and social protests, there

is little to suggest that caste in India is on its way out. From Buddha to Narayana Guru to Mahatma Gandhi, a whole host of powerful spiritual personalities have campaigned against caste, but the system has endured. In her essay on *Sri Ramakrishna and the Caste System* in this issue, Dr Krishna Verma notes Sri Ramakrishna's pregnant comment: 'The caste system can be removed by one means only, and that is the love of God. Lovers of God do not belong to any caste.' The bhakti movement bears historical testimony to this fact, and Swamiji echoes this spirit of Vedantic bhakti when he says, 'Live in any caste you like; but that is no reason why you should hate another man or another caste. It is love and love alone I preach, and I base my teaching on the great Vedantic truth of the sameness and omnipresence of the Soul of the Universe.' (3.194) The solution to the vexed issue of caste, therefore, may lie not in an iconoclastic attack on caste but in the ability of communities to transcend these barriers.

The message of Vedanta as exemplified in the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda contains this call for transcendence. It has played a significant historical role in weakening caste distinctions and it will continue to break caste barriers as it percolates among the masses. To the extent that we are able to contribute to this process, we may consider ourselves privileged. \*

## References

1. 'Vanaparva', *Mahabharata*, 180.31-3, cited in P V Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1997), 261.
2. Acharya Shankara's commentary on *Brahma Sutras*, 1.3.33.
3. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.245.
4. *History of Dharmasastra*, 2.164.

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# Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

February 1905

## Occasional Notes

Lives which demonstrate that age and death are only debts of nature and nothing more are the world's pillars of spirituality. Such a life ceased to inform its earthly tenement from the 19th of last month. Born in 1817, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore lost his powers of hearing and sight years ago, with the result that what he lost in the gross he gained in the fine. His spiritual insight became clearer and stronger, while his intellectual perception and mental energy remained unimpaired to the end. In proportion as he ceased to participate in the world of the senses he found his activity in the spiritual world. If the whole of a long life of purity, philanthropy and prayer—a youth of wonderful earnestness and work for religious and social progress, a middle age matured in the love of God and man, and an old age 'lived in the presence of God'—ending in euthanasia can be called victory over death, it was Devendranath's. He was a unique example of a householder rishi of modern times.

Mrs Besant in the *CHC* magazine for January mentions an amusing incident illustrative of the sense of the word *native* as applied by Europeans to the people of this country. 'There was a large gathering to which a number of Indian gentlemen were invited, and on the following day a retired Anglo-Indian official said to one of the Hindu guests: "Were there many natives present?" "Oh yes," answered the Indian, "many hundreds of natives were present, and about fifty Indians." The official had forgotten that the Englishman is a *native* in England! The term connotes contempt, and has come to mean savage, and it will be remembered that Lord George Hamilton protested, in the House of Commons, against the use of the term *native troops* when a member spoke of the splendid Indian army.'

That is one extreme, this is another. The 'good old generation' of Indians, now fast disappearing, had also their peculiar conceptions of a *savage*. Here is an illustration. An old, much venerated sadhu was once speaking in reply to a question on the subject of the centuries of foreign subjection of India. He began by saying that he did not mind the subjection so far as the kshatriya power was concerned. Earth-hunger, love of conquest and possession, he thought, were savage instincts, which disappeared from a nation in proportion as it became civilized. The savage in man was bound to own the earth, whether the savagery was expressed in brute force or in cunning mechanism. Civilization tamed a people down; it refined and spiritualized the blood, as it were, and weeded out from it the brute impulses of selfishness, deprivation and destruction of others.

No, he went on, he would not mind that India should be a subject nation if her culture and ideals were not put down by brute force either in the shape of the sword or in that of money. The military and police forces of the world were bound to be more savage than civilized and they were the real owners—so far as ownership went—of the earth. Therefore it mattered little who ruled over you—the savages of your own colour or those of another. But the real danger came when the spiritual ideals and institutions of a nation, evolved and perfected through centuries, were sought to be swamped by the power of the sword or the organization of money. It ought to be the lookout of the whole civilized world that ennobling ideals and beliefs and spiritual institutions are not swept out of existence by savage ones, the same as it ought not to permit the destruction of another Alexandrian, or to come to later

times, another Chinese library.

The power, continued he, of the sword was bad enough, but the power of money was worse. For instance, the work of the wonderfully organized Christian missions, with the power of money at their back, was good so far as it imparted education to and relieved the suffering of the poor. But when that was made only the means to the end of proselytization, nothing could be more regrettable. For what of religion could they give to India? Absolutely nothing. The whole world knew that. All that they could give were certain savage ideas, as, a wild God who did not know his own mind, eternal hell, a Devil about as powerful as God, the inherent sinfulness of man, resurrection of all the world's corpses on a certain day, salvation by proxy, etc. They wanted to make Jesus great and holy and they must needs do it by bringing him into the world in an unnatural way! Poor Mary! The imagination of a child and a savage was very similar. Christianity claimed another unique position. It arrogated to itself the sole position of truth and the whole of it. No other attitude could be more childish and more inimical to the progress of knowledge and truth.

In his Social Conference address the Maharaja Gaekwad referred to sadhus as follows: 'We have already a large body of men who might be doing some of this work for the country, just as the religious orders of the Middle Ages did so much for Europe. I refer to the countless body of sadhus who are roaming over the country. But they must be trained, and they must have something useful to say. For asceticism is evil unless it can be a humane asceticism, one not divorced from philanthropy. He who surrenders life to help his fellows is a saint, but not he who becomes a beggar to avoid labour or responsibility, or retires to a jungle to save what Kingsley would have called "his own dirty soul".'

In the general degeneration of the country which affected all classes from the prince to the peasant, the sadhus were no exception. The ill they are afflicted with is exactly the same as of the others—lack of education. They are just as important an item in the movement for reform or progress as any other in the propaganda. The point is, therefore, not why they do not do their duty, but what steps has society, and chiefly leaders like His Highness, who recognizes their value as a factor in the nation, taken to train them?

Kingsley's phrase notwithstanding, we have the temerity to think that it is necessary for many a man to retire into a jungle to cleanse 'his own dirty soul', before he is fit to embark on helping his fellows. A period of training is needful in every work: most so in philanthropy. A man who would save the souls of others should begin by saving his own. How else could he know what the soul was and how to save it? And retirement for a time, to qualify for a knowledge of the soul, to know it first hand and not merely gather an academical knowledge about it, we repeat, is an absolute requirement for even the best of us. It is only the free soul, freed from the chains of personal ambition and attachment, who can do the greatest amount of good to the greatest number. The guiding principle of a sadhu's life is the Vedic phrase *atmanah mokshaya jagadhitaya*, 'for the freedom of self, for the good of the world'. We are surprised that His Highness should take a one-sided view of the matter.

The *Mysore Herald*, not long ago, published information regarding the opening of a *pathashala* by the head of the Shivagange monastery (Bangalore). In conformity to the old Indian custom, the scholars would be provided with board, lodging and tuition, free of cost. We noticed that only Sanskrit would be taught. We gather that the swami is a man of culture and in touch with the times. We can therefore hope much from him. The object of the *pathashala* is to spread a wider knowledge of our ancient religion and philosophy. Would not the excellent object be better secured if a liberal English education was included in the curriculum of studies of the institution? \*

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# Reflections on the Bhagavadgita

SWAMI ATULANANDA

## Chapter 11 (*continued*)

21. Verily, these hosts of devas are entering into You; some praise You in fear with folded hands. Hosts of great rishis and Siddhas, saying 'Svasti, Peace, may it be well' are singing Your glory in beautiful hymns.

Whenever God incarnates on earth, it is for a great divine purpose. To carry out that purpose the Lord brings with Him the devoted free souls, who always rejoice in being in His presence. These free souls, who come with the avatara and always remain with Him and surround Him as the satellites stay with the planet, return to God when the divine purpose is fulfilled. And so when Sri Krishna came to establish righteousness on earth, these bhaktas who came to assist in the working out of God's plan, fulfilled that purpose in the form of warriors on the field of Kurukshetra. The warriors fighting with and against Arjuna were none other than free souls, who incarnated to lighten the earth's burden.

Arjuna realizes this in his vision. He sees that those who stand against him are no less instruments in God's hands than those who fight on his side, and that by killing these warriors God's plan is also being fulfilled. For those who are slain return to their celestial abode from where they came.

Again, other perfected beings, the rishis and Siddhas, witnessing the battle from differ-

ent spheres, offer their prayer in splendid hymns, and, dreading the untimely destruction of the universe, cry out 'Svasti.'

The war as it is being enacted and as it will develop, now passes in review before Arjuna's mental eye, or rather, spiritual eye. The film unrolls. Scene after scene is thrown on the canvas of his mind. Time and space have changed their relative values. They still exist, but in a different way. The future comes near and almost merges in the present. Space also is almost eliminated. Arjuna sees heaven and earth and all the spheres at once. And he sees the future and also the purpose of things, the true object and character of the war. It is God-ordained. It is a war for righteousness. All his fear and anxiety had been in vain. It all had to happen, just as it happened.

We are so ignorant, we have no faith, hence all our fear and anxiety in life. Had Arjuna trusted in God from the beginning, he would not have hesitated to perform his duty on the battlefield. But he became egotistic. He thought that *he* was the cause of the war, that *he* would kill and cause others to kill their enemies. He forgot for an instant that God is the

only actor on the world-stage, that it is all His play and that through us *He* acts. When we realize this, life changes its aspects. The anxiety, the bitterness, the fear, the heartburning go forever. We become His playmates. He is the general

***He sees that those who stand against him are no less instruments in God's hands than those who fight on his side, and that by killing these warriors God's plan is also being fulfilled.***

and we are the soldiers. 'Ours not to question why, ours but to do and die.' We become resigned. Life is sweet and death is sweet; joy is sweet and sorrow is sweet; victory is sweet and defeat is just as sweet when we are truly resigned to God's will. Proportions change. What seems so momentous now, becomes very ordinary; what seems so all-important becomes an indifferent matter when the light of understanding falls on it. It is not such an awfully weighty affair to us now, whether our college team wins the ball game or the other. But when we were in college, life and death seemed to depend on that.

And so it is now in our life. Play with all your might, fight with every ounce of strength

***We are always surrounded by fear in a thousand different forms. If we can conquer fear, samadhi comes at once. With the body-idea comes fear; with the Spirit-idea comes fearlessness.***

that is in you, but remember that it is all God's play. No revenge, no hatred, no injury to others. It is all fun, a play in which we take our share. And *your* soul and *my* soul look on and quietly take it all in and see the joke of it all.

And now Arjuna continues. First he relates the wonderful side of the Universal Form, then the terrible side and finally, its splendour.

**22. The Rudras, Ādityas, Vasus, Sādhyas, the Vishvas, the Ashvins, the Maruts, the Ushmapās, the host of the Gandharvas, Yakshas, Asuras, Siddhas—they are all looking at You wonderstruck.**

These different classes of celestial beings, looking on from their different spheres, are

filled with wonder.

**23. O Mighty-armed, seeing Your immeasurable form, with many mouths and eyes, with many arms, thighs, feet and stomachs, and fearful with many tusks, the worlds are agitated with terror and so am I.**

**A**s it translates itself to Arjuna's mind, the great vision takes different aspects. First came wonder. He saw the Lord, mighty and glorious, in His friendly aspect, the Abode, the Refuge of all. Now comes the terrible side, the Destroyer, who swallows up the whole universe, who, with a turn of His wrist, annihilates worlds. It is not strange that Arjuna is frightened. It was an unheard-of vision. The saints sometimes behold fearful sights in their meditation. There is a sect of tantrics in

India who court these terrible visions in order to conquer fear, because fear is a great obstacle to realization. We are always surrounded by fear in a thousand different forms. If we can conquer fear, samadhi comes at once. With the body-idea comes fear; with the Spirit-idea comes fearlessness. The easiest, the safest, the most natural way to conquer fear is through bhakti, because the bhakta throws his burden upon the Lord and puts himself under His protection. Arjuna continues:

**24. O Vishnu, beholding You touching the heavens, shining in many colours, with mouths wide open and with large blazing eyes, my heart is terrified and I find neither peace nor courage.**

**25. O Lord of gods! Seeing Your mouths, terrible with long teeth, blazing like the fire of *pralaya* (destruction), I know not the four quarters, nor do I find peace. Have mercy, O Abode of the Universe!**

**A**rjuna is a warrior in his body, mind and soul, so his fear shapes itself in the form of a gigantic, immeasurable opponent, terrible to behold; whose eyes flash fire, whose many mouths are wide open, ready to devour whomsoever he may get in his clutches. Even

Arjuna quakes before this vision and becomes confused. There is no way of escape. Wherever he turns, the Terrible One faces him. He pleads for mercy, that peace may return to his agitated mind.

Now see what happens.

**26-7. All these sons of Dhritarashtra, with the multitude of monarchs, Bhishma, Drona, and Sūtaputra (Karna), as well as our own principal warriors enter precipitately into Your mouth, terrible with long teeth and fearful to behold. Some are seen hanging between Your teeth, with their heads crushed to powder.**

**S**ri Krishna sees that the vision is more than Arjuna can endure. He gives it a different turn. It remains as terrible as before, but Arjuna's personal safety is ensured. What Arjuna feared for himself happens to the enemy. It means *their* destruction and his safety: the war will end in his favour. His mind be-

comes calm, less agitated and then he becomes exultant. The Lord is on his side. Confidence is restored and the vision (as we shall see) closes in great splendour and great happiness for Arjuna.

What is it like? Can you give an illustration? Yes.

**28. Verily, as the many torrents of rivers flow towards the ocean, so do these heroes in the world of men enter Your fiercely flaming mouths.**

**W**hat a beautiful psychological picture we get here, of the working of the human mind—very realistic, very true. The same vision of destruction, but the relationship is changed. There is no more reason for

Arjuna to fear. *He* is safe! Now let happen what will! From fearing and trembling Arjuna becomes quiescent: he becomes the observer. Now he can draw comparisons. He even gives beautiful illustrations of what is taking place.

**29. As moths rush into the burning fire headlong to destruction, in the same manner do these creatures rush headlong into Your mouths, only to perish.**

**H**urried on by their own karma, by their own nature, these warriors rush to their own destruction, blindly or knowingly. Nothing can prevent them. The cosmic Law is

taking its course. Nobody is to blame. There is no cruelty on anyone's part. It is the law of karma. The Universal Form swallows up everything and He seems to enjoy it.

**30. O Vishnu! With blazing mouths You are licking and swallowing all the worlds on every side. Filling the whole universe with radiance Your fierce rays are burning it up.**

**W**hat an extraordinary vision! God the Destroyer, who swallows up the universe; the Divine Mother of the universe dancing Her dance of destruction; Time, devouring all; Death, slaying and executing

His power. All the days of our lives we have had it chanted into our ears that God is good and God is love and God is beauty! But how about this vision? What is there good or lovable or beautiful in this carnage? Wars or

floods or famines or epidemics are with us always; if not where we live, in some other part of the globe. Dare we still go on chanting God is good and all is good? No, that would be insincerity. The terrible side in nature is as real as the lovely side, death is as real as life, and sorrow is as real as joy. And if we accept (and we cannot very well do otherwise) that there is but one God, the source of all that is, we must conclude that good and evil both proceed from Him.

We are afraid to acknowledge it. We are scared by the terrific aspect; we fear death. 'The deadly frightful sword, reeking with blood, / They take from Her hand, and put a lute instead!' as Swami Vivekananda puts it.<sup>1</sup> We shrink back in fright at the thunder of Mother's awful laughter, at Her nakedness, at the dripping sword. We dare not acknowledge that it is *She* who scatters plague and sorrow and disease. We cheat ourselves; like the ostrich we hide our face in the sand when danger approaches. And therefore we do not progress spiritually. Our fear, our cowardice, holds us back. Our beautiful images are smashed to pieces. Our God of love and all-goodness receives a few knocks, and then we are stranded. We tremble. That is the common experience.

Arjuna does not understand. What does it mean, this awesome Form? 'Who are You, Lord? Explain to me, I pray, the meaning of this terrible vision. You swallow everything and, as it appears, with a good appetite are always ready for more. Be merciful and explain. What is Your purpose? I do not understand it. Where is Your mercy, Your feeling, Your sympathy? I desire to know You, O Primeval One, for Your purpose I know not.'

The first experiences in the religious life are usually of a peaceful, enjoyable nature. Many converts mistake this for the highest state and they never strive for anything higher. They are afraid to lose that little bliss.

They think that when *that* goes, everything is lost. But the courageous soul, the true bhakta, does not stop at a little pleasant, peaceful feeling. He wants God, the Truth, as it is. He pushes on and then he may meet the Mother in Her terrible form. There, many recoil in fear, as did Arjuna. But great treasures of Truth await those who persevere. They do not ask for a God of just favours; they are ready to meet what comes, destruction as well as good times. Passing through that state of terror the strong behold the Highest, the resplendent One. The fire has burned the dross. The mind has become crystal clear. They have passed the ordeal, come out sanctified and are ready for the highest samadhi.

Weak minds, it is said, may come to grief. Fear and terror and the terrible strain may snap the cords of the weak brain. But spiritual gi-

***We dare not acknowledge that it is She who scatters plague and sorrow and disease. We cheat ourselves; like the ostrich we hide our face in the sand when danger approaches. And therefore we do not progress spiritually.***

ants undauntedly push on through good and evil till they reach the highest summit, from where they look down on all dualistic conception, as the mountaineer does on the clouds spread beneath him. These clouds may mean so much to the people of the valley. They may mean a harvest or a crop failure, but to the mountain climber who is above them they mean nothing. The *jivanmukta*, or the liberated soul, rises above good and evil. He may come down again to the world of strife and division, but never can he forget his experience on the mountaintop. Never can he forget the clouds spread beneath him, unable to affect him in any way.

Just as at an earlier stage time and space lost their relative values and the past and the present seemed to melt into *one*, even so good and evil approach each other here and become

related as the obverse and reverse sides of the same coin. Both are maya; both encircle and delude us. The one is sattvic, the other tamasic, but both are gunas. But we have to rise beyond the gunas. And as we grow spiritually, we become more and more detached from the gunas. We rise above their sphere of power. We approach the Spirit, where maya is not. All chains and bondages break, golden chains and iron ones, sweet bonds and bitter ones. We rise above all limitation. Good and evil belong to the material plane. *There* they both exist and *there* alone. And on *that* plane both serve their purpose. They coexist; where the one is, the other is too.

We must jump outside the circle of maya. Then we can never be caught like the young snakes; we are free outside the circle, which is

***We love and have faith so long as our self-esteem is not hurt. But let there be one unpleasant word and the critic is brought out. Is the guru so much greater than us? And then and there the bond that held master and disciple together is snapped.***

nothing but nature. It is said that the mother snake has eggs in a circle around her while they are hatching. And as soon as an egg hatches she quickly catches the baby snake and swallows it. But some baby snakes are very quick and clever and the moment they hatch, they jump outside the circle. And then they are safe. But as long as they are inside the circle the mother will catch them, no matter how quick they are. So it is with the soul. In maya lies danger. We are safe only when we jump outside maya. Then we are in the arms of the Divine Mother and she lifts us beyond nature.

It is a hard lesson. We have struggled so hard to be good and virtuous. And now we learn that the value of goodness was fictitious. We have repeated our mantras, spent hours in our meditation rooms, read volumes of scrip-

tures, have taken so many vows, performed our duties so faithfully! Is all that lost? No! No effort is in vain. That is the teaching of the *karma-kanda*. But unless it is all done out of love and love alone, it will not bring us a high vision of God. Unless it is done with great humility, it may only increase our vanity. We may think that we have become saints and then we are so eager to criticize others. We may become self-righteous. That is why great souls often express greater love for so-called sinners than for those who are regarded as saints by society. Sinners have true repentance. They know that they are sinners and that they have not the strength to give up sin. Therefore they fall at the feet of the Master and resign themselves to Him in all humility. Such humble souls the Lord loves.

The rich young man had followed all the commandments from his youth. What better man could be found? But he could not follow the Master, Jesus. When the test came, he turned away. Jesus said to him, 'If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.'<sup>2</sup> That was too much for him. Perhaps he thought (as so many of us do), 'Why should I sell all? Am I not unattached? After all, does the Master know so much more than I do?' How easily the self-righteous mind is turned! We love and have faith so long as our self-esteem is not hurt. But let there be *one* unpleasant word and the critic is brought out. Is the guru so much greater than us? And then and there the bond that held master and disciple together is snapped.

And so let us examine ourselves and see that no pride enters our heart. Let us not be hasty in criticism, for after all, we *may* be wrong. We *may* misjudge. Let us watch ourselves more closely and be less mindful of others' faults. When we watch our own weaknesses and insincerities and shortcomings, we

will become humbler. And that humility will be our strength. On it we will soar higher till we reach the feet of Him who is the refuge of all.

Arjuna has told Sri Krishna all that he had seen and experienced. It was a wonderful revelation, a vision grand and sublime, but also terrifying. And what is its meaning? How to interpret it? Who is that Being, terrible to behold, yet worthy of all praise? It must be the Highest of beings, for everything entered into it. It is the source of all. But what is its purpose? These questions arise in Arjuna's mind.

In Arjuna we always find the true disciple. Whenever he experiences something he comes to Sri Krishna and relates to Him with gratitude and humility all that he has seen.

**31. Tell me, who are You, in this terrible form? Salutation to You! O Supreme Deity, have mercy. O Primeval One, I desire to know You, for indeed I know not Your purpose.**

**B**e merciful, O Lord. You have shown me Your wonderful form; now kindly explain the meaning, for that is not yet clear to me. And who are You? This question gives Sri Krishna an opportunity to further en-

This is pleasing to the Master. He sees the effect of His teaching and instructions and it gives Him a clue on how to proceed. This confidence draws the Master and the disciple closer, and both react upon each other. It draws the Master out, bringing out the best in Him. Yes, Arjuna is the skilful disciple who knows how to please the teacher, not by flattery, but by showing Him the result of his efforts. He knows how to spur Him on to further revelations of Truth. And he also knows how to question intelligently. 'The true preacher of religion has to be of wonderful capabilities,' says the Upanishad, 'and clever shall his hearer be.'<sup>3</sup>

What then is Arjuna's question? We find it in the next verse.

lighten Arjuna. Listen, I will tell you what the vision means. You have witnessed Me in the form of Time and Death and the Destroyer. And you have seen Me act in that capacity.

**32. The Blessed Lord said:**

**I am mighty, world-destroying Time, here made manifest for the purpose of destroying these people. Even without You, none of these warriors arrayed here in the hostile armies, shall live.**

**I** am mighty Time, that is to say, I am the divine power that causes all changes. I am Death; I destroy the worlds. And at present I am made manifest for the purpose of slaying these warriors. Should you refuse to fight, even then, without you, without your instrumentality, all these heroes will die. Therefore, do not be foolish. Take My advice. This war is necessary for the unfoldment of My plans. I have come to establish righteousness. I have incarnated for that purpose. Why cannot you be humble and resigned! Does anything depend on you? Out of dust I can create my mighty workers. I do not depend on you. Do

not be idle; do not neglect your duty. It will not avail anything. The law will take its course. Therefore be calm and humble and obedient, and then act seeing stillness in strife, life in death, peace in war.

*(To be continued)*

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# Sri Ramakrishna and the Caste System

DR KRISHNA VERMA

In modern India the caste system is considered by many to be one of the most serious social problems hindering the progress of the whole nation. In the beginning the aim was division of labour. People were divided into four castes: brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra, according to their inner tendency and capability. Wisdom was the main characteristic of the brahmana, strength of the kshatriya, business talent of the vaishya, and shudras were those who lacked all these three characteristics, but were good at manual work. The scriptures prescribed simple living and high thinking for the brahmana. 'Serenity, self-control, austerity, purity, forbearance, and also uprightness, knowledge, realization and faith are the duties of a brahmana, born of his nature.'<sup>1</sup> Initially, caste depended on one's nature, but gradually it became hereditary, and the concept of caste hierarchy evolved in society. Brahmanas were considered the highest of all classes, as they were to guide the other three castes through their wisdom. But being intoxicated by this supreme power, they started exploiting the lower castes. They wanted to grab all the social privileges, denying everything to the others. This exploitation was worst in the medieval period. Even for small matters, in their day-to-day life, the non-brahmanas had to get the sanction of the brahmanas. However, the kshatriyas by virtue of their physical strength, and the vaishyas their economic power, were not so much affected. The condition of the shudras was really pitiable. They were suppressed by all the three upper castes. Hence the reaction in modern times.

## The Caste System in Medieval Bengal

Interestingly, in Bengal, in the medieval period, the caste division was reduced to two:

brahmanas and shudras; there were no significant kshatriya or vaishya castes. Anybody who was not a brahmana was considered a shudra.<sup>2</sup> Of course, among the so-called shudras there was some hierarchy. There were *vaidyas* (a caste that followed Ayurveda and practised medicine) and *kayasthas* (believed by some to be a line of kshatriyas in Bengal), who considered themselves superior to people like goldsmiths, blacksmiths, weavers, peasants, washermen and fishermen. Then there were cobblers, tanners, burning-ghat workers and sweepers, who were known as untouchables. The division was not based on their financial position. A brahmana might be poorer than a *kayastha* zamindar or a goldsmith (and in most cases he was), but his social position was much higher than theirs. They had to show respect to him in every way, and he had authority over them. All religious and social activities that a non-brahmana wanted to perform had to be sanctioned by the brahmana, and only a brahmana could function as the priest and spiritual teacher. However, there were some more staunch brahmanas, who would not perform priestly activities in a non-brahmana house and would not accept anything from them. Accepting cooked food and drinking water from a shudra was absolutely out of the question. All these distinctions between brahmanas and non-brahmanas were observed by women also. A brahmana woman, while mentioning her name, would use the suffix *devi* (divine person), whereas a non-brahmana would use *dasi* (servant). Such were the caste conceptions during Sri Ramakrishna's time.

## Sri Ramakrishna's Lineage

Sri Ramakrishna was born in a brahmana

family known for its piety and spirituality. His father followed all the principles of a true brahmana as prescribed by the scriptures. All the brahmanic qualities mentioned in the *Bhagavadgita* (quoted above) could be found in him. He led a very simple, pure life, spending most of his time in spiritual activities and scriptural study. At the same time, he also strictly observed all the social rules of a brahmana. Though poor, he did not accept anything from a non-brahmana, not even from those brahmanas who accepted gifts from shudras. His family members were also not allowed to do so. His adherence to brahmanic rules and his renunciation and asceticism made him so distinguished that everybody in the village had great respect for him. Nobody bathed in the pond before he took his bath, nor would anybody pass him by without showing him proper respect.

### His Attitude towards Other Castes

Born in such an orthodox brahmana family, what was Sri Ramakrishna's attitude towards non-brahmanas? How did he deal with them? Sri Ramakrishna's first contact with a shudra was at the dawn of his birth. Dhani Kamarini, a blacksmith woman, was the first person to touch him and introduce him to the world. However, there is nothing unusual in it. In those days only a shudra woman functioned as a midwife. But later the relationship that developed between the two was history, both for the family as well as for society. When Sri Ramakrishna reached the age of nine, the family decided to perform his *upanayana*, sacred thread ceremony. It is a custom among brahmanas that when a male child attains a certain age he is invested with the sacred thread (worn diagonally across the trunk) and given the Gayatri mantra. This function is performed with great solemnity. It is a very important occasion in the life of the boy, because it is only after this function that the boy becomes a full-fledged brahmana. Before this he does not have the right to any religious activ-

ity. A number of rituals are associated with this ceremony, and many people are invited to attend this function. After he is invested with the sacred thread he has to live as a brahmacharin for a certain period of time, begging his food and sleeping on the floor. The first lady who gives him alms is known as his *bhiksha-mata*, the 'alms-giving mother'. This is indeed the privilege of a brahmana woman. Now, Dhani Kamarini had a secret desire to become Sri Ramakrishna's *bhiksha-mata*, which, of course, was nothing more than a wild dream on her part. She also knew it. But somehow Sri Ramakrishna came to know about it and promised to accept his first alms from her. When he made his decision known to the family there was naturally a lot of hue and cry. Accepting the first alms from a shudra woman and making her the *bhiksha-mata* when the family was so orthodox as not to accept anything even from a *shudra-yajin* brahmana (one who officiated for the shudras)? Impossible! But the boy was adamant. His only argument was this: holding on to truth is the prime virtue of a brahmana. If he cannot keep his promise, he has no right to be called a brahmana. His family people tried to persuade him but with little success. Ultimately they had to agree; and the *upanayana* took place with the blacksmith woman as the *bhiksha-mata*.<sup>3</sup>

There is another incident from the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: Sri Ramakrishna used to hear from the village blacksmiths that dal (lentils) cooked by them had some special taste. They used to say that brahmanas do not know how to cook dal properly. So he had a desire to taste that dal. We have already seen that brahmanas were very particular in not accepting any cooked food from a non-brahmana house. But Sri Ramakrishna was different. He asked a blacksmith woman, most probably Dhani, to cook dal for him. Of course, his comment on that dal was quite witty: 'I ate the dal but it smelt of the blacksmith.'<sup>4</sup>

Chinu Shankhari, an old man of the village, was his childhood friend. Sri Ramakrish-

na used to call him 'dada' (elder brother) and was very fond of him. Though Chinu belonged to the artisan caste (*shankharis* are those who cut conch-shells and make conch bangles), considered low in Bengal, Sri Ramakrishna never hesitated to take food from him. Chinu was also one of the first few who realized the divinity of the child Gadadhar. We also read in the *Ramakrishna Punthi* that a certain Khetir Ma, who belonged to the carpenter caste, once desired to feed Sri Ramakrishna at her home, but did not dare to express her wish because of her low social position. Somehow, the divine child came to know of it and insisted on taking food sitting at her place. The author of the *Punthi* points out how surprising it was that though born in an orthodox family, very strict in caste matters, Gadadhar ignored caste distinctions altogether when they clashed with love and affection.<sup>5</sup>

These, however, are his childhood incidents. Presently, we will see his attitude towards other castes when he grew up and became aware of social distinctions. Sri Ramakrishna came to Calcutta at the age of seventeen. His elder brother had opened a Sanskrit school there and was also working as a priest in the neighbourhood. Sri Ramakrishna came to assist him and also to study under his tutelage. This was the time when Rani Rasmani, a very rich lady of the *kaivarta* caste, was building the famous Dakshineswar Kali temple. Though the Rani was very rich and powerful and respected by all, there arose a technical problem in worshipping the image in the temple. In Bengal of that time, no brahmana officiated as priest in a temple constructed by a *kaivarta*. *Kaivartas* were fishermen by profession and were considered low in the caste strata. So the Rani invited pundits for a solution according to the shastras, but none could provide one. When Sri Ramakrishna's brother Ramkumar was consulted, he told her to dedicate the temple in the name of her guru, who was a brahmana. Still nobody came forward for the consecration of the temple or to become

a priest there. Ultimately, Ramkumar was approached to take up the job, and he agreed. However, Sri Ramakrishna, then a young man of nineteen, was not willing to accept the food of a *kaivarta*. Having grown up in an orthodox brahmana family, he was well aware of the social practices of that time and did not wish to break them without reason. But when his elder brother convinced him through arguments that there was no harm in taking food at such a holy place like the temple of the Divine Mother situated on the bank of the Ganga, he started living in the Kali temple complex and gradually began taking food there too. Reason always had great appeal for him. After some time he was entrusted with decorating the image in the Kali temple, and later became the priest there. Thus began his worship of the Universal Mother, which gradually turned into an intense sadhana. Such sadhana and such God-intoxication the world had not seen before. An account of his sadhana is beyond the scope of this essay. We shall touch only a few aspects of his religious practices, which will reveal his attitude towards caste system.

### His Sadhana to Remove Caste Pride

The brahmana being the highest caste in society, the other castes treat a brahmana with great honour and respect. Naturally, this might make him conscious of his social position and give rise to a feeling of superiority. Moreover, we have seen that Sri Ramakrishna belonged to a brahmana family held in high esteem even by other brahmanas. Hence, in order to crush his caste pride completely, the first thing he did as a part of his tapasya was to remove his sacred thread at the time of meditation. According to Sri Ramakrishna, *jaty-abhimana*, the pride of caste or lineage, was one of eight ties that bind the self to the world of maya. Then, as his sadhana became more and more intense, the urge to demolish the ego and feel one with all also grew in him. To attain this objective he used unique methods unheard of in the realm of spiritual practice. He would

clean the places where the poor of all castes were fed by the temple management, remove their used plates, and sometimes even eat their leavings. In India scavengers are considered to belong to the lowest caste, the untouchables. Sri Ramakrishna would go to the dwelling place of the temple scavenger and clean his toilet stealthily, lest the owner should object. This was his way of getting over the feeling of caste superiority. Shame, hatred and fear are considered to be obstacles in the spiritual path. This single act shows how he got over these obstacles. He felt no shame in cleaning the hut of a low-caste person; he had no hatred towards anybody, nor any aversion for menial jobs; he had no fear of social disapproval and was not afraid of excommunication.

The fear of others' opinion—'What will people think of me?'—is the worst form of weakness in man. We always want the approval and appreciation of others. Behind this psychology is the ego of the individual. Sri Ramakrishna had no such weakness in him. He was absolutely indifferent to the opinion of the world. He would not hesitate to sacrifice anything for a righteous cause. He was of the opinion that the pride of being born in an upper-caste family inflates the ego and bars the vision of equality towards all creatures of God. He virtually saw God in everybody, even in the prostitute, the pariah and the mleccha (a member of an alien race). The concept of equality, that God resides in everybody, that all are His children, is not new in religion. Many saints have declared this truth. But in the history of the world one does not come across another example where such methods were adopted to remove caste consciousness. Unique indeed were the ways of Sri Ramakrishna.

### His Disciples

Among Sri Ramakrishna's sixteen sannyasin disciples nine were non-brahmanas; of these eight were *kayasthas* and one belonged to

a shepherd family. Again, among his twenty-five intimate householder disciples whose names we find in the *Sri Ramakrishna Bhaktamali*, nineteen were non-brahmanas. Most of them were *kayasthas* while some belonged to the *vaidya* caste and some to the vaishya caste. However, in nineteenth-century Bengal, all non-brahmanas were termed shudras, as noted earlier. When Swami Vivekananda became famous, many of the orthodox Hindus objected to his eligibility for sannyasa. Their point was that a shudra had no right to sannyasa.<sup>6</sup>

### Transcending Caste Considerations

For Sri Ramakrishna, purity of mind and devotion to God were the only criteria for judging a man. In his estimate Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda) and Rakhal Chandra (Swami Brahmananda) were spiritually much higher than many brahmanas, though both of them were *kayasthas*. Latu, the shepherd boy of Chapra who was a domestic help at Ramchandra Datta's house, was transformed into Swami Adbhutananda, a great sadhu, by the grace of Sri Ramakrishna. Adhar Sen and Mani Mallick were devotees of Sri Ramakrishna though they belonged to the so-called lower castes: one was a *subarna-banik* and the other was a *тели*. Sri Ramakrishna used to visit their houses and take food there.

An incident revealing Sri Ramakrishna's attitude towards the caste system is recorded in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Once, on the occasion of Durga Puja, Sri Ramakrishna went to Adhar's house. Kedar Chatterjee, an orthodox brahmana devotee, came to meet him there. But when the time for partaking prasada approached, Kedar hesitated to take food at Adhar's place. He and several devotees stood up; they were about to return home. Kedar saluted the Master and bade him goodbye. The *Gospel* mentions the following conversation thereafter:

Master: 'Should you go away without bidding Adhar good-bye? Wouldn't that be an act of discourtesy?'

Kedar: "When God is pleased, the world is pleased." You are staying; so in a sense we are all staying. I am not feeling well. Besides, I am a little nervous about my social conventions. [Adhar belonged to a lower caste. Kedar, a brahmana, could not dine with him or eat at his home.] Once before I had trouble with our community.'

Vijay (*pointing to the Master*): 'Should we go away and leave him here?'

Just then Adhar came in to take the Master to the dining room, for the meal was ready. Sri Ramakrishna stood up and said, addressing Kedar and Vijay: 'Come. Come with me.' They followed him and partook of the dinner together with the other devotees.

After dinner they all returned to the drawing room, where the devotees sat around the Master. Kedar said to him with folded hands, 'Please forgive me for hesitating to eat here.' Perhaps the thought had come to his mind that he should not have hesitated, since the Master himself had no scruples about eating at Adhar's house. ...

Master: '*One can eat food even from an untouchable if the untouchable is a devotee of God.*'<sup>7</sup> (*Emphasis added*)

This small incident not only shows the liberal mind of Sri Ramakrishna, but also reflects his sense of propriety. Though apparently an unlettered villager, he was very conscious of etiquette and manners. He knew that once you visit somebody's house, it is unmannerly to go away without saying goodbye to the host, while Kedar, a city-bred educated man, was ignoring this factor. Second, the conversation also reveals Sri Ramakrishna's high esteem for a devotee. Again and again we hear him say, 'Devotees do not belong to any caste'; 'Blessed is he who feels longing for God, though he eats pork. But shame on him whose mind dwells on "woman and gold", though he eats the purest food—boiled vegetables, rice, and ghee.'<sup>8</sup>

We find the same attitude in his treatment of shudras. There used to be a misconception that unless one was born a brahmana, one could not attain liberation. It was also believed that a non-brahmana who had per-

formed sadhana for the realization of God and had led a very pious life would have to wait for the next birth to be born as a brahmana. Only then could he get the result of his past sadhana and be liberated. The case of Rasik the sweeper belies this belief. Being a scavenger, he was considered an untouchable. Those were days when low-caste persons were treated very inhumanly. If a low-caste man happened to cross an upper-caste man's path he would be punished, but no action could be taken against the latter. Rasik used to see many people come to Sri Ramakrishna and get his blessings. He too wanted to go to him and ask for his blessings, but being an untouchable dared not approach him in front of others. One day, when Sri Ramakrishna was coming from the Panchavati all by himself, he took the opportunity to go near and kneel down before him and say, 'Father, what will happen to me!' Hearing his cry for spiritual grace, Sri Ramakrishna went into deep samadhi, and Rasik fell at his feet. After some time, when Sri Ramakrishna regained outer consciousness, he told Rasik, 'Do not be afraid, you will have it. At the time of death you will see me.' Exactly the same thing happened: just before his death he saw Sri Ramakrishna. His face beamed with delight and he shouted, 'Father, you have come! You have not forgotten me!' Saying this he passed away.<sup>9</sup>

We also find Sri Ramakrishna saying, 'Hazra said that a man could not be liberated unless he was born in a brahmin body. "How is that?" I said. "One attains liberation through bhakti alone. Śabari was the daughter of a hunter. She, Ruhidas, and others belonged to the sudra caste. They were liberated through bhakti alone."<sup>10</sup>

### Caste and Spirituality

Sri Ramakrishna was not a social reformer in the ordinary sense of the term. He was a master of spirituality. In the *Gospel*, where his words are recorded, we find very few references to the caste system. But what-

ever little is there gives us a glimpse of his attitude to caste. Even this is always placed in the context of spirituality. Sri Ramakrishna lived in God alone. His talks and acts were never outside the realm of divinity. Hence, whenever the topic of caste came up he discussed it from the spiritual point of view. For example, while talking about Captain Vishwanath Upadhyay, he says:

Captain is a strong upholder of orthodox conventions. Because of my visiting Keshab Chandra Sen, he stopped coming here for a month. He said to me that Keshab had violated the social conventions: he dined with the English, had married his daughter into another caste, and had lost his own caste. I said to Captain: 'What do I care for such things? Keshab chants the name of God; so I go to him to hear about God.' (651)

While describing the nature of a God-realized man he says, 'He becomes like a child. ... All persons are the same to a child. He has no feeling of high and low in regard to persons. So he doesn't discriminate about caste. If his mother tells him that a particular man should be regarded as an elder brother, the child will eat from the same plate with him, though the man may belong to the low caste of a blacksmith.' (171) We find in his life also the same type of same-sightedness. When the storm of God-intoxication enveloped him, he forgot everything: his caste, his high social position, his highly respected family. All distinctions were obliterated. He observed, 'I became mad. ... In that state I could not observe any caste restrictions. The wife of a low-caste man used to send me cooked greens and I ate them.' (548) Again, 'Oh, what moods I passed through! At Kamarpukur I said to Chinu Shankhari and the other chums of my boyhood days, "Oh, I fall at your feet and beg of you to utter the name of Hari." I was about to prostrate myself before them all. Thereupon Chinu said, "This is the first outburst of your divine love; so you don't see any distinction between one man and another.'" (549) As we have mentioned

earlier, Chinu Shankhari belonged to a lower caste and we are talking of a time when caste consciousness was so strong in Bengal that even touching a low-caste man was considered to be sacrilegious, what to speak of an upper-caste brahmana prostrating before him!

### His Observations on Some Castes

Sri Ramakrishna was indeed aware of the caste distinctions prevalent in society, but never paid any importance to it. In fact, in the whole of the *Gospel*, very rarely do we find Sri Ramakrishna mentioning anybody's caste. Once while asking Mani Mallick to build a reservoir in a certain village where people were suffering from acute water shortage, he said smilingly, 'You have so much money; what will you do with so much wealth? But they say that telis are very calculating.' But in the course of the conversation he was reprimanded by Manilal: 'Sir, you referred to a reservoir. You might as well have confined yourself to that suggestion. Why allude to the "oil-man caste" and all that?' Sri Ramakrishna laughed. (202) This was a simple humorous comment by Sri Ramakrishna, and everybody was amused.

Similarly, when Balaram Bose quoted some brahmanas as saying that Annada Guha was a very egotistic man, Sri Ramakrishna replied, 'Never listen to what the brahmanas say. You know their nature very well. If a man does not give them money, they will call him bad; on the other hand, if a man is generous to them, they will call him good. (*All laugh.*) I know Annada. He is a good man.' (727) These are the only two places in the *Gospel* where we find Sri Ramakrishna talking about some peculiarities of particular castes; but even there he does not appear to mean offence.

### Caste in His Parables

Sri Ramakrishna was well acquainted with the lifestyle and workings of the peoples of different castes and professions. While explaining some abstruse philosophical or spiri-

***According to Sri Ramakrishna caste distinctions can be removed only through bhakti, devotion to God. Intense love for God melts away all distinctions.***

tual point, he used examples from their day-to-day life to make the concept easy to comprehend. Take for example the carpenter woman pounding paddy, an illustration of *abhyasa* yoga, the yoga of practice. With one hand she turns the paddy in the hole where the pestle of the husking-machine is pounding the paddy; at the same time she nurses the baby and also talks to prospective buyers. But fifteen parts of her mind out of sixteen are fixed on the pestle, lest it should pound her hand. Similarly, woodcutters, peasants, potters, weavers, wives of gardeners and fishermen—all figure as illustrations in his conversations. It is remarkable how, in those days of caste restrictions and segregation, he freely mixed with these people of so-called lower castes and observed their activities!

**On Obliterating Caste Distinctions**

But what was his view regarding caste distinction as such? Did he want the system abolished altogether because it was a social evil? Or did he justify it? In the latter half of the nineteenth century, at the time of Sri Ramakrishna, social reforms had started taking place in urban Bengal. Raja Rammohan Roy, with the help of the British Government, already had banned sati. The Brahmo Samaj was formed and image worship was denounced by the Brahmos. Their next attack was on the caste system. The Brahmos did not believe in caste distinctions. They practised inter-caste dining and marriage. Though they constituted a small portion of the total population, their influence on 'Young Bengal' was great. With them the evils of the caste system were a topic of hot discussion. Sri Ramakrishna was once categorically asked by Ashwini Kumar Datta, 'Do you observe caste?' The answer that Sri

Ramakrishna gave is as significant as it is interesting:

How can I say yes? I ate curry at Keshab Sen's house. Let me tell you what once happened to me. A man with a long beard brought some ice here, but I didn't feel like eating it.

A little later someone brought me a piece of ice from the same man, and I ate it with great relish. You see, caste restrictions fall away of themselves. As coconut and palm trees grow up, the branches drop off of themselves. Caste conventions drop off like that. But don't tear them off as those fools do. (1023-4)

The last sentence is very important and shows how much Sri Ramakrishna was against anything artificial. Nothing should be done forcibly. If one has not risen above the feeling of superiority or inferiority regarding one's caste or social position, mere eating together or marrying in a different caste will not help. Outwardly one may make a show of equality but inside there will be hatred and jealousy. Sri Ramakrishna was very much against any type of hypocrisy. Whatever comes in a natural way is welcome. If one tears off the scab from a raw wound it causes trouble but when the wound is dry the scab falls off automatically. It is the same with social rules. Social conventions are deep-rooted in our minds. When the mind becomes absolutely prepared to accept a new idea, only then is social change possible. According to Sri Ramakrishna caste distinctions can be removed only through bhakti, devotion to God. Intense love for God melts away all distinctions. In Sri Ramakrishna's language:

The caste system can be removed by one means only, and that is the love of God. Lovers of God do not belong to any caste. The mind, body, and soul of a man become purified through divine love. Chaitanya and Nityananda scattered the name of Hari to everyone, including the pariah, and embraced them all. A brahmin without this love is no longer a brahmin. And a pariah with the love of God is no longer a pariah. (155)

This, however, is the last word about the caste system. The superiority or inferiority of a man does not depend on his caste or his position in society. It depends upon his mental purity.

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We have already mentioned that Sri Ramakrishna was not a social reformer in the ordinary sense of the term. But the work of such great souls is done silently. When we look back, we see what a tremendous change has already taken place in modern India. By their words and deeds Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ma Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda have silently tried to remove this age-old hatred based on caste distinctions. The Ramakrishna Mission, which is an embodiment of their ideas, is following the religion of service to humanity, irrespective of caste, creed or religion. \*

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**N**ot by matted locks, nor by family, nor by birth does one become a brahmana; but in whom there exist both truth and righteousness—pure is he, a brahmana is he. —*Buddha*

**T**he true failure of caste occurs whenever it establishes such an ascendancy of social opinion over the individual's conscience that his power of advance is impeded and he becomes less of a man, or less really beneficent socially. —*Sister Nivedita*

**C**lass war is foreign to the essential genius of India, which is capable of evolving communism on the fundamental rights of all on equal justice. *Ramarajya* of my dream ensures rights alike of prince and pauper. —*Mahatma Gandhi*

**T**o idealise the real, which more often than not is full of inequities, is a very selfish thing to do. It is only when a person finds a personal advantage in things as they are, that he tries to idealise the real. To proceed to make such an ideal real is nothing short of criminal. It means perpetuating inequity on the ground that whatever is settled is settled for all times. Such a view is opposed to all morality. No society with ideal conscience has ever accepted it. On the contrary whatever progress in improving the terms of associated life between individuals and classes has been made in the course of history, is due entirely to the recognition of the ethical doctrine that whatever is wrongly settled is never settled and must be resettled. —*BR Ambedkar*

**I** have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. —*Martin Luther King Jr*

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# Bioethics for Science and Technology: A Hindu Perspective

SWAMI JITATMANANDA

Why an international conference on bioethics? Animals of African forests do not need any such conferences. They live, happily or unhappily, preying on one another, surviving on each other's flesh and blood, living for the sake of eating and procreating, for sense gratification and perpetuation of species. We human beings need today a global conference on bioethics to create a sustainable global civilization, in this age when the information revolution brought on by computers, the Internet, science and technology has made the world a global village.

Why do scientists need a system of bioethics? Because ethics aims at creating higher human beings and a higher level of civilization. That society is the most ethical which produces the largest number of Christs and Buddhas; or an Einstein who turned into a cosmic man; or great scientists, artists, painters, writers and philosophers who have inspired human beings to reach superhuman and supersensual levels of existence. 'Civilization is the manifestation of that Divinity in man,' said the greatest interpreter of Hinduism in modern times, Swami Vivekananda, in his Harvard University talk of 1896. Civilization does not consist in making newer machines or projecting man as a 'tool-making animal', as Benjamin Franklin said. Nor does it lie in the creation of an 'economic animal', as Alvin Toffler said, or just a Freudian sense-bound animal who jumps at every sensate pleasure provided by today's consumerist society, commits blunders, suffers from a sense of guilt and depression, and then commits suicide.

Science means knowledge. Knowledge for what? Knowledge for evolving higher hu-

man beings who can bring out the infinite potentiality of the Christs and Buddhas hidden inside them ('*sā vidyā yā vimuktaye*'). Hinduism continuously asserts, '*Ātmānam viddhi*, Know thy Self.' This is the goal of human evolution: not the creation of global killers, but global saviours—the Christ-man and the Buddha-man, as Pierre Tielhard de Chardin showed in his brilliant book *The Phenomenon of Man*. The amoeba evolves into Christ, because the end of human evolution is Christogenesis.

'Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest (realize) this Divinity within,' taught Swami Vivekananda. According to Hinduism, there are two great aims of knowledge: external perfection in life through science and technology and internal perfection through higher Knowledge ('*Dve vidye vedita-vye ... parā ca'iva-aparā ca*', *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.1.4). Of these two, primary importance has been given to the superior Knowledge (*para vidya*) for the manifestation of the Christs and Buddhas within us.

The second goal of science is to bring welfare to the whole world. I remember talking to agro-scientist Dr Norman Borlaug, who used to spend sleepless nights in the deserts of Mexico to develop drought- and disease-resistant strains of wheat. He did succeed, and thus saved one third of humanity from a sure famine predicted by world economists, for which he got the Nobel Peace Prize. This is the glory and beauty of science.

Hinduism continuously asserts that happiness lies not in individualistic living, however excellent that may be, but in living a holistic life for the welfare of entire humanity, because each one of us is inextricably connected

with the universe. 'I connect the whole universe like a thread connecting pearls,' says Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavadgita*. Happiness, fulfilment and peace come to an individual or a nation when they know how to live for the welfare of all humanity. '*Bhūmaiva sukham*, Infinitude is bliss,' says the *Chandogya Upanishad* (7.23.1).

From the perspective of Hinduism the entire issue of bioethics revolves round two primary questions:

(1) Is science helping to create highly evolved human beings or is it only creating highly powerful Frankensteins?

(2) Is science catering to the welfare of entire humanity, or is it only trying to enrich one nation, one race or one group at the cost of others?

If our answers are in the affirmative and we orient all of our scientific research, investigations, findings and discoveries towards this end, we would have followed the universal laws of bioethics.

During the successful explosion of the first atom bomb in Alamogordo, Robert Oppenheimer, its maker, spontaneously began to recite the hymn from the *Gita* where God's effulgence is compared to the effulgence of a thousand suns. A few days later a special party was hosted in honour of the scientists led by Mr Oppenheimer. He found that the party was a 'dismal flop'. A cool-headed scientist came out suddenly and began to vomit. 'The reaction has begun,' wrote a stupefied Oppenheimer.<sup>1</sup> His memorable speech after the first atomic explosion is a cry for morality and ethics for scientists working in a thermonuclear age: 'But there is another thing—we are men too; we cannot forget our dependence on our fellow-men. I mean also our deep moral dependence ... the value of science must lie in the world of men ... all roots lie there. There are the strongest bonds in the world, stronger than those even that bind us (atomic scientists) to one another, deepest bonds that bind us to our fellow-men.'<sup>2</sup>

### The Hindu Concept of Ethics: Dharma

In a beautiful story from the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* we find that even after creating brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras, the Creator did not feel happy. He finally created the 'excellent form' of law and justice called dharma, or righteousness. Says the Upanishad, 'There is nothing greater than dharma, righteousness or justice. So even a weak man hopes (to defeat) a stronger man through righteousness, as with the king's help. That righteousness is verily truth.' (1.4.14)

According to the *Manu Smṛiti*, the king must protect the country through an efficient administration. The king who has successfully rooted out violence from his kingdom, commands the highest respect. (8.386-7) By the king's order, punishment alone governs all created beings. ... The whole world is kept in order by punishment meted out to evil-doers. (7.18, 22) The king must punish thieves and the wicked by lashes, fines or severe corporal punishment. (8.324) Any assassin should be immediately killed. (8.350) A truly spiritual man should never be hurt. (8.380-1)

The Creator assured humanity that he had created dharma, a system of law or moral order by which the weak would be able to get justice against the strong. The moral order, or *ṛta* as described in Vedic Hinduism, is inviolable. Its violation means self-destruction. Macbeth brought destruction on himself because he violated the moral order by killing the innocent guest Duncan. According to Vedic Hinduism, a guest has to be respected like a god just as one's father, mother and teacher should be respected as gods. Swami Vivekananda extended this Upanishadic limit, and declared that the new Vedantic Hinduism must respect the God in the sinner, the ignorant, the sick and in the have-nots of all countries and climes, everywhere, irrespective of caste, creed or nationality. It is on this basis of universal respect for the Infinite in the finite, for God in human beings everywhere, that the

new ethics of human civilization must be based.

Hinduism asserts that there is the same Consciousness pervading all creatures, plants and even non-living entities. Manu recommended fines for injuring small animals, cattle, wild quadrupeds and birds. (*Manu Smriti*, 8.296-8).

In 1901, the Indian biologist J C Bose demonstrated his epoch-making experiments of human-like response in metals before the physics section of the British Association at Bradford. Scientists saw with wonder the similar curves obtained from human muscles, metals and plants when they were responding to the effect of fatigue, depression and poisonous drugs. Bose's discovery conclusively proved that the same consciousness pulsates in men, plants and even metals in various ways. He summed up the essence of his findings thus: 'In many investigations on the action of forces on matter, I was amazed to find boundary lines vanish-

***Hinduism asserts that there is the same  
Consciousness pervading all creatures,  
plants and even non-living entities.***

ing and to discover points of contact emerging between the living and the non-living.<sup>3</sup>

### **Can We Use This Holistic Ethics in Practical life?**

Sri Ramakrishna, the modern saint of Hinduism, tells us that although God is present in every living being like man, tiger or snake, we cannot embrace a tiger; we have to avoid it and create barriers to prevent the tiger from taking innocent lives. Again, Ramakrishna teaches us that our duty is not to kill the wrongdoer, but take sufficient steps so that he refrains from wrongdoing. A snake was taught by its guru not to bite others. When it left biting, people began to hit it mercilessly and left it half-dead. The guru came back and taught the snake, 'Do not bite. But

who told you not to hiss?' The snake got the mantra for survival in an antagonistic world. This is the Hindu view of ethics in practical life.

### **Unity, the Basis of Ethics**

It is from the realization of the one single Consciousness everywhere that sages have felt their inextricable interconnectedness with the rest of the universe. It is only after such realization that true love, love for others, dawns. Then the higher man goes on to live a holistic life. Only then are ethics and morality born. All ethics is based on the perception of the basic unity of life. Vivekananda explained, 'Why should you do good to others? Because that is the only condition of life; thereby you expand beyond your little self; you live and grow. All narrowness, all contraction, all selfishness is simply slow suicide.'<sup>4</sup>

The rational world of science is earnestly bent upon seeking out the rationality, the *raison d'être*, of all its philosophy and ethics. Ethics cannot be derived from the mere sanction of any personage, however great and divine he may have been. Such an explanation of the authority of ethics appeals no more to rational thinkers. They want something more than human sanction for ethical and moral codes to be binding; they want, in the words of Vivekananda, 'some eternal principle of truth as the sanction of ethics'. (3.189) Vivekananda asserts that in order to reach the real basis of morality or ethics one 'must have the highest philosophical and scientific conceptions'. (2.355)

Two eternal principles governing the universe stand out in the Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism:

(1) The Infinite is the background behind the finite (Atman = Brahman).

(2) An essential holistic unity and interconnectedness is always there behind all apparently disparate realities of the universe and the life therein (*ekam-eva-advitiyam*).

Ethics is the foundation of any society or civilization. Without ethics life would be governed by the law of the jungle. The ends of morality are fulfilled by the recognition of one's own Self in others. The *Gīta* declares, 'He that sees one God existing everywhere cannot injure another who is his own Self, and so attains the highest goal.' (13.28)

Vedanta philosophy, which is the crowning glory of Hinduism, encourages an individual to realize the infinite God in the finite body, then see His presence everywhere, and thus turn his life into a ceaseless service to his own Self in others. Dualistic philosophies, which make a distinction between God and man, cannot justify this holistic vision. A ruling Personal God promising reward in heaven or punishment in hell for His devotees can punish the violators of ethics and encourage fellow feeling for the believers of the same faith, but cannot inspire universal love for mankind at large. Unfortunately, in some religions, a clanish attitude made the killing of non-believers respectable.

The Ten Commandments of Moses with categorical imperatives like 'Thou shalt not kill', 'Thou shalt not bear false witness' and so on form the fundamental basis of ethics in Semitic religions. The teachings of Christ returned to pure ethics and reduced the Ten Commandments to two central teachings:

(1) Love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and soul.

(2) Love thy neighbour as thyself.

Why does a newborn baby get so much love from her mother? Because a day earlier the two were one. All ethics, all altruistic and humanistic values, as opposed to jingoistic, fundamentalist and dogmatic values, are based on the perception of this basic unity of existence.

This holistic perception of life forms the basis of ethics in all major religions. In the Jain religion *paropakāra* (doing good to others) and *parahita-cintā* (thinking of others' good) are the first two values for joyful living. The same path of holistic living was voiced by Buddha

to his intimate disciples: '*Bahujana hitāya, bahujana sukhāya, lokānukampayā, hitāya, arthāya, sukhāya, devamanuṣyānām*; for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, with compassion, for bringing goodness and the good things of life to all, both for the gods and the common masses.'

In the Sufi mysticism of Islam, the same voice is heard in the utterance '*ana'l-haq*, I am God' instead of '*ana'l-ab'd*, I am the servant of God.' Jalaluddin Rumi says, *ana'l-haq* means I am not, He is all; there is no being but God's.<sup>5</sup> That is extreme of humility and self-abasement.

### Science Brings Us a Single Universe of Unbroken Wholeness

Relativity physics shows us that material objects are not distinct entities, but are inseparably linked to their environment or the so-called empty space; properties of one material substance can only be understood in terms of their interaction with the rest of the world. The universe of classical physics has been swept away by relativity, whose main hallmark is *unification*, joining together space, time, energy and matter in an indissoluble continuum.<sup>6</sup> In the state of *singularity* of blackholes, as Roger Penrose calls it, energy-matter and space-time are all fused into *one single entity, a unity beyond space and time*.<sup>7</sup>

If Einstein interconnected time, space, field and matter, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle broke down for the first time the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter by proving that the objective outside in subatomic physics is inextricably related to the subjective dimension of the scientists. The reality today is no more objective but 'omnjective' (subjective and objective) according to Michael Talbot in his book *Mysticism and the New Physics*.

Ilya Prigogine, winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, writes in the introduction to his book *Order out of Chaos*, 'Present-day research leads us further and further away from the opposition between man and the natural world.'<sup>8</sup> According to him, the main purpose of his dis-

covery is to show 'instead of rupture and opposition, the growing coherence of our knowledge of man and nature'. 'We are living in a single universe,' says Prigogine.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas S Kuhn, in one of the most influential books of modern times, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, shows how the scientific world has turned to a new paradigm of interconnectedness of the entire universe, and an inseparable connection between mind and matter. *It is the new holistic paradigm of science.*

The successful experimental demonstration of Bell's theorem by David Bohm in 1972 proved that twin, paired quantum particles somehow communicate with each other instantaneously, even at a space-like distance. David Bohm says: 'Parts ... are seen to be in immediate connection in which their dynamic relationship depends in an irreducible way on the whole system, and indeed that of a broader system in which they are contained, extended ultimately into the entire universe. Thus, one is led to a new notion of unbroken wholeness which denies the classical idea of analysability of the world separately.' Bohm writes with another physicist, Basil Hiley, that the experimental verification of non-local causality in physics 'leads to a radically new notion of unbroken wholeness of the universe'.<sup>10</sup>

The quantum revolution, as Ken Wilber wrote in 1993, has established a holistic paradigm as the final basis of science, instead of the old dualistic paradigm, which separated God from men, man from man, matter from mind, and obviously nation from nation and religion from religion. It has inspired and has led to a monistic and not monotheistic vision of underlying reality. 'It is perhaps the most outstanding cultural phenomenon of our time,' writes Amaury de Riencourt in his book *The Eye of Shiva*. 'It might well be that mankind is now on the threshold of a psychological and physiological revolution of a magnitude that will overshadow all the social and political revolutions of our century, made possible by the seemingly incongruous, yet perfectly logical,

marriage between science and eastern mystical insights.'<sup>11</sup>

Echoing the highest Hindu philosophical sentiments, Vivekananda declared that in the ultimate analysis 'the whole universe, mental and material, will be fused into one. It is the finding of unity towards which we are going.'<sup>12</sup> Again, he said:

One atom in this universe cannot move without dragging the whole world along with it. There cannot be any progress without the whole world following in the wake, and it is becoming every day clearer that the solution of any problem can never be attained on racial, or national, or narrow grounds. Every idea has to become broad till it covers the whole of this world, every aspiration must go on increasing till it has engulfed the whole of humanity, nay the whole of life within its scope.<sup>13</sup>

(To be concluded)

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# A Christian Looks at the Life of Vivekananda

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I am sure many of you will be familiar with the account of the first miracle that Jesus performed at the wedding in the village called Cana in Galilee. Jesus was a guest at this wedding. The wine gave out, to the discomfiture of the master of ceremonies. Mary, the mother of Jesus, somehow felt her son could help. When she asked him to do something to produce wine, he got the servants to fill the troughs with water. The water immediately turned into wine. The guests asked the master of the feast as to why he had kept the good wine till the end. It has been said that when Robert Browning was a little boy at school, the teacher had set the class a composition entitled 'The Miracle at Cana'. While the rest of his classmates were busy writing furiously, little Robert just sat dreaming. Just before the composition was due to be handed in, he wrote just one sentence: 'The water saw its Lord and blushed.' Needless to say, he got the highest marks for his effort. If I were asked to sum up in one sentence the essence of Swami Vivekananda's work, this is what I would say: 'He brought the awareness of the divinity of man to the common people all over the world.'

The crucifixion of Jesus at the instigation of the chief priest of the Jewish people had enormous repercussions. Nature itself rebelled against the inhuman crime: there was pitch darkness for three hours. When the spirit of Jesus left his body many momentous things happened. There was a severe earthquake and the graves opened, and people who had been dead for a long time awakened and went into the city. The most significant thing that happened was that the veil of the temple was rent in twain from top to bottom. Many Christians even to this day do not understand the significance of the torn veil. From the time Moses lib-

erated the children of Israel from the clutches of the Pharaoh of Egypt, no one could approach God except through the intercession of the priests. The veil represented the partition between the common people and God. The advent of Jesus changed all that. Anyone, poor or rich, sinner or righteous, could approach God. It has been so with the Hindus too. For a very, very long time, the priestly class held the right to interpret to the common people the prolific rituals inherent in Hindu worship. For one thing they were the only ones who knew Sanskrit, the language of the sacred Hindu literature. They were the educated people of the time and only they could inform the people as to what rituals were required to appease the deity. Not only was there a princely living for the priests, they also wielded enormous power and influence over the lives of innumerable people.

It could be said with conviction that the life of Swami Vivekananda was devoted to the illiterate poor people of India who were down-trodden by the application of the caste system. In that way he also sought to bring the common people to an appreciation of how every human being had the capability to reach the heights of spiritual awareness. Vedanta philosophy holds that divinity resides within each and every human being and the aim of a successful life is to acquire not only a knowledge of this fact but also to feel this conviction. The veil that Vivekananda rent was the bringing to the awareness of the poor people that they needed no priest to intercede for them and that they could approach God directly without any human intervention.

Why was Swami Vivekananda chosen to take the message of Vedanta to the West? We have to look at the concepts of extroversion

and introversion. The extrovert is outward looking and has the capacity to interact actively with the world of people; the introvert, on the other hand, is inward looking and can be said to live in a subjective world. Some important research findings on introversion are:

- Introverts have higher levels of cortical arousal and better ability to learn conditioned responses, and they seem to be better learners using formal, direct teaching methods.

- They seek stimulus avoidance, are cautious and tend to over-socialize.

Introverts may be seen to show stimulus aversion in the sense that they already have a high cortical arousal, any further stimulation being perceived as unpleasant. It is perhaps the introversive characteristics of the reclusive yogi which makes him spend a massive slice of his life ensconced in a cave, oblivious to the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

- They are process oriented and tend to avoid competitive situations. An interesting correlation may be drawn with the theory of karma promulgated by the ancient sages of India which postulates rebirth thousands or millions of times until the individual Atman is ready to merge with the Divine Consciousness. Once Swamiji asked Pavhari Baba what the secret of success in work was, to which he replied, 'The means should be loved and cared for as if it were the end itself.' This is another way of saying what the *Gita* teaches: 'To action man has a right; he has no right to the fruits of action.' This is in conformity with the process orientation, that introverted Indian culture stands for.

- They have a rich fantasy life and this may be of aid to people of reclusive habits.

- They do not usually suffer from boredom.

- The threshold for pain is lower for the introverts and therefore it may be found that their suffering is disproportionate to the intensity of the painful stimuli.

- Introverts are more susceptible to punishment.

- The body temperature of introverts is

higher in the morning and early afternoon.

This has several practical implications. Introverted people seem to function best in the early morning and forenoon. As the day progresses, their body temperatures and their efficiency tend to wane, whereas extroverted people come alive in the afternoon and evening. It is interesting to note that in Vedanta and Yoga philosophies the pre-dawn hours, referred to as *brahma-muhurta*, are said to be the best time for contemplation and study.

Extroverts, on the other hand, have a craving for stimulation; they often need change of activity and rest pauses. They are very susceptible to rewards. They are impulsive and are slower to learn the rules of society.

The introversion-extroversion dichotomy is often overlooked by the layman who thinks that every seeker after truth is fit to be a sannyasin. Many yogis and holy men have spent a lifetime trying to fit their personality into a pattern of renunciation which is not in their nature. Some of them have had to be content with being karma yogis. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, although he did not put it in these words, was nevertheless aware of the fact that despite the spiritual evolution of Swami Vivekananda he was cut out to be a messenger of spirituality not only to the Western world but also to India. He had the necessary outgoing nature to relate to people of all faiths. One of the essential attributes he had was his innate gift for superb public relations. His target population could be rich or poor, white or brown or black, atheists or believers. He could relate to all of them with great success.

Swami Vivekananda had always been extroverted and he would never accept anything without questioning. Very often he needed positive proof about everything. For example, during the early days of his discipleship, it was reported to him that Ramakrishna Paramahansa had renounced wealth, money in particular, and that the very contact with money would cause him discomfort. Vivekananda hid a coin under his guru's mattress. Rama-

krishna, when he occupied his bed, jumped up as if in pain. He made a search of the mattress when the offending coin was found. This was just one of the tests he subjected his guru to. Swami Vivekananda's food preferences have caused a great deal of furore among his critics, who have accused him of pampering to his bodily needs at the expense of spirituality. Some orthodox Hindus even accused him of eating forbidden food at the table of infidels. He retorted by saying: 'Do you mean to say I am born to live and die as one of those caste-ridden, superstitious, merciless, hypocritical, atheistic cowards that you only find amongst the educated Hindus? I hate cowardice. I will have nothing to do with cowards.' Further, 'I belong as much to India as to the world, no humbug about that. ... What country has any special claim on me? Am I any nation's slave? ... I see a greater power than man, or God, or Devil at my back. I require nobody's help. I have been all my life helping others.' This is reminiscent of what people said about Jesus when he participated in the social life of his community, eating and drinking with the common people. It has to be pointed out that severe renunciation is very often sought by introverted people whereas the karma yogi, who is usually an extroverted man, does not have to renounce anything but live the life of a householder bearing in mind that every act that he does is for the divinity which resides within and which is all around him. This means that a radical attitudinal change has to be brought about. And this is exactly what Swami Vivekananda did. It has been recorded that once he came across an outcaste puffing away at his pipe. He craved for a smoke and requested a draw from the pipe and enjoyed it, very much to the discomfiture of the man, who was horrified that a high caste man should share a pipe with him.

Many people talk glibly about the bane of untouchability and how everyone is equal in God's eyes. But when it comes to the crunch many so-called upper class people would shud-

der to partake of the food prepared by a person of lower caste. Not Swamiji. He not only practised what he preached, he also accepted everybody as equal without any hint of patronization. Once when he was in Khetri, Rajasthan, people came to him all day long with their questions. Three days and three nights passed in that way. Swamiji was so engrossed in talking about spiritual matters that he did not even stop to eat. No one even asked him whether he wanted to eat or rest. On the last night when all the visitors had left, a poor man came forward and said lovingly, 'Swamiji, I have noticed that for three days you have not even taken a glass of water! This has pained me very much.' Swamiji felt as if God himself had come to succour him. He said to the man, 'Will you please give me something to eat?' The man, a cobbler by trade, said, 'My heart yearns to give you some bread, but how can I? My touch will defile the food. If you permit I will bring you some coarse flour and dal and you can prepare them as you please.' Swamiji said without hesitation, 'No, my child, give me the bread you have baked. I shall be happy to eat it.' At first the poor man was frightened because he thought the Maharaja would punish him if he did as Swamiji asked. But the eagerness to serve a monk overpowered his fear. He hurriedly went home and returned with freshly baked bread, which Swamiji ate with relish. It goes to show that in India there are millions of poor people of humble origin who are noble and large-hearted and that, given a chance, they would help other people.

But Swami Vivekananda also had to learn his lesson about purity and impurity the hard way. Just before his impending departure to America, he was invited by the Maharaja of Khetri to a musical entertainment in which a nautch girl was to sing. Swamiji promptly refused to go since he was a monk and not permitted to enjoy secular pleasures. The singer was hurt and sang that he should not look upon her sins. In her song she said, 'Is not same-sightedness Thy name?' Swamiji real-

ized that the girl whom society condemned as impure was nevertheless a precious person in the sight of God. Before God there is no distinction of good and evil, pure and impure. Such pairs of opposites become manifest only when the light of Brahman is obscured by maya. In this connection we have to remember the story of the woman caught in adultery who was brought to Jesus. The punishment among the Jews for adultery was death by stoning. Jesus said to the hostile mob, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.' Soon the crowd disappeared, each one being convicted in his own heart!

It might be worthwhile to relate another of the experiences of Jesus, a Jew by birth and therefore supposed to be superior to the gentiles. A publican named Levi hosted a very big feast for Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees, the cream of Jewry, took Jesus and his disciples to task, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with publicans and sinners?' Jesus answered, 'They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'

One of the outstanding gifts Swamiji had was the ability to chastise his friends and disciples without causing offence, although it was not always so. His hostess in America, Miss Dutcher, a conscientious Methodist Christian, could not take in with equanimity Swami Vivekananda's revolutionary ideas. She became physically ill and was not seen at the meetings for a number of days. One sometimes wonders how Swamiji could be so tactless as to offend a lady who had befriended him and who had placed at his disposal her own large mansion, even building an annexe for him to stay. Miss Ellen Waldo, another of his disciples, was once in tears. On being asked why, she replied, 'I seem unable to please you. Even when other people annoy you, you scold me for it.' He said, 'I do not know those other people well enough to scold them. So I come to you. Whom can I scold if I cannot scold my own?' When Swamiji had to speak in Boston, he

looked at the artificial and worldly crowd of people and contrasted it with his master's purity and renunciation. He berated them mercilessly for the hypocrisy and shallow nature of Western culture. The audience was resentful and many left the meeting in anger. However, on returning home, Swamiji recalled what Ramakrishna Paramahansa had said about tolerance, and he wept. His master had never uttered a word of condemnation against anyone.

However, Swamiji tried hard to adhere to the principle of seeing God in every living being, which is what his master was at pains to teach him. His personal ideal was that of the sannyasin who during the First War of Independence (known as the Sepoy Mutiny in the West), when he was stabbed by a British soldier, said to his murderer with his dying breath, 'And thou also art He.' Then there is the tale of the saint who ran after a thief with the vessels he had dropped in his terror at being discovered. The saint then said, 'O Lord, I knew not that Thou wast there! Take them, they are Thine! Pardon me, Thy child.' This is reminiscent of the story of the bishop's candlesticks in which the thief, who was the bishop's guest, stole his silver candlesticks and tried to abscond with them. The police apprehended him with the booty whereupon the bishop made the remark that the silver was his gift to the man. The idea of recognizing an enemy would have seemed to Swamiji's mind a proof of hatred.

Swamiji's reverence for Buddha was one of the passions of his life. Sister Nivedita relates with considerable feeling, how one evening Swamiji sat with his disciples reconstructing the story of Siddhartha's renunciation as it must have appeared to his wife Yashodhara. On the night of the fateful farewell Prince Siddhartha returned again and again to the bedside of his sleeping wife. It was she whom he was about to sacrifice for the sake of the world. That was his struggle. Then the final farewell with that gentle kiss on the foot of

the princess. During the seven years of the prince's absence, Yashodhara had lived clad in the yellow cloth, eating only roots and fruits, and had not used a bed. On his return as Buddha, she took the hem of his garment while he told their son the Truth. When the child asked, 'Mother, who is my father?' her answer was, 'The lion that passes down the street, lo, he is thy father.' When the lad, at his mother's behest, asked his father to give him his inheritance, he had to ask thrice before Buddha turned to Ananda, his disciple, and said, 'Give it.' Thereupon the disciple threw the *gerua* cloth over the child. On Ananda's asking his master whether he should also bestow on Yashodhara the ochre cloth, Buddha assented. Thus Yashodhara became his disciple. One of the first things that Swami Vivekananda did after receiving the ochre cloth from his master was to go to Bodh Gaya and sit under the great tree where Buddha was said to have attained his enlightenment.

There were many reasons why Swamiji was so impressed by Buddha. The fact that Buddha kept in abeyance his own attainment of nirvana till all sentient beings on earth had attained that state, appealed to the sense of fair play that Swamiji espoused at all times. The work that Buddha did for helping the poor people, especially the outcastes, was something Swami Vivekananda had always done. To this day, Buddhists abhor the existence of the caste system. The very establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission was the culmination of Swami Vivekananda's desire to uplift the Indian masses. He believed, for instance, that it was important to help other people even at the risk of retarding his own spiritual growth. On one occasion he remarked, 'Of course I would commit a crime and go to hell for ever, if by that I could really help a human being.' Like Buddha he also believed that the Truth should be accessible to every human being. He was fond of giving the example of Ramanuja, who broke his vow of secrecy and proclaimed the sacred mantra to all. One wonders whether

any human being is ever unworthy or unready to hear the Truth!

It is perhaps a mark of the sannyasin that he is not afraid of physical dangers. Swami Vivekananda had to learn this fact perhaps the hard way. The first experience was when as a young swami he was pursued by a band of monkeys. He was afraid they would harm him. An old sannyasin, who happened to be nearby, said to him, 'Face the brutes.' This is what Vivekananda did and the monkeys ran away. He never forgot this lesson. Much later when Swamiji was in England, he happened to visit a farm in the company of an Englishman and Miss Muller. An enraged bull charged at the little group. The Englishman ran for his life and reached the safety of a hill. Miss Muller ran as fast as she could but fell, being incapable of further effort. Swamiji, seeing her predicament, stood in front of her with folded arms. When it neared him, the bull suddenly stopped, turned and walked away. One of the thoughts that had preoccupied Swamiji's mind then was the distance that the bull would be able to toss him and whether he was to die in such a violent manner. It is also on record how he, as a young boy, had saved a child from being trampled under the hooves of a horse in Calcutta.

One of the important things that Swamiji did during the last few years of his life was this: he paid more attention to people doing social work to raise the living conditions of the poor and downtrodden. He scoffed at the idea of people looking for their own salvation by austerities and meditation. This is in accordance with his extroverted personality, which determined his preference for action rather than contemplation alone. It has to be remembered that he was a karma yogi, which is symbolized by his organizational capacity resulting in the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission in India and by his work in America and England. The Ramakrishna Mission as it is constituted now has an important arm which deals with the uplift of

the poor and illiterate. However, when he was not engaged strenuously in his active work, he could meditate for a long time. It is on record that in India and in the USA he experienced nirvikalpa samadhi many times. In this regard one may say that he is not a typical example of an extroverted man. I hasten to add that every rule has its exception. It has been said that when he was a young novice under the wing of the Paramahansa, Ramakrishna asked him what he wanted most in life. Naren, as he was known then, promptly replied, 'To remain always in samadhi'. Ramakrishna remarked, 'I thought you had been born for something greater, my boy.' This set Swamiji thinking. Thus he stood for work without attachment or work for impersonal ends as one of the highest expressions of the religious life. Very soon an order of monks was formed with their faces set primarily towards new forms of civic duty. This was the beginning of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Every thinking person who reads Swami Vivekananda's life would be intrigued to find that he rarely spoke about his mentor and preceptor in public, especially in America. One wonders why he did not, for instance, publicize the teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa at the Parliament of Religions. Sister Nivedita had this to say: 'He never in public mentioned his own Master, nor spoke in specific terms of any part of Hindu mythology.' At one stage Max Muller, the orientalist, asked him what he was doing to make his guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa known to the world. At that time Max Muller was writing a biography of the Master and he enquired whether Vivekananda could procure some material for this endeavour. Instead of directly acquiescing to this request Swamiji asked a colleague, namely Swami Saradananda, to write down the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna and the biographical facts of his life. Later Max Muller incorporated these in his book *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*. Vivekananda explained in the following words why he himself had not writ-

ten about the Master's life:

I have such deep feelings for the Master that it is impossible for me to write about him for the public. If I had written the article Max Muller wanted, then I would have proved, quoting from philosophies, the scriptures and even the holy books of the Christians that Ramakrishna was the greatest of all prophets born in the world. That would have been too much for the old man. You have not thought so deeply about the Master as I have; hence you could write an unbiased account that would satisfy Max Muller. Therefore I asked you to write.

Whatever explanation Swamiji was able to offer in this regard remains shrouded in mystery. Indeed no satisfactory explanation exists or is possible.

Swamiji had his share of hecklers too. Fortunately, these people were not shallow troublemakers but sincere seekers after truth. Once a white-haired philosopher said to Swamiji at the end of a lecture, 'You have spoken splendidly, sir, but you have told us nothing new.' Swamiji was quick to reply, 'Sir, I have told you the Truth. That, the Truth, is as old as the immemorial hills, as old as humanity, as old as creation, as old as the Great God. If I have told you in such words as will make you think, make you live up to your thinking, do I not do well in telling it?' Vivekananda was a master of repartee. Once during question time, a native of Scotland made a snide remark by asking, 'What is the difference between a *baboo* and a *baboon*?' Swamiji's instantaneous reply was: 'Oh, not much, it is like the difference between a *sot* and a *Scot*—just the difference of a letter.' Although Swamiji was abrupt with facetious, insincere people, he was never known to show the slightest impatience at being interrupted by sincere seekers after truth, of whom there were many in his audience.

One of the things we have to remember is that Swami Vivekananda was born endowed with certain gifts, one of which was his phenomenal memory and an ability to speak in public. Even as a schoolboy these characteris-

tics came to light. At school one day, he was regaling his classmates with a story. When the teacher came into the room and started teaching, the children were still listening to Narendra's story. All this whispering and inattention to his teaching enraged the teacher, who questioned his pupils as to what he was saying. No one could answer. But Narendra was able to repeat word for word what the teacher had said. This proved that he could attend to two things at the same time. Psychologists will tell you that it is impossible to do this. However, Indians have always spoken about some gifted people who could have what is called *ashtavadhana*, the ability to attend to eight different things at the same time! Later on, while at Belur Math, Swamiji wanted to go through the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. After perusing some of these volumes for a few days, he could accurately remember much of the contents.

During the early days of his explorations, Swami Vivekananda travelled widely all over India, many a time without food. His aim was to travel to Kanyakumari. He always proceeded alone on these journeys quoting the famous words of Buddha: 'Even as the lion not trembling at noises, even as the wind not caught in a net, even as the lotus leaf untouched by the water, so do thou wander alone like the rhinoceros.' After reaching Kanyakumari he worshipped Devi Kanyakumari in the shrine and then swam across the shark-infested waters to meditate on the rocks where, according to the Puranas, the Devi had performed tapasya.

Any account of the life of Vivekananda cannot be complete without a narration of what happened at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. To start with, the Maharaja of Khetri was responsible for introducing two important things into the life of Swamiji. It was he who suggested that he take the name of Vivekananda, perhaps to emphasize his wisdom and knowledge. Secondly, the prince bought a first-class ticket on the ship *SS Peninsular* of

the P & O Company. Besides this he also provided a robe of orange silk, an ochre turban and a handsome purse. Swamiji enjoyed the voyage because he could go sightseeing at various ports of call, Colombo, Singapore, Hong Kong and Yokohama. From Vancouver in Canada, he travelled by train to Chicago. He arrived too early for the Parliament and did not have the necessary accreditation from a well-known institution. Moreover, his funds were dwindling. It is to the credit of American women that some of the very wealthy ones came to his help and extended their hospitality to him. Although he had stage fright in the beginning, when he did speak to the gathering, his first words, 'Sisters and Brothers of America', drew the people to a standing ovation. What he did was open the eyes of the Americans to the message of Vedanta. Swamiji made clear to the people there that unlike many other religions, Hinduism was a tolerant approach to life which admitted the divinity of many religious leaders like Jesus, Muhammad and others. It is not possible here to go into details about his message to the West but it can be summed up in the words of St Paul, 'And now abideth faith, hope and love: but the greatest of these is love.'

### Some Pithy Sayings of Swamiji

- 'It is well to be born in a church, but it is terrible to die there.'
- 'What the world wants is character. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word tell like thunderbolt. ... Awake, awake, great ones! The world is burning with misery. Can you sleep?'
- 'Silence! ye teachers of the world, and silence! ye prophets! Speak Thou alone, O Lord, unto my soul!' (In the context of Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.)
- 'It is a sin even to think of the body.'
- 'It is wrong to manifest power.' \*

# Parabrahma Upaniṣad

TRANSLATED BY SWAMI ATMAPRIYANANDA

कर्मणः चित्तशुद्धिप्रापकत्वम्

Attainment of purification of mind through *karma* (selfless action)

पञ्चपादब्रह्मणो न किञ्चन । चतुष्पादन्तर्वर्तिनोऽन्तर्जीवब्रह्मणः स्थानानि चत्वारि । नाभिहृदयकण्ठमूर्ध्निषु जाग्रत्त्वप्रसुप्तुमितुर्यावस्थाः, आहवनीयगार्हपत्यदक्षिणासभ्याग्निषु । जागरिते ब्रह्मा स्वप्ने विष्णुः सुषुप्तौ रुद्रस्तुरीय-मक्षरं चिन्मयम् । तस्माच्चतुरवस्था चतुरङ्गुलवेष्टनमिव षण्णवतितत्त्वानि तन्तुवद्विभज्य, तदाहितं त्रिगुणीकृत्य द्वा-त्रिंशत्तत्त्वनिष्कर्षमापाद्य, ज्ञानपूतं त्रिगुणस्वरूपं त्रिमूर्तित्वं पृथग्विज्ञाय, नवब्रह्माख्यनवगुणोपेतं ज्ञात्वा, नवमा-नमितं त्रिः पुनस्त्रिगुणीकृत्य सूर्येन्द्राग्निकलास्वरूपत्वेनैकीकृत्य, आद्यन्तकत्वमपि मध्ये त्रिरावृत्य ब्रह्मविष्णुमहेश्वरत्व-मनुसन्धाय, आद्यन्तमेकीकृत्य चिद्ग्रन्थावद्वैतग्रन्थिं कृत्वा, नाभ्यादि ब्रह्मबिलप्रमाणं पृथक्पृथक्सप्तविंशतितत्त्वसंबन्धं त्रिगुणोपेतं त्रिमूर्तिलक्षणलक्षितमध्येकत्वमापाद्य, वामांसादिदक्षिणकट्यन्तं विभाव्य, आद्यन्तग्रहसंमेलनमेवं ज्ञात्वा मूलमेकम्, 'सत्यं मृन्मयं विज्ञातं स्याद्वाचारम्भणं विकारो नामधेयं मृत्तिकेत्येव सत्यम्,'... ॥५॥

5. There is nothing (else) other than the five-footed Brahman (*pañcapāda-brahman*).<sup>1</sup> There are four places [for realizing] the inner *jīva-brahman* contained within [or consisting of] four *pādas*.<sup>2</sup> In the navel, heart, throat and head there are [the four] states of waking, dreaming, deep sleep and *turiya*.<sup>3</sup> [Further, the Atman is to be contemplated insofar as the connectivity goes] in the *āhavanīya*, *gārhapatya*, *dakṣiṇa* and *sabhya* fires.<sup>4</sup> In the waking state [the presiding deity is] Brahmā, in the dream state [the deity is] Viṣṇu, in deep sleep [the deity is] Rudra [and] *turiya* [the fourth state] is the immutable (indestructible), of the nature of [pure] Consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the four states [waking, dreaming, deep sleep and *turiya*] [may be conceived of] as a four-finger unit measure [in terms of which] the encircling thread [is measurable],<sup>6</sup> [just as the sacred thread is ninety-six finger-breadth units in length, even so the inner *brahmasūtra* may be considered to be composed of] ninety-six categories (*tattvas*) following an analogous division of the [external] thread;<sup>7</sup> [similar to the external sacred thread tripartite in composition, even so the inner *brahmasūtra* is to be] brought to the state of thirty-two categories (*tattvas*) by a threefold [application] of the three qualities (*guṇas* of *prakṛti*);<sup>8</sup> [this tripartite nature of the inner sacred thread] purified by [divine] Knowledge should be realized separately as of the nature of the three *guṇas* [namely, *sattva*, *rajas* and *taṃas*] and as the essence of the triad of gods [the *trimūrtis*, namely, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva]; this is to be known as what could be designated as *nava-brahman*<sup>9</sup> possessed of nine attributes; this ninefold measure, being rendered into three, each again having the three *guṇas*, should be identified with [and thought of] as the very nature of the [three] component parts (*kalās*), [namely] the sun, the moon and fire;<sup>10</sup> the first and the last should be rotated thrice by the middle and inquiringly contemplated as the states of being of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Mahēśvara;<sup>11</sup> again, the first and the last should be joined together in the knot of Consciousness made into a knot of non-duality;<sup>12</sup> that which extends from the navel up to the *brahmarandhra* (at the top of the head) and connected separately with the twenty-seven *tattvas*,<sup>13</sup> possessed of the three *guṇas* and distinguished by the characteristics of the Trinity (*tri-mūrtis*) should, nevertheless, be unified into one; [this inner *brahmasūtra* should be] considered as [hanging from] the left shoulder [and reaching] up to the right loin; the conjoining of the first and the last<sup>14</sup> should be understood in such a way [that it is clearly perceived that they have but]

one [common] source; the truth that is clay [being the cause of objects made of clay] having been known, [the effects in the form of clay objects] are seen to be [illusory], being merely a mass of words (insubstantial verbosity), the transformation [being merely of] names, [while the cause behind all this, namely] clay, is alone the Reality (the Truth);<sup>15</sup> ...

(To be continued)

## Notes

1. Upaniṣad Brahmayogin refers to this *pañcapāda-brahman* as *turiyātīta*. In regard to this *turiyātīta pañcapāda-brahman*, there is no *avidyā*, of the nature of delusion (about existence or non-existence) different from Itself.
2. There are four places for the realization of the inner *jīva-brahman* residing in the four *pādas* constituted of their microcosmic (*vyāṣṭi*) and macrocosmic (*samaṣṭi*) aspects. Those in the *vyāṣṭi* aspect of the four *pādas* are *viśva*, *taijasa*, *prājña* and *turiya*, while those in the *samaṣṭi* aspect of the four *pādas* are: *virāj*, *sūtra*, *bija* and *turiya*.
3. Although the Upaniṣadic text speaks of the navel (*nābhi*) as corresponding to the waking state, Upaniṣad Brahmayogin contends that the eye (*netra*) is the place for experiencing the waking state, invoking the following *śruti* passage in support of this contention: '*Netrastham jāgaritam vidyāt kañṭhe svapnam samāvīśet; susuptam hṛdayastham tu turiyam mūrdhni samsthitam.*' (*Brahmopaniṣad*, 21)
4. These fires are different names of the consecrated fire obligatorily maintained all through his life by a householder (*gṛhastha*). The *āhavanīya* fire is a consecrated fire taken from the householder's perpetual fire, and burns on the eastern side in a sacrifice; the *dakṣiṇa* fire is the sacred fire placed southwards in a sacrifice; the *gārhapatya* fire is the sacred fire perpetually maintained by a householder. The *sabhya* is a sacred fire believed to be present in the body.
5. In the passage that follows, in order to expound the *brahmasūtra* (literally, 'the thread or string of Brahman'), its similarity with the external *yajñasūtra*, the sacred thread worn by the twice-born (*dvija*), is brought into play and the imagery of the external thread is used with telling effect in order to develop a profound insight into the true import of the *brahmasūtra*, which is the internal and spiritual counterpart of the external and material *yajñasūtra*. At this point Upaniṣad Brahmayogin comments beautifully as follows: 'If one holds on to the *yajñasūtra* in the course of [Vedic] *karmas* in this fashion by contemplating its nature as *brahmasūtra*, then that kind of *karma* will lead to *cittaśuddhi*, or purification of mind.' The idea is that the *attitude* with which one performs *karma*, or action, is responsible for producing elevation of mind. We should bring *brahma-buddhi*, that is, the feeling and thought of the Divine, to bear upon *all* our actions and instruments of action. Reference may be made to the very first verse of the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*, which says that all that exists should be covered by the divine Consciousness or God. Bondage and liberation are essentially in the mind and the mental attitudes. This important message ought to be remembered when we study the elaborate analogy of the *yajñasūtra* and the *brahmasūtra*, although some points of this analogy might appear somewhat peculiar and intriguing.
6. The process of internalizing, in meditative awareness, the sacred thread (which a *sannyāsīn* discards while taking the vow of *samyāsa*) is elaborated here through the well-known Upaniṣadic method of number analogy. The external sacred thread usually consists of six strands of circular loops, each strand approximately sixteen units long (one unit being taken to be four finger-breadths in length). Thus the total length of the sacred thread works out to 6 loops x 16 units in each loop = 96 units altogether. Now the meditative process of internalization consists in contemplating each of the four states (waking, dreaming, deep sleep and *turiya*) as corresponding to one-fourth part of the unit of measure just mentioned, so that the entire sacred thread worn externally may be thought of as the

four-state-unit repeated twenty-four times. Since the number 24 corresponds to the cosmic principles (*tattvas*) of Sāṅkhya philosophy, the ninety-six units comprising the sacred thread may be contemplated, by number analogy, as the ninety-six *tattvas*, that is,  $24 \times 4$ —the twenty-four cosmic principles as applied to each of the four states.

The meaning of this internalization programme of meditation seems to be that a *sannyāsin*, being an earnest seeker of liberation, should abandon the external and, withdrawing his mind and senses as much as possible from the external world, contemplate the external as a symbol of the internal. His mind would thus always try to live absorbed in the internal world through a transcendental awareness.

7. The division of the external sacred thread into ninety-six units and its correspondence with the ninety-six *tattvas* have been fairly elaborately discussed above.
8. The same number analogy as mentioned above is extended to a different level of interpretation as follows: 32 cosmic principles (*tattvas*)—accounted for, probably, as the 24 *tattvas* of Sāṅkhya philosophy + *puruṣa* (1) + *sapta dhātus* (7)—in interaction with each of the three *guṇas*, thus making up  $32 \times 3 = 96$ , could be taken as another type of meditation in the process of internalization of the sacred thread.
9. The nine aspects or modes of Brahman (designated as *nava-brahman*) are, probably, the five-footed *pañca-pāda-brahman* and the four-footed *catur-pāda-brahman*.
10. The sun, the moon and fire are the three essential sources of light, by day or by night. The Ātman / Brahman, spoken of in the Upaniṣads as the Light of all lights (*ḥyotiṣām ḥyotiḥ* —*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 2.2.9), is often meditated upon in and through these lower manifestations of light.
11. The meaning of this 'rotation' is not quite clear. Perhaps it means that the three states of consciousness, namely, waking, dream and deep sleep (*jāgrat*, *svapna* and *suṣupti*), keep revolving in a cycle, one following the other like a wheel fixed at the centre and rotated by moving the 'two' edges. Also, it may be noted that the Trinity—Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśvara—have already been mentioned as the presiding deities of waking, dream and deep sleep states, respectively.
12. The external knot ceremonially tied during the preparation of the sacred thread is thought of here as the knot of Consciousness leading ultimately to non-duality. In Vedāntic terminology, the mix-up of *cit* (Consciousness, or *caitanya*) and *jaḍa* (matter), that has 'somehow' taken place on account of *avidyā* or *ajñāna* (ignorance), is spoken of as *cit-jaḍa-granthi* (the knot of Consciousness and matter) and this 'knot' is the essence of *samsāra*, or involvement of the pure Spirit or Self, which is our true nature, in the world of matter. The cutting of this knot (much like 'cutting the Gordian knot') is the metaphorical expression for *mukti*, or liberation, from the bondage of *samsāra*. The Upaniṣad here uses the same imagery to highlight the importance of the realization of non-dual (*advaita*) Consciousness.
13. The twenty-seven *tattvas* perhaps mean the twenty-four cosmic principles (*caturviṃśati tattvas*) together with the three *guṇas* of Sāṅkhya.
14. The first and the last could mean *jāgrat* (waking) and *suṣupti* (deep sleep), both of which have their foundation or source in the transcendent *turiya* state of consciousness.
15. Cf. *Chāndyoga Upaniṣad*, 6.1.4, and Śaṅkara's commentary thereon.

## Upasana according to Shankaracharya

**M**editation (upasana) means approaching the form of the deity, or the like, as it is presented by the eulogistic portion of the Vedas relating to the objects of meditation, and concentrating on it, excluding all worldly thoughts, till one is completely identified with it as with one's body, conventionally regarded as one's self. Compare: 'Being a god, he attains the gods.'

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# Glimpses of Holy Lives

Sadhu Mathuradas

Many Indians think that the age of the saints is long over, that their country no longer produces saints. However, the belief is largely unfounded. How does a man find a saint if he is *not* looking for one? One cannot walk into a saint, surely! If only people were genuinely interested in spiritual life and deserved holy company, there is no doubt that they would, sooner or later, find themselves living with saints. As a matter of fact, there have been many who took the trouble to find what they were looking for. Mahendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda's younger brother, was one such—and he came across not one but several saints, all of whom had attained to a state so high that to them the injunctions and prohibitions of society were meaningless. These exalted souls, embodiments of religion and spirituality, are the 'salt of the earth'. Whether we realize it or not, they are the conscience of our society. In order to make it known that such spiritual giants still lived and walked the length and breadth of India, Mahendranath recorded his experiences in a small Bengali book, *Sadhu-chatushtay*. What follows is a retelling of his account.

\* \* \*

*Kankhal, March 1924.* As Mahendranath sat on a wooden bench in the courtyard of Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama enjoying his early morning smoke, an old sadhu arrived and sat down beside him. Even for a sadhu, he was quite unkempt: his shock of grey hair was untidy and a sparse beard grew on his cheeks. Except for a narrow *kaupina* he wore nothing. Mahendranath looked at the sadhu questioningly and was rewarded with a toothless grin. The sadhu looked quite strong for his age; he seemed to be a Punjabi.

Not showing any further interest, Mahendranath turned his attention to his hookah. He had only taken a few puffs when, without warning, the sadhu tried to grab the pipe from his hand. Startled, Mahendranath withdrew his hand just in time, and then, without showing surprise—or any courtesy to the sadhu—continued with his smoking. And the sadhu sat there looking like a small boy in a sulk.

After some time, Swami Kalyananandaji, the head of the Sevashrama, entered the courtyard accompanied by Swami Nischayanandaji. Both of them were disciples of Swami Vivekananda. The sadhu walked up to them and, at the end of a fairly long conversation on nothing in particular, left the place.

When the sadhu had gone away, some workers of the Sevashrama, who had been watching all this from a distance, approached Mahendranath and asked, 'Mathuradasji just wanted a smoke, but why did you refuse him?' They sounded as though he had made a very grave error. But Mahendranath saw things differently: how could he, a Bengali who ate fish and meat, have let a sadhu smoke from a pipe he was using?

Be that as it may, Mahendranath came to know the identity of the sadhu. Mathuradasji was a highly revered monk in Hardwar and commanded great respect from Sevashrama workers. Countless sadhus lived in temples and monasteries that dotted the holy city of Hardwar, and all of them came to the Sevashrama for medical treatment. None of them, however, enjoyed the honour that was accorded to Mathuradasji.

Three or four days later the sadhu again came to the Sevashrama. This time there were other people sitting in the courtyard smoking. But the sadhu made straight for Mahendra-

nath. Something in Mahendranath's hookah seemed to have cast a spell on him. But Mahendranath's manner was still cold and distant. After waiting for a while, the sadhu made a long pipe from the stem of a banana leaf and, sticking it into the hookah bowl without asking, began to smoke, looking at the pipe intently all the while. This time also not a word passed between the two.

Mahendranath watched the sadhu's behaviour minutely. He had seen too many sadhus to be easily taken in. Most of them were common gossips, unashamedly money-minded, and not a few were embroiled in ashrama politics and other such controversies; some were even litigious! Mahendranath would have nothing to do with their ilk. He preferred to be alone rather than in such 'holy' company.

### Who Is a Paramahansa?

Mathuradasji, however, was different. He was entirely artless, unworldly. There was absolutely no attempt at impressing others. The more Mahendranath observed him, the more Mathuradasji's childlike simplicity stood out. Everything about him was so natural and yet he seemed strangely untouched by the world. When he was not talking, the sadhu sat silently, his serene gaze fixed on something deep within himself. At such times he looked detached from his surroundings. Then he would exchange a few words with others and go away just as he had come. He walked with a spring in his step, like a cheerful boy.

'Where does this sadhu live?' Mahendranath enquired of some young men at the Sevashrama. 'Near Satikund,' they replied. 'There is an abandoned hut at the edge of the lake.' 'Where is Satikund?' 'You have to cross the small canal behind the ashrama and go beyond the large patch of jungle on the other side. It is quite a distance from here. The place is as inaccessible as it is inhospitable, the whole area overgrown with thick forest and tangled vegetation. Even the lake is rimmed with thorny

bushes and dries up in summer.' 'So he lives in that hut?' 'Yes, Mathuradasji sleeps there at night. He doesn't need a bed; the bare floor is good enough for him. Why, the hut doesn't even have doors or windows.' 'Then what does he do in winter, how does he keep himself warm? Winters are so cold here.' 'Summer or winter, Mathuradasji doesn't seem to feel the difference. We have never seen him use a shred of cloth other than his *kaupina*, let alone a blanket! He just lies down on the floor and goes to sleep. It doesn't bother him whether it is burning hot or freezing cold.' 'And where does he eat?' 'Mathuradasji doesn't go about with a begging bowl, nor does he eat at almshouses or ashramas. He accepts only what is offered with love and affection.' Mahendranath was impressed.

A few days had passed. Mathuradasji returned to the Sevashrama once again at mid-morning and found Mahendranath sitting on the bench dragging on his hookah! This was their third meeting. Without a hint of inhibition, Mathuradasji sat next to Mahendranath and reached for the pipe. Mahendranath did not resist this time, but wiped the pipe clean before Mathuradasji put it to his mouth. The ice was broken. 'Well, well,' said Mahendranath, 'have your smoke, sir. I am an aghori, and so are you. Go ahead, enjoy yourself.' (Aghoris are a Shaiva sect to whom nothing is horrible. Mahendranath used the term because he ate fish and meat, and Mathuradasji was above the notions of cleanliness and uncleanliness.) Others joined in: 'So Mathuradasji got his hookah at last! Carry on, have a nice time.' But Mathuradasji was in no mood for talk. He busied himself with the pipe, jiggling his knees as he sat on the bench. After several long puffs, his mouth split in a broad smile and he looked as happy as a boy who had won a bet. When he had satisfied himself thoroughly, Mathuradasji rose to his feet and walked away.

(To be continued)

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## Reviews

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA  
publishers need to send two copies of their latest publications.

### **Photographs of Swami Vivekananda.**

Compiled and researched by members of the Vedanta Society of Northern California. Sri Ramakrishna Math, 16 Ramakrishna Math Road, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004. E-mail: [srkmath@vsnl.com](mailto:srkmath@vsnl.com). 2002. xvii + 286 pp. Rs 200.

This is an invaluable volume which we owe to the dedicated, meticulous research of the members of the Vedanta Society of Northern California. 'The purpose of this' album, say the compilers, 'is three-fold: one, to serve as a visual meditation on one of the greatest spiritual teachers who ever lived; two, to present chronologically all the known photographs of Swami Vivekananda accompanied by whatever historical background is available; and, three, to portray the tenor of Swamiji's life during the time that the photographs were taken through brief biographical sketches of him and through his own words.'

The result is a visually amazing and interiorly illuminating collection of the most majestic figure that has ever subjected his luminous form to the human eye seeing through the technology of a lens. Holy Mother once observed regarding the Great Master getting photographed: 'Incarnations of God have appeared on earth again and again; but only the people of the present age have been intelligent enough to invent a new device for recording and preserving their likeness—the camera.' Indeed, one can, looking at this collection, even say that the artefact of a camera is teleological, rising to the full stature of its potentialities when a luminous being like Swamiji faces it. If 'writing with light' is the root meaning of a *photo*, then where can one find a more enchanting and elevating figure to 'write' about than Swamiji?

We are so accustomed to verbal texts that we bypass the fact that visual texts have a different dimension of reception, and absorption is often a bypassed fact. Here is a volume that transcends even the visual and evokes the visionary eye. Every photo

creates a resonance, a *spandana* that sets in motion a contemplative richness rarely seen in ordinary visual texts.

If this appears a romantic impression, recall what Paul Capanigro, the celebrated master of landscape photography, says: 'For me photography provides an intersection of time, space, light, and essential stance. One needs to be still enough, observant enough and aware enough to recognize the life of the material, to be able to hear through the eyes. Clarity of process and simplicity of purpose are compromised by the heat of intellect. But once I have achieved this communion, I can hear the voice of the print as it forces its way through ideas and materials.' (*Parabola*, issue on 'Truth and Illusion', Winter 2003, 61)

This magnificent album is a glowing testimony to the responses and reception, content and composition of photographs as identified by Paul Capanigro. Arranged in five sections—Section One: India 1886-1893, Section Two: The West, 1893-1896, Section Three: India 1897-1899, Section Four: The West, 1899-1900 and Section Five: India, 1900-1901—each section has a narrative, quotations from Swamiji and background concerning the photograph(s). The album is a comprehensive collection that provides, both for the cultural historian and the devotee, rare specimens of Swamiji's varied and variegated 'moods' and moments.

The first thing that strikes one is the immense variety: the very first photograph of 'this shoreless sea of radiant knowledge' evokes a state of unshakeable poise and strength that is still nascent. With a lotus posture and the torso draped with a typical dhoti-like cloth, the photo presents obviously the light hiding under a bushel. By the time we reach photograph 8, the standing figure with a staff and ochre robes is significantly revelatory of what is to manifest itself in the years to come. If one were inclined, one way to contemplate this volume would be to simply gaze into the eyes of Swamiji as a progressive unfolding of that inner fire, that 'burning, roaring fire, consuming all impurities to ashes!'

To realize the uniqueness of Swamiji is to see photographs (14, for instance) in which he appears with others. His casual appearance sets him apart from the rest, for Swamiji shows a poise, a grace and above all, a leonine strength that stare you in the face! Even look at the way Swamiji places his hands! Perhaps, one who is an adept in mudras may find meaning and significance usually unavailable to casual onlookers of photos! See the grace of the folded hands in photos like 21, 23 and 25.

But quite often one notices—if I can phrase my responses adequately—an Olympian detachment in Swamiji that is odd considering his extraordinary warmth and love. This is best illustrated (for me) in photo 80 taken during the ‘great summer’ of 1899 at Ridgley Manor where Swamiji spent ten weeks. Swamiji is seen sitting in photo 80 with the face slightly lowered(?) and eyes closed(?). One gets the impression that he was immersed in something like an uncharted sea of consciousness where few venture! One wonders whether he is the same person who appears so gregarious and bursting with the ‘party spirit’ that marks some photographs. Perhaps, the expression that appears on the face is something that Capanigro calls ‘hearing through’ (here, the closed) ‘eyes’.

Similarly, the impression that appears of Swamiji in photographs 73 and 74 (74 facing the most celebrated of Swamiji’s poems ‘Kali the Mother’) is, indeed, like the print, ‘shadowy’! Did the spirit of Kali blot out the light so that we have only a faint imprint? Is Swamiji gazing into the terrifying but dynamic emptiness that hovers on the horizon as one begins to ‘dare to love misery’, the sorrow that sorrow is? But then, there are photos where Swamiji smiles dazzlingly and disarmingly but with a glint of amused tolerance, indeed acceptance, of human folly stemming from Mother’s Cosmic Play! (See photos 83, 88, 90 and 103). Again, some photos acquire a radiant distinction and grace by simply the shock of his hair! I find photograph 91 irresistible: the hair is wavy, thick and lush, parted in the middle, the eyes gazing steadily, the hands folded, with three fingers of the right hand set off against the ‘dark shade’ of the ‘coat’ Swamiji is wearing. For the same reason, I find photograph 104, if one can put it that way, very cute.

In short, as Revered Swami Ranganathanandaji puts it in his illuminating ‘Preface’, ‘the quality of the eternal saturates’ the photographs. As such the album is ‘a vivid, visual feast—getting a glimpse into

the blending of the eternal and the temporal’. This is, indeed, the secret of the great impact of this volume which is fascinatingly revelatory and compulsively, vibrantly visual. (Perhaps, all the more so since it is in black and white!)

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**Philosophies of Communication and Media Ethics: Theory, Concepts and Empirical Issues.** *Kiran R N.* BR Publishing Corporation, 3779 1st Floor, Kanhaiya Nagar, Tri Nagar, Delhi 110 035. E-mail: *brpctld@del2.vsnl.net.in*. 2000. xxxiv + 342 pp. Rs 750.

Living beings sustain themselves by communication. Like the urge for food, communication is inherent in all beings. The questions how and why we communicate have engaged philosophers down the ages. Kiran has done a tremendous job in evaluating the major Western and Eastern philosophies of communication with empirical verification.

It is said that communication is culture and culture is communication. With the growing importance of information and development of technology, communication has dominated the present world but without leaving any lasting impact; rather it is more involved with the frivolous and the sensational. We need to correctly apply the great ideas and principles behind communication to make it more effective.

Divided into three parts, this book is based on the author’s interviews with a select sample of media people. The first part discusses the various philosophies of communication like pragmatism, existentialism, hermeneutics, the pre-reflective and the four theories of the press. The second part gives the theoretical perspectives on values and value systems that guide mass communication. The third part is ‘Value Systems and Ethical Dilemmas: Empirical Issues in Print and Electronic Media’. The relevant figures and tables are a great help in clarifying things.

Most people are passive and gullible while the media, both print and electronic, are proactive. This book will be extremely useful to people in the print and electronic media. Besides its relevance to the

media profession, the book can greatly influence the masses and mould future action. The author explores the values, biases and principles that govern media ownership, reporting, responsibility, commitment and culpability.

People whose professions hinge on communication, like teachers, lawyers, doctors, executives and politicians, will find this book very useful in understanding the philosophy behind communication and becoming better communicators.

The author is a lecturer in communication and journalism at Sri Padmavathi Mahila University, Tirupati. She was also a UGC research fellow at the Department of Studies in Philosophy, Bangalore University. Her credentials and list of research papers are impressive. She has done well in recording the great strides of Indian culture and its contribution to world civilization, made possible by Sanskrit, which is unparalleled as a vehicle for communication.

The first of its kind, the present work should play a significant role in furthering culture-specific research in the field of communication.

*Swami Satyamayananda*  
Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata

**Sreemad Bhagwad Geeta.** *Debabrata Bose.* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulapati Munshi Marg, Mumbai 400 007. 2001. E-mail: [brbhavan@bom7.vsnl.net.in](mailto:brbhavan@bom7.vsnl.net.in). xxiii + 115 pp. Rs 100.

The *Gita* still inspires many a scholar to write about it, translate it or comment upon it. It still inspires sadhakas to undertake spiritual disciplines based upon its teachings. The *Gita* is the knowledge of the Upanishads in a condensed form as told to humanity by Lord Krishna through Arjuna.

What inspired Debabrata Bose to translate the *Gita* into modern English? In the preface, he says that the reason for translating the book was because his niece had not come across a satisfactory English translation and commentary on the *Gita*. Discourses, or *bhashyas*, written by Shankaracharya and Ramanujacharya are, according to Bose, 'outstanding and indeed pre-eminent. But they were written many hundred years ago. The world has evolved much since then. There are many learned modern commentaries.'

One is not convinced about the commentaries

of the great Acharyas having become outdated! The age-old truths of the Upanishads and the *Gita* may appear to have become irrelevant, but the fact remains that Truth is eternal and will never become stale or outdated.

In the book under review, the author has given an introduction which includes comments on 'the people of ancient India, the Hindu concept of God, idol worship, the battle of the *Mahabharata* and the *Gita*'. But the main book is a chapter-wise English translation of each verse. In each chapter the author has introduced its subject matter before taking up the translation. Certain verses have been grouped together for translation.

Another addition to the existing corpus of *Gita* translations.

*Dr C S Shah (late)*  
Aurangabad

**Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal.** *Shamita Basu.* Oxford University Press, YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001. E-mail: [orders@oupin.com](mailto:orders@oupin.com). 2002. xi + 213 pp. Rs 525.

At a time when it is fashionable to consider Vivekananda as an icon or restrict him to a canon forgetting his thoughts and insights, the present volume is welcome. Its well-researched and clearly documented structure takes Vivekananda's contributions quite seriously. 'Modernity' and its presuppositions are the framework the author uses with an accent on recent theories of related social change. This is claimed as 'the first attempt of its kind'. The basic aim is to 'read the text of Vivekananda's neo-Hinduism as an attempt to construct the unity, history, morals and the destiny of' the national self.

Shamita Basu traces her argument by emphasizing the significance of the history of Vivekananda's life before he went to the Parliament of Religions. This is seen as 'the context of Vivekananda's conversion from a Brahmo rationalist to a Hindu nationalist'. Moreover, the swami's views on Hinduism are treated 'as a document, and his appearance in America as a form of performative utterance'.

Given this kind of approach, it is to be expected that the book steers clear of the many and often ster-

ile discussions about what is nationalism and its manifest or latent forms. She rightly emphasizes a crucial element which many recent studies (specially the ones by Amiya Sen and Indira Chowdhuri) ignore or at best dismiss with tautological arguments. In contrast, the author asserts unambiguously the fact that 'nationalism, to Vivekananda, was an act of self-revelation, a going back to the origin of this Hindu self, and a Hinduism rising to self-consciousness'. Indeed, she notes that in the subsequent nationalist struggle 'those who adopted the religious idiom and rose in the defense of Hinduism often borrowed from Vivekananda this gigantic conception of Hinduism as the custodian of universal enlightenment'. This is seen as 'a genealogical account of this universal Hinduism'. At the same time, as an academic she is cautious in not attempting to 'say anything meaningful about the authenticity of Vivekananda's Hinduism', or to what extent 'he followed classical texts, treatises and doctrines'.

From this point of view, the chapter on 'The Universalization of Hinduism' vis-à-vis the construction of the nation seems to me a very balanced and comprehensive approach. In a climate when both the secularists and the revivalists beat the drums of their own unilateral theses about Vivekananda, it is heartening to see somebody who writes with honesty and integrity avoiding blatant generalizations. The two imbalances of either sanitizing or sanctifying a religious figure are avoided. Even when very intricate areas such as reason and ritual in Vivekananda are discussed, there is an attempt to present one's perspective without making it too subjective. Refreshingly, the author is aware of but not overawed by the scholars in the field such as Sumit Sarkar. In this regard the author's study of enlightenment and the place of science, ethics and philosophy seems to me to open up areas for further study specially in the light of the common charge that Hinduism does not have ethics as such. The only point one can make about this is that the discussion could have been more accessible to the general reader who is interested in Vivekananda, but is put off by the specialist academic vocabulary.

'Refreshing rather than segregating the ancient society from the rest of the world,' says the author, 'Vivekananda's nationalism sought to ensure that a form of Enlightenment was ushered in through the modern use of Hindu religion which could enter into a dialogue with Western rationalism.' This Vi-

vekananda did because, as the author rightly says, he avoided 'offering any romantic critique of development and modernity' and emphasized the 'ultimate liberation of the spirit through selfless action for humanity'. But, differing from the author, one can say that this is valid not only for a colonial society but for humanity as a whole, whatever the conceptions of Enlightenment. This aspect needs further attention in a guarded and cautious way without deifying or defying the contribution of this great architect of modern India. The book needs to be read by all those who are interested in nationalism at this crucial moment. One may differ or controvert a few points, but the study is marked by rare balance of academic neutrality and personal perspectives.

Dr M Sivaramkrishna

**Sree Satyanārāyana Swāmi Vrata Kallam.** *Kalluri Suryanarayana*. Sankhyayana Vidya Parishat, 2-12-34 Annapura Colony, Uppal, Hyderabad 500 039. 2002. viii + 147 pp. Rs 108.

The worship of Lord Satyanarayana is very widely practised in India and even in foreign lands with a sizeable Hindu population. The original *vrata* is described in the 'Reva Khanda' of the *Skanda Purana*, which is one of the eighteen chief Puranas.

Though there is nothing new about the concepts contained in the book under review—scores of books in virtually every Indian vernacular have been published—the author has to be complimented for its sheer exhaustiveness and meticulous adherence to the Vedic angle of Satyanarayana worship.

The book begins with an enumeration of the customs behind the worship, its significance and the benefits that accrue from it. Then comes a rather lengthy list of articles required for the *vrata*, a list long enough to discourage even people of moderate means! This is followed by the actual Sanskrit text along with the English translation. The last chapter of the book contains the *Satyanarayana Sahasranama*.

It is surprising that the author has not included the *arati* hymn, for no worship is concluded without the mandatory *arati*. But for this one drawback

the book is fairly complete.

Santosh Kumar Sharma  
Kharagpur

**The Mirage and the Mirror.** Richard C Prescott. 1st Books Library, 2511 West 3rd Street, Suite #1, Bloomington, IN 47404, USA. 1998. xix + 210 pp. Price not mentioned.

**Inherent Solutions to Spiritual Obscurations.** Richard C Prescott. 1st Books Library. 1999. xxxiv + 524 pp. Price not mentioned.

These two books by Richard Prescott are an attempt to explore, understand and explain a wide range of spiritual topics from different angles. It encompasses a large gamut of ideas and issues, often travelling through unknown territories, and tries to uncover the hidden meanings, finally opening up some insight here and there. Obviously the author is a keen student and devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, trying to comprehend Sri Ramakrishna, his mystical experiences, his references to Vedantic and Tantric concepts of reality, and so on. The author also tries to weave in Buddhist teachings and Yogic tenets into his explanations.

But unfortunately, the author is not very focused as to whom he is addressing his writing to. Is it to a student of Vedanta? Then the perspective is unclear and the explanations mixed up. Or is it to a spiritual aspirant? Though he does refer to his experiences in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, no systematic exposition from a spiritual standpoint has been attempted.

The books are at the most an endeavour of a highly curious Western mind to decode certain Vedantic, Tantric, Yogic and Buddhist terminologies, vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experiences. 'In my spiritual work', says Prescott (*Mirage and Mirror*, 102), 'I see Sri Ramakrishna as a most excel-

lent and divine prototype of the dynamic possibility within each living being. ... For the one half of a century that he occupied in this region of mortal beings, his entire person and his personal life was ultimately a most astounding journey and innate discovery of the Goddess Experience in the shape of Kali.'

The author also explores women's role in Hindu culture through mythological ideologies prevalent in Hinduism which have, according to him, wedded them 'to be good mothers who, for example, must care for and feed the naughty boy-king Krishna, and that their sole purpose and identity is to bring forth the boy-king. ... These ideals have created the historical situation of a culturally caged lion.' (103)

At some places, the books explain Ramakrishna's prayers (103) and at others, visions and incidents related to Sri Ramakrishna. In fact, many of the Hindu ideas of consciousness, cosmic moral principle, motherhood of God and so on have been commented upon.

The author makes copious references to Buddhist concepts and traditions, though he is not very clear and precise about what he wants to say (*Inherent Solutions to Spiritual Obscurations*, 164). He speaks of his dream experiences as also some spiritual visions and imageries which are rather difficult for a commoner to decipher.

A little more careful copy-editing of the text (capitalizations, italics, footnotes on Sanskrit and Buddhist terms, etc) will add to the utility of the book.

Monastic Sojourner

## Book Received

**India and 'The Dedicated': Towards the Rise of a Nation.** Mamata Ray and Anil Baran Ray. Manuscript India, 166/3 SNN Ganguly Road, Howrah 711 104. 2003. 336 pp. Rs 320.

Given the sort of practical idealism that Nivedita outlines for India, India can achieve adequate, if not perfect, integration as a nation and take giant steps in all spheres of life—social, political, moral, material and intellectual—and having thus 'arisen' she can use the united strength of a resurgent nation towards achieving a world order based on the essential oneness of humanity.

—from *India and 'The Dedicated'*

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# Reports

## New Math Centres

Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mekhliganj, which had been a sub-centre of the unaffiliated Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Cooch Behar, was taken over by the Ramakrishna Math in October 2004. It has been made a sub-centre of Ramakrishna Math, Cooch Behar, and renamed **Ramakrishna Math, Mekhliganj**. Its address is: Ramakrishna Math, Mekhliganj, Dt Cooch Behar, West Bengal 735304 (Phone: 03584-255272).

A new branch centre of the Ramakrishna Math came into being in **Bindweide, Germany**, in November. Its address is: **Vedanta-Gesellschaft e.V.**, Bindweide 2, D-57520, Steinbach/Sieg, Germany (Phone: 49-2747-930493; Fax: 49-2747-930494). Swami Baneshanandaji has been appointed head of the centre.

## Durga Puja

Durga Puja was celebrated at **Belur Math** from 20 to 23 October 2004 with solemnity and joy. Tens of thousands of devotees thronged the precincts of the Math on all four days to receive the blessings of the Divine Mother. The Kumari Puja held on the 21st drew huge crowds as usual. Cooked prasad was served to about 74,000 devotees on Puja days. The Puja was telecast live by Kolkata Doordarshan at different times during the four days.

## Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's 150th Birth Anniversary Celebrations

In connection with the celebration, **Ramakrishna Math, Rajahmundry**, organized a 28-day-long ratha yatra from 19 September to 20 October. Passing as it did through nearly 100 towns and villages of 7 districts of coastal Andhra Pradesh, the 3000 km yatra fulfilled the purpose of taking Holy Mother's message to the maximum number of people possible.

Thanks to enthusiastic public response and involvement, the meetings and cultural events organized all along the route were a grand success. At every place the ratha, led by 3 monks and 11 volunteers, was received with auspicious music and flower garlands, and hundreds of people, from students to dignitaries, attended the meetings that followed. 60,000 copies of *Sarada Devi Sukti Sudha*, a booklet published specially for the occasion, were given away, apart from 15,000 copies of 3 other titles; 60,000 picture postcards containing a beautiful photo and sayings of Holy Mother were also distributed.

A convention of the office-bearers of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Bhava Prachar Parishads was held at **Belur Math** on 29 and 30 October to discuss various aspects of Holy Mother's 150th birth anniversary celebrations being organized by different unaffiliated centres under the Parishads, and to guide and help them to take up some follow-up programmes for women's welfare. The convention was addressed by senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order.

## News from Branch Centres

Sri S Jaipal Reddy, Minister for Information, Broadcasting and Culture, Government of India, visited **Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home, Chennai**, on 11 September and addressed a meeting organized on this occasion. As part of its centenary celebrations, the centre also organized a devotees' convention on 19 September and a seminar on 'Poverty Alleviation' on 20 November.

Sri Vikas Shridhar Sirpurkar, Chief Justice, Uttaranchal High Court, visited **Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati**, on 25 September.

Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Rama-

krishna Mission, laid the foundation stone for the proposed guest-house building at **Ramakrishna Math, Puri**, on 8 October.

Swami Smarananandaji, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, laid the foundation stone for the proposed extension of the school building at **Ramakrishna Mission TB Sanatorium, Ranchi**, on 8 October.

Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the newly built guest-house at **Matrimandir, Jayrambati**, on 10 October.

**Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban**, opened a blood bank in its hospital on 6 November.

### Achievement

A student of the school run by **Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**, bagged the gold medal at the Abantika International Essay, Painting and Slogan Competition held in New Delhi in December. 9 more students of the school won medals at the competition: 4 silver and 5 bronze.

### Foreign News

Several distinguished persons, including Mr Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Minister for Local Government and Rural Development; Mr Moudud Ahmed, Minister for Law; Mr Sadeq Hossain Khoka, Mayor of Dhaka; and Mr Hossain Muhammad Ershad, former President of Bangladesh, attended Durga Puja at **Ramakrishna Math, Dhaka**, on different days of the celebration.

Durga Puja at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narayanganj**, Bangladesh, was attended by Brigadier Hafizuddin, Minister for Water Resources; Mr Abul Kalam, MP; and some other dignitaries.

### Relief Work

In October, Ramakrishna Math and Mission centres in West Bengal and Bangladesh

continued relief operations among flood victims by distributing food, clothing and essential items like halazone tablets, candles and matchboxes: **Ramakrishna Math, Barasat**, distributed *khichuri* to 19,005 persons for 5 days in North 24 Parganas; **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda**, distributed 700 kg *chira*, 225 kg *gur*, 250 kg salt and 50 kg biscuits among 1200 persons in Malda, and 2565 kg rice, 210 kg dal, 1600 kg *chira*, 200 kg sugar, 100 kg *gur*, 500 kg salt and 120 kg biscuits among 4346 persons in Birbhum; **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Sargachhi**, distributed 1000 kg *chira* and 200 kg *gur* among 1844 persons in Murshidabad; **Ramakrishna Mission, Sikra-Kulingram**, distributed 15,834 kg *chira*, 2892 kg *gur*, 750 kg rice and 150 kg dal among 10,467 families in North 24 Parganas; **Ramakrishna Mission Headquarters** distributed 80 kg *chira*, 20 kg *gur*, 40 blankets and an equal number of dhotis and saris among 40 homeless families in Nadia; **Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka**, distributed 15,107 kg rice, 1755 kg dal, 4510 kg *chira*, 905 kg sugar, 1609 packets of baby food, 690 kg milk, 4000 halazone tablets, 100 saris, 1207 candles and 1152 matchboxes among 24,110 people belonging to 37 villages spread over 9 districts.

Besides the above-mentioned relief services, the following centres helped the poor and needy in their localities: **Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**, distributed 100 dhotis, 100 saris and 458 children's garments; **Ramakrishna Math, Puri**, distributed 140 garments; and **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ramharipur**, distributed 400 dhotis, 1100 saris and 150 sets of children's garments.

In December, as a follow-up to relief work, our centres in Assam, Bihar and West Bengal distributed blankets, dhotis, saris and assorted garments among the flood victims of those states.

### Relief Work by Belgharia Students

For the people of West Bengal, Durga Puja is a most auspicious and eagerly awaited

festival. Last year's Puja, however, brought only tears to those living in low-lying areas like Bongaon in North 24 Parganas. Heavy showers lashed the area during the first week of October and man-made blockages in the Jamuna's course caused severe waterlogging. Soon the areas around Bongaon were submerged under water as high as 6 feet!

The students and devotees of Ramakrishna Mission Calcutta Students' Home, Belgharia, decided to spend their Puja holidays trying to help the victims. They could have easily spent the time partying and making merry, but bringing relief to their afflicted brethren gave them more fulfilment.

The numerous villages in between Bongaon and the Jamuna were badly hit, of which 53 were identified as the worst affected. The entire area being inundated, villages could only be reached by boats. This arduous work was made easier by motor boats donated to the Ramakrishna Mission by the people and government of Japan. Volunteers visited each home in these villages and distributed identity cards to those who needed help most. Food and medical facilities had to be provided urgently. As of November, 21,259 kg of *chira* and 5644 kg of *gur* was distributed among 37,383 persons. A temporary medical camp was also started with local help, and 460,000 water-purifying tablets were distributed.

### Tsunami Relief

The devastating tsunami that crashed into the Indian east coast and Sri Lanka on 26 December destroyed hundreds of kilometres of coastline killing tens of thousands of people and inflicting indescribable misery upon innumerable others. The following centres of the Ramakrishna Mission launched relief opera-



Tsunami Relief being done in Nagapattinam by Ramakrishna Math, Chennai

tions right from the day the disaster struck. Ramakrishna Mission, Port Blair, distributed cooked food, baby food and clothing, bottled drinking water among 1500 people in Andaman; Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, distributed cooked food, dhotis, saris, bed sheets, mats and utensils and so on to about 22,000 people and also provided medical aid to 27,500 people in Chengalpattu, Chennai, Cuddalore, Kanyakumari and Nagapattinam. The extremely affected victims were provided shelter. Ramakrishna Math, Madurai, provided food to fishermen in Rameshwaram; Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Kalady, distributed clothes, utensils, and food in Ernakulam district. Ramakrishna Mission, Colombo, distributed to more than 25,000 people cooked food, stoves, utensils, clothes, mats, bed-sheets, dry-foods, medicines, etc. after farmed out in about 20 camps in Batticaloa and nearby places. Steps were being taken to extend the relief work to more places and reach more people in the worst-affected areas. Further reports will follow. Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math, relief is overseeing all operations. The total expenditure till 10.1.2005 was about 1.30 crores. Donations received are about 0.73 crores. \*